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CONTENTS

CHAPTER I. A WEB OF FATE.
CHAPTER II. AT PIRATE BEACH.
CHAPTER III. "IT IS BETTER THAT YOU DIE."
CHAPTER IV. LIZETTE SAVES HER MISTRESS.
CHAPTER V. A PLOT TO WIN A LOVER.
CHAPTER VI. UNDER THE ROOF OF GRAY GABLES.
CHAPTER VII. FORGOT SHE WAS A WIFE.
CHAPTER VIII. IN DEADLY PERIL.
CHAPTER IX. THE SERPENT RING.
CHAPTER X. "WILL YOU NEVER FORGIVE?"
CHAPTER XI. "IT IS THE RING."
CHAPTER XII. ALL FOR A WOMAN'S SAKE.
CHAPTER XIII. SECRET PLANS.
CHAPTER XIV. TWO PISTOL SHOTS.
CHAPTER XV. A DUEL ON THE BEACH.
CHAPTER XVI. "WITH THIS RING I THEE WED."
CHAPTER XVII. "SHALL I NEVER SEE YOU AGAIN?"
CHAPTER XVIII. "HE WILL KILL MY HUSBAND."
CHAPTER XIX. TREACHERY.
CHAPTER XX. A GHOST ON BOARD SHIP.
CHAPTER XXI. DONALD KAYNE'S RETURN.
CHAPTER XXII. PEPITA!
CHAPTER XXIII. NITA AT GRAY GABLES AGAIN.
CHAPTER XXIV. THE MISER SENDS FOR HIS BRIDE.
CHAPTER XXV. "LET US DIE TOGETHER."
CHAPTER XXVI. "YOU SHALL KNOW THE SECRET."
CHAPTER XXVII. THE TENTH OF JUNE.
CHAPTER XXVIII. THE OTHER CLAIMANT.
CHAPTER XXIX. HER FATHER'S NAME AND GOLD.
CHAPTER XXX. DONALD KAYNE'S STORY.
CHAPTER XXXI. LIZETTE A PRISONER.
CHAPTER XXXII. ON TRIAL FOR HER LIFE.
CHAPTER XXXIII. THE PARRICIDE'S FATE.



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They Looked and Loved

OR,

WON BY FAITH

BY

MRS. ALEX McVEIGH MILLER

Author of "When We Two Parted," "All for Love," "Love Conquers Pride," "The Man She Hated,"
etc.



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—
They Looked and Loved

THEY LOOKED AND LOVED.

CHAPTER I.

A WEB OF FATE.

"I would sell my soul to Satan for a chest of gold!" cried a despairing voice.

It was a young girl who uttered the words. She was standing under a tree in Central Park, watching the equipages that rolled past in a constant stream. A handsome victoria, in which sat a golden-haired beauty, one of the famed Four Hundred of New York, had just whirled past, and the dust from the wheels had blown into the speaker's face, drawing those reckless words from her lips:

"I would sell my soul to Satan for a chest of gold!"

Of a truth, the girl was fair enough to have exchanged places with the regal woman in the carriage, for her face and form had been shaped in beauty's fairest mold, though the cheek was wan and pale from the pangs of grief and hunger, and the peerless form was draped in worn and shabby garments.

But the fires of pride and ambition burned brightly in the large Spanish-looking dark eyes, as the girl clasped her small ungloved hands together.

"Would you marry me?" asked a low, sneering voice in her ear.

[Pg 6]

She turned with a start of terror, and it appeared to her as if her reckless words had summoned the arch-fiend himself to her side.

The person who had addressed her was a horribly ugly and grotesque-looking old man.

He was at least sixty-five years of age, bent and stoop-shouldered, with features that were homely to the point of grotesqueness. His nose was large, his mouth wide, his small malevolent gray eyes peered beneath bushy red eyebrows supplemented by grizzled hair and whiskers of the same lurid color. His clothing was scrupulously neat, but well-worn and of cheap material.

"Would you marry me?" repeated this old man, and the beautiful girl gave a start of surprise not unmixed with fear.

"You—you—why, you are as poor as I am!" she gasped, her eyes roving over his shabby attire.

"Appearances are often deceitful, young lady. I look like a beggar, I know, and, truth to tell, I live like one, but I am rich enough to give you your heart's desire—a chest of gold. Did you ever hear of Charles Farnham, the miser?"

"Yes."

"I am Farnham, the miser, young lady, and for once I have a generous impulse. You are young, beautiful, and poor. I am old, ugly, and rich. In the world of fashion such marriages are not uncommon. Will you marry me?"

She gazed into his repulsive features, and shuddered.

[Pg 7]

"No, no, no!"

"You are very independent," he sneered. "What is your name? Where do you live?"

"My name is no concern of yours. My home will soon be—in—the—river!"

"What mean you, girl?"

"What I have just told you, sir. I am a poor and honest girl, out of work, penniless, and friendless, turned into the streets to-day to starve. Before nightfall I shall end my sorrows in the river."

"A girl with that beautiful face and form need never starve," returned the old miser, with a significant leer.

The pale, young face flushed to a burning crimson, and the large, dark eyes flashed angrily.

"I have been told that many times, sir, but I am an honest girl. I can die, but I cannot do wrong."

"It is too beautiful a day to die," returned the old miser, looking around him at the green grass and flowers and golden sunshine.

The park was crowded. There were throngs on foot, throngs in carriages. Beautiful women were plenty, but none of them could compare with the young girl standing there in the dust of their carriage-wheels talking to the old miser.

"Look at those handsome creatures in their magnificent carriages with liveried servants—look at their silks and jewels. Do you not envy them?" demanded Farnham. "You are more beautiful than they are. It is very foolish of you to drown yourself for lack of bread when I offer you wealth and splendor as my wife."

[Pg 8]

"But I could not love you. You are old—hideous—and I could not marry any one I did not love; I would rather die."

A fierce gleam came into the old man's eyes.

"You are the proudest pauper I ever saw, yet your very scorn makes you seem more desirable in my eyes," he exclaimed. "Come, give your consent to marry me, and you shall have one of the finest homes in New York—carriages, jewels, Paris dresses, opera-boxes, and an adoring husband. Would you not like all this?"

"All but the husband!" answered the girl frankly and sadly. "Oh, forgive me, sir, but your wealth would not make me happy if I had to live by your side."

"Yet you said just now that you would sell your soul to Satan for a chest of gold."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I—I spoke thoughtlessly, sir. I did not think that Satan would hear me," she murmured in an undertone.

The miser saw in her eyes a girlish scorn that maddened him; yet, strange to say, it made him more eager to possess this luring though scornful beauty. He stood gazing covetously at her, and suddenly she added archly:

"I have read stories about people who sold themselves to the devil; but you see they had a little respite first, and rather enjoyed life before he claimed them, but if I married you I should be signed, sealed, and delivered over at once to the enemy," and she laughed, a mocking, mirthless laugh, for, in truth, she was desperate with despair and misery.

[Pg 9]

"You are very complimentary," said her strange suitor, with a contortion of the lip that was a cross between a grin and a sneer. He had an angry longing to strike the beautiful face that looked at him with such defiant scorn, for the girl was as proud as she was poor, and she had her treasured love-dreams like all other young girls—dreams of a rich and handsome lover who might some day woo her for his bride.

Miser Farnham, with a frightful grimace, withdrew from her side, but remained close by, watching the lonely, desolate creature with keen, calculating gray eyes.

Something more than an hour went by, and as the brilliant pageant of wealth and fashion began to fade, the girl drew a long, shuddering sigh, and turned to leave the park. A jibing voice sounded in her ear:

"Are you going to the river now?"

The dark eyes, heavy now with despair, turned upon the face of the old man.

"Yes; I am going to the river," she replied, in a dull, dreary tone.

"Will you wait one moment, please?"

She stopped and looked at him in dull wonder, her face so pallid, her eyes so despairing, that he shuddered to meet them.

"You said just now that Satan always gave a respite to those whose souls he bought; I have pondered deeply over those words, and here is the result: I will give you a respite, if you will marry me. No, don't turn away so recklessly. I mean it, young lady. Marry me to-day, and I will not see you again for a whole year. In the meantime you shall reign a queen in a palace; your life shall be a dream of delight. In my hand is the wand of the magician—gold—yellow gold—and I can accomplish all that I promise, and more! Think! A whole year of luxury, of pleasure, and in that time not one sight of my face. Can you turn from this to the dark, cold river? Surely, then, you must be mad!"

[Pg 10]

The girl stood like one rooted to the spot, her eyes dark, burning, eager. What was it he was offering? Wealth, ease, happiness—and she was homeless and starving. Her brain reeled; she trembled with excitement.

"A year," repeated old Farnham temptingly, "and in all that time I will not come near you. Only speak the word, and we will go now to a lawyer, I will have a marriage contract drawn, waiving all rights for one year from the date of marriage. Then we will be married. I will secure a chaperon and maid for you, and, leaving you in a home of luxury, take my departure until the months of your respite are over. Perhaps by then your gratitude to me will lead you to look on me with favor—if not, there is still the river"—leering wickedly.

Surely a stranger offer had never been made to a fair and homeless girl. It was romantic in some of its aspects, and it was tempting to the forlorn young creature. A gleam of piteous hope came into the large, sad eyes. A year or more of life, of ease, of comfort.

"No poor girl ever had such a chance before. Surely, you consent," continued the wily tempter.

[Pg 11]

"Yes, I consent," answered the girl, with stiff lips and unsmiling eyes.

"Good," uttered the miser, with a chuckle of satisfaction. He caught her small ungloved hand and pressed it with awkward gallantry. It was cold as a lump of ice, and fell stiffly from his clasp. Then she looked at him and spoke again, briefly and coldly:

"I am trusting fully in your promises," she said. "Remember, you must not play me false, or weak girl as I am, I shall know how to punish you."

"You can trust me, for I love you," he answered, in wheedling tones. "Come now, let us go at once to a lawyer. We can get a cab at the park gates."

She followed him away from the park, and when seated in the cab on their way to the lawyer's, he said:

"When the contract is drawn up, and we are married, the first thing will be to get you some clothing and jewels suitable for a beautiful young heiress. The next thing will be a chaperon. Well, I know an aristocratic woman, widowed and reduced to poverty, who will gladly take charge of you for the splendid salary and privileges she will get. She has one daughter, who will be a fitting companion for you. These two will make it possible for you to enter at once into the best society. You will be introduced to them as my ward, not as my wife. Then, with your chest of gold, you will enter upon a dazzling career. Your wealth and your beauty, and the prestige your chaperon will confer upon you, will enable you to dazzle the world of society and fashion. Does the picture please you?"

[Pg 12]

"I must be dreaming," answered the girl, passing her hand across her eyes in a bewildered fashion.

But the rest of the day seemed but a continuation of her dream. They went at once to a lawyer, who drew up the strange marriage-contract; then to a minister, who united them in matrimonial bonds. Next the old miser took his bride to a large store, where he gave orders that she should be supplied with an outfit of clothing suitable to her needs as a young heiress. Obsequious clerks flew to do his bidding; then, drawing her aside, he said:

"I shall leave you here several hours while I go to see the lady who will be your chaperon during the one year that you will pass as my rich ward instead of my wife."

He paused a moment, then added, with an air of hesitancy:

"I have decided that your home shall be for the first few weeks at a seaside residence I own in New Jersey. I will arrange for you to go this evening, as it is but a short distance from New York. Be all ready in your traveling-dress when I call for you with the lady and your maid at six o'clock."

CHAPTER II.

[Pg 13]

AT PIRATE BEACH.

It was midnight, and the moon rode high in the star-spangled sky, and mirrored itself in the ocean as it rolled its long and heavy swells in upon the silvery sands of the shell-strewn shore.

Far up the beach stood an old, graystone mansion, many-gabled and picturesque, surrounded by handsome and spacious grounds dotted with trees and shrubberies. Up in the second story a dim light gleamed from an open casement, and from it leaned a girl watching the beauty of the summer night with dark, solemn eyes—Nita Farnham, the miser's bride.

Charles Farnham, Mrs. Courtney, the chaperon; a maid, and several servants had accompanied Nita here. The old man had stayed only one hour, at the end of which he had accompanied his bride to her chamber and showed her upon the hearth-rug a small iron-bound box containing the promised gold.

"The little chest is yours, all yours," he said, with a strange emphasis. "There are many thousands of dollars in it, but they are nothing to my great wealth. I am many times a millionaire. Ah, Farnham, the miser, eking out his wretched life by selling cigars on the elevated railroad, but they little dream of his stores of hidden wealth. Wait one year more, and they will stare in envy at my Fifth Avenue palace and my peerless bride!"

She shuddered uncontrollably, and, dropping the cold hand he had taken in farewell, he turned away with a grin.

[Pg 14]

"Good-by, for a year, my beauty!"

She bowed in horror; then locked the door, and stood alone in the luxurious chamber, with the shadow of a fateful tragedy looming over her unconscious head and the price for which she had sold herself—the chest of gold—lying open at her feet.

The maid tapped presently upon the door, but Nita sent her away.

"I shall not need you to-night. You may retire."

But sleep was far from Nita's eyes. Midnight found her leaning from her window, watching the moonlight on the sea and the gray mist creeping up the shore, and murmuring over and over:

"Pirate's Beach! Pirate's Beach! How strange that he should have brought me here! Here of all places in the wide, wide world!"

A strange, beguiling melancholy crept over her as she listened to the voice of the sea as the surf broke continuously upon the beach. The very beauty of the summer night oppressed her.

"I am married, married," she murmured sadly. "I should not mind it if my husband were young and handsome, and we loved each other; but, alas, I am forever cut off from love's sweetness—I am bound by golden chains to that hideous old miser."

Nita was passionate, wilful, and undisciplined. A strange life had been hers, and it had left her like some beautiful, untamed, wild bird—untrammelled by conventionalities. The great, inrolling waves down on the beach seemed crying out to her yearningly:

[Pg 15]

"Come, come, come. We love you, we understand you!"

She flung a thick woolen shawl over her dark head, and stole down to the beach, and stood there dreamily, her gray-clad form blending softly with the creeping gray mist.

"How familiar it all looks, yet that old man did not dream I had ever been here before. I wonder if old Meg, the fortune-teller, lives here still? What if we meet? What if she recognizes me?"

She ran with a light, quick step along the beach for about half a mile, then paused pantingly close to a tumble-down old shanty that had evidently been constructed out of the black hull of an ancient wreck. From a tiny, smoke-begrimed window a dim light pierced through the murky sea fog, and Nita murmured:

"So she is here still, the old harpy!"

She bent her head, and peered through the dim little panes into the shanty. A smothered cry escaped her lips.

"Good heavens! what is that old man doing here?"

Seated by a table, ornamented with bottles and pipes, Nita had seen an ugly, witchlike old crone in close converse with—Farnham, the miser. It flashed into her mind that he was seeking from old Meg some knowledge of the future which she pretended to foretell, and she smiled in ironical amusement.

"An old man like that ought to know that Meg's pretensions are all humbug," she thought impatiently, and bent her ear to listen to their words. Old Meg was muttering with fierce gesticulations:

[Pg 16]

"I don't understand your plans nor approve them. Beware how you trifle with me, Farnham, or I will tear her from that stately home. I will make her my slave as in the old days before she ran away from my boy's love, the proud jade!"

Miser Farnham put out a lean hand and gripped the virago's wrist so tightly that she screamed with pain.

"Behave yourself then, you she-devil, and do not presume to question my actions. You will leave the girl alone, remember. She belongs to me now, for I found her after you had let her escape your clutches. No wonder she fled from you. The bare idea of that ruffianly son of yours aspiring to the hand of the proud Juan de Castro's daughter—faugh!"

"You know what he wanted," Meg growled significantly.

"Yes, what he will never get," was the harsh reply, and Farnham only laughed at her incoherent ravings. To Nita it seemed plain that the fiendish pair shared some dark secret between them, and that the man held the balance of power.

"They are plotting against me. They both know the secret of my parentage, although old Meg has told me a hundred times that I was cast up by the sea. What if I go in there and tax them with their villainy, and demand the truth?"

With flashing dark eyes she moved toward the door, and her hand touched the knob to throw it open. A moment's indecision, then her brave heart failed her. She recoiled, shuddering with a sudden fear.

[Pg 17]

"No, no, I dare not. They might murder me," and she hurried from the spot, with terror-winged feet.

When the old black hulk and its glimmering light were swallowed up in the gloom, Nita stopped a moment to take breath, and turned her exquisite white face toward the sea.

"Oh, ocean, how I love you, you great murmuring mystery!" she cried, stretching out her white hands lovingly, as the surf rolled in.

Hark, what was that blending with the hollow voice of the waves? A human voice, a deep groan as of one dying! Nita uttered a cry of superstitious terror, and ran wildly a few paces farther along the shore. A broken shell pierced the sole of her thin shoe, but she limped painfully on, half-blinded by the salt spray and her own startling tears, when suddenly she stumbled over a body lying directly in her path, and fell prostrate.

"IT IS BETTER THAT YOU DIE."

Nita believed for a moment that she had stumbled over a body cast up by the cruel sea. That strange awe of death overcame her at first, and, struggling painfully to her feet, she was about to hurry from the spot when she was suddenly arrested by a low moan similar to the one that had so startled her when she was several paces away.

She realized that it was not a corpse, it was a living being, lying unconscious at her feet—a living being, wet already with the surf, that went over him each time it rolled in on the shore. The tide was coming in strongly, and presently the fatal undertow would sweep him out to sea.

"It must not be!" she cried.

Sinking down on her knees, she gazed into the white, upturned face for some sign of life.

"Oh, pitiful Heaven, he is dead!" cried Nita wildly, and she laid her white hand with an involuntary, tender caress on the broad, white brow, from which the wet masses of brown curls fell carelessly back.

Did her touch recall him to life? The broad breast heaved suddenly, the eyelids fluttered open, and the young girl met the wondering gaze of a pair of eyes that seemed to pierce her heart.

The next moment a giant wave rolled in and flung her prostrate against his breast. Drenched and shivering, Nita struggled to her knees again. [Pg 19]

"You are alive, thank Heaven," she exclaimed gladly. "Oh, speak to me, sir; let me help you to rise, for if we remain here, the sea will sweep us both away."

She had to bend her ear close to his lips to catch the faint reply:

"I am—wounded—and have no—strength—to rise. Go—save yourself—leave me—to—my—fate!"

It must have cost him a severe effort to utter the disjointed words, for with the last one his eyes closed and he became unconscious.

And out upon the ocean Nita saw the white-caps rolling in to the shore, as if eager to seize and carry off their helpless victim. From her pallid lips came a cry of despair, and, seizing his shoulders, she tried to drag him further up the beach.

"God help me to save him," she prayed aloud, for the heavy body resisted her efforts, and she was distinctly conscious of as strong a yearning to save this man's life as though he had been a beloved friend of long, long years.

A happy thought came to her, and, dragging the strong woolen shawl from her head, she passed it with difficulty under his body, knotting the long ends on his breast. Just then another strong wave engulfed them. Clinging to the end of the shawl, she bent down and let it rush and roar above them, with its thunder of sound, and almost resistless fury of force.

With her whole heart uplifted in prayer, Nita grasped the ends of the shawl, and slowly, wearily, but determinedly, dragged the heavy form of her companion far up the beach; and within the gates of her home, where she sank down, exhausted, and gazed anxiously into his unconscious face, her heart convulsed by an agonizing yearning that he might live. [Pg 20]

But the features remained still and lifeless, the broad breast did not heave with the faintest sign of life. She noted even then with the eyes of an artist his wonderful beauty.

"Oh, the pity of it that one so beautiful should die like this," she sobbed, and laid her hand caressingly upon his brow. Then she started as from a trance, and withdrew her hand from his brow, sobbing under her breath: "It is better that you died, for if you had lived you would have lured my heart away!"

She shivered as the keen breeze swept over her drenched form, bearing with it the intoxicating scent of June flowers blooming riotously in the neglected gardens, and rising wearily, she toiled up to the house and aroused the servants.

They gazed at her in amazement when she briefly explained the situation, and commanded them to bring the unconscious man into the house, and send for a doctor.

When the man-servant and the housekeeper had brought the dripping form and laid it on a bed, the woman cried out in wonder:

"What a strange thing! Why, I know this young man, Miss Farnham! He is Mr. Dorian Mountcastle."

And the pale young creature, leaning over the pillow, looked at her with dark, eager eyes, and murmured: [Pg 21]

"Is he dead? Do you think that he is dead?"

"The Lord knows, honey; he looks like it, that's certain. But we can tell better when the doctor comes. Now do you go right up to your room, please, and get some dry clothes on before you catch your death of cold, while we tend to the young man," pushing her gently toward the door.

Nita threw one long look of mute despair upon Dorian Mountcastle's still and beautiful face, with the long, dark lashes lying so heavily upon the death-white cheeks, and moved silently out of the room, dragging herself wearily up the stairs, encumbered by her dripping wet garments, that left little rills of salt-water wherever she moved.

As she went along the dim corridor to her room her lips moved ever so slightly. She was

whispering:

"Dorian! Dorian! What a soft, sweet name!"

When Nita had left her room, obeying the strange impulse that had tempted her out to the shore in the dead hour of the night, she had forgotten the open chest of gold upon the floor; she had even left the door standing slightly ajar with a dim light burning on the dainty dressing-table.

It was just the same now as she stepped across the threshold, little pools of salt-water sinking into the rich carpet. She stopped then, staring before her in wild-eyed horror.

[Pg 22]

Upon the rug crouched the haglike woman she had seen but a little while ago, cursing Miser Farnham in the old shanty. Her back was turned to Nita, her clawlike, skinny hands were diving into the chest of gold. She was filling her apron with the glittering coins. She had not heard the light footstep behind her, but suddenly a sharp voice rang in her ear:

"Put back that gold, you vile thief! What are you doing here?"

The old woman started so violently that the corners of her apron fell, and the gold pieces rolled in every direction. Springing wildly to her feet, she confronted Nita with the horrible, burning eyes of a murderess.

"I came here to kill you, Juanita de Castro, and to avenge my son!" she hissed, springing on her victim like a tigress.

Ere Nita could cry for help, she was borne down by her enemy's fierce onslaught, her white throat gripped in a clutch of death.

CHAPTER IV.

[Pg 23]

LIZETTE SAVES HER MISTRESS.

When Nita had left the room the housekeeper stood gazing with deep commiseration at the deathlike face of Dorian Mountcastle as it lay among the pillows.

"Not much use to send for a doctor, for he is certainly dead, poor fellow," she said aloud.

"Oh, what a pity!" exclaimed a voice at her side, and, turning abruptly, she saw a pretty young woman—Nita's maid, Lizette.

"Oh, Mrs. Hill, I hope he's not dead! Can I do anything to help you, please?"

"Why, Lizette, I did not know you were out of your bed, but I'm glad some one awoke you, for your mistress needs you very badly. Go up-stairs and attend to her while I wait here for the doctor."

Lizette went away obediently, and ascended the stairs to Nita's room, full of surprise at the strange happenings of this summer night at Pirate Beach.

Finding Nita's door ajar, she stepped over the threshold. Then she recoiled with a cry of surprise and terror.

A startling sight was before her eyes. Prostrate upon the floor lay her young mistress, and across her body was stretched the lean, lithe frame of an old witchlike woman, whose skinny claws gripped Nita's throat in a murderous clasp. The victim's face was purple and distorted.

The dim light that shone upon the scene showed also to the wondering maid the open chest of gold and the glittering coins scattered over the floor in reckless profusion, where the hag had dropped them in her spring upon Nita.

[Pg 24]

One moment's recoil of amazement and horror, then Lizette comprehended the full meaning of the scene—robbery and murder.

"Lord help me!" she exclaimed, and sprang upon the murderess, grasping her arms in a viselike hold, and tearing them apart from Nita's throat, although the hag struggled and snarled like a wild beast baffled of its prey.

Finding herself unable to regain her grip on the girl, she turned with a fierce howl upon her assailant. There was murder in Meg's heart, and she was determined to silence forever the witness to her attempt upon Nita's life.

But although she was strong and wiry, her lean frame soon weakened under the vigorous onslaught of her young and agile foe, and the struggle soon ended, for Lizette adroitly tripped her up, and she fell heavily, her head striking the corner of the iron-bound chest with a loud thud.

Then the maid turned to kneel down by her unconscious mistress. Nita lay motionless, but when Lizette put her ear against the girl's heart she was rejoiced to find that it was still throbbing faintly.

"Poor darling, that old fiend didn't quite kill her!" she cried joyfully, and set to work to revive her hapless mistress.

But Nita came back to life very slowly, and it was not until her wet garments were all removed and she was laid in her bed, that she opened a pair of languid dark eyes and met the affectionate gaze of the anxious maid.

[Pg 25]

"What has happened?" she breathed faintly, and Lizette explained, softening the whole affair as much as she could, not to excite the patient.

"You saved my life, Lizette," cried Nita gratefully. Then she shuddered at perceiving the unconscious form of the old fortune-teller.

"I'll see how much she's hurt now; I have been tending to you all this time," said the maid. "I don't suppose she's dead, but there's an awful cut on the side of her head. She will go to prison for this if she lives—oh, Lordy!" as the apparently dead woman suddenly opened her dazed eyes and lifted up her grizzled head. Lizette sprang to the door, and locked it.

"You don't get out of here except to go to prison, old woman," she observed, then brought water and sponges and bathed and bandaged the wounded head. Then she gave Meg a drink of cordial, and said:

"You're all right now. The cut ain't as bad as I thought at first. Well, now I'm going to send for an officer and hand you over on a charge of attempted robbery and murder."

The hag sprang to her feet, her sullen face ghastly in the dim light, her eyes lurid with hate.

"You shall not send me to prison," she hissed savagely.

"You will see!" cried the maid, stretching out her hand to the bell.

[Pg 26]

Meg's skinny, upraised arm arrested the movement.

"Wait. See what your mistress will say," she snarled, and, moving to the side of the bed, she bent down and whispered sharply for several minutes in Nita's ear.

A low cry of horror came from the bed, and the old harpy moved aside, muttering significantly:

"I knew when I told you that, you would let me go free. Indeed, I did not mean to touch you if I could get the gold without—but you took me by surprise."

Lizette looked at her mistress for orders.

"Miss Nita, you surely won't let the old hag escape?" she cried.

"Yes, open the door," Nita cried faintly, shudderingly.

"But, Miss Nita——"

"Let the woman go!" Nita repeated, and the maid reluctantly obeyed. Then Nita said faintly:

"Lizette, I am already your debtor for my life, and indeed you will find me grateful. Do me one more kindness. Keep the secret of this terrible adventure locked forever in your breast unless I give you leave to speak."

"Oh, Miss Nita, is it best to shield that old wretch from justice? She may come back again and carry off all your gold, and kill you, too."

"No, Lizette, she has sworn never to attempt it again, and you must keep it a secret. Gather up the gold, put it back in the chest, and lock it carefully away. But first take some for yourself."

"Oh, Miss Nita, I don't want any reward for saving your life."

[Pg 27]

"But I insist," murmured Nita sweetly. "Take five hundred dollars."

She saw the young woman's eyes grow suddenly eager.

"God bless you, Miss Nita. It means so much to me—oh, you can't think the good I can do with just two hundred dollars. I will take that much, no more, if you please, and, dear Miss Nita, I'll love you with every drop of my heart's blood to the end of my life for this. Oh, I will tell you all some day, my lady," and Lizette, sobbing like a little child, kissed Nita's white hand. Then she locked and carefully put away the chest of gold.

"For no one else must find out that you have such a treasure in this room," she said cautiously.

Then Nita sighed wearily:

"Oh, Lizette, I feel so tired and ill. My arms ache with pain, my whole body is stiff and sore. I should like to go to sleep, but first you must go down-stairs and bring me news of Dorian Mountcastle—if he is dead or alive, for surely the doctor must have come by this time."

CHAPTER V.

[Pg 28]

A PLOT TO WIN A LOVER.

Mrs. Courtney, sitting at a desk in her own room the morning after the arrival at Pirate Beach, was busy writing a letter to her daughter, who had been absent from New York when Miser Farnham had called at her lodgings and electrified her with the welcome offer to become the chaperon of his beautiful ward.

After acquainting her daughter with these facts and the later ones of the night's happenings, Mrs. Courtney added:

"Now, prepare for a joyful surprise, my dear Azalea. A happy fate has thrown Dorian Mountcastle across your path again. It is he whom Miss Farnham so romantically saved, and although he has a mysterious wound in the side which will cause several weeks of confinement, the doctor thinks he can pull him safely through. Of course, I shall nurse him assiduously, and I want you to drop everything and come home. That girl is quite ill to-day, feverish and delirious from her exposure last night. Before she is well enough to come down and see Dorian Mountcastle, you will have a chance to cut her out with him. Our former acquaintance will be to your advantage, too, for there is some secrecy about Miss Farnham's antecedents that I don't at all approve. Well, if you can only secure the prize, we can soon drop this other affair; so come quickly, my dear daughter, for I know your heart seconds my wishes in this matter."

[Pg 29]

It was barely twenty-four hours later that Nita's maid said to her mistress, who was still too ill to leave her bed:

"Mrs. Courtney's daughter, Miss Azalea, came to-day."

"Is she pretty?" asked Nita—always a girl's first question about another one.

"She is a little thing with blue eyes, rosy cheeks, and golden hair. The housekeeper was just telling me that these Courtneys used to be grand rich people, and that they are old friends of this Mr. Dorian Mountcastle."

"Old friends," murmured the invalid, and her heart gave an inexplicable throb of pain.

"And," continued Lizette, "Mrs. Hill says Mrs. Courtney is perfectly devoted to the young man, and just takes the nursing right out of her hands."

Nita smiled a little contemptuously, for Mrs. Courtney had made her but two formal visits, into both of which she had infused a sarcastic disapproval of the girl's nocturnal wandering.

"Oh, Mrs. Courtney, it was an irresistible impulse stronger than myself that led me out. Indeed, I think God sent me to save Mr. Mountcastle's life," the girl had cried reverently.

Mrs. Courtney had smiled in a sort of cold derision.

"Never go out alone like that again. I would never forgive my daughter, Azalea, for doing anything so highly improper," she had replied stiffly.

And now Azalea had arrived upon the scene, and the housekeeper had bluntly told Lizette that the lady was preparing to throw her pretty daughter at the young man's head.

[Pg 30]

"But it won't work, for he's always talking about Miss Farnham, and begging to see her to thank her for her bravery. He told me he took her for a real angel when he first opened his eyes down there by the water and saw her face!" cried Mrs. Hill, and Lizette returned:

"And when Miss Nita was delirious last night, she kept calling his name: 'Dorian, Dorian, Dorian,' like they were old acquaintances. I think myself, it's a case of love at first sight on both sides."

"And so do I, Lizette."

And, kindly, romantic souls that they were, they took a keen, womanly delight in this incipient love-affair. Miss Farnham had saved Mr. Mountcastle's life, and in novel-lore this romantic incident always led up to love and marriage.

It was noon the next day before Nita saw Azalea. A bewitching golden-haired vision in a white morning-gown, with floating blue ribbons, that matched the color of her large, turquoise-blue eyes, and brought out clearly the rose-pink tinting of her soft skin—this was the fairy that floated into Nita's room alone, and murmured gushingly:

"How do you do, Miss Farnham? Mama has been trying to keep me out, saying that you were too ill to be disturbed. But you must not mind me, will you? I am only Azalea! May I call you Nita?" Dropping suddenly on her knees, she kissed Nita's feverish cheek. "I love you, you brave heroine!" she cried.

[Pg 31]

Nita could only smile, for Azalea gave her no chance to speak. She went on cooingly:

"I want to whisper a sweet secret to you, dear. I love you already, because—well, because you saved Dorian's life. When I came yesterday and found him here, I almost fainted with surprise and joy. Do you understand, Nita? Dorian and I were—lovers—once—but afterward we were cruelly parted. But now, we have made it up, and are happy. But only think, dearest, if you had not saved his life that night I should have gone mourning him all my days. God bless you, Nita."

Strange that those words of blessing almost sounded like a curse in Nita's ears. She shrank from the red lips that again caressed her cheek, and murmured coldly:

"Pray, take a seat, Miss Courtney."

"Do I weary you, poor dear?" sinking gracefully into an arm-chair. "Oh, how dreadfully ill you look; I suppose you will be in bed for weeks."

"I am going to sit up to-morrow."

"Surely not so soon, dear. I don't think mama will permit you."

"I beg your pardon, I shall not ask her leave, Lizette is my nurse"—quietly.

"But I thought mama ought to be consulted. She is your chaperon, you know"—wheedingly.

"I am very wilful, Miss Courtney, and intend to have my own way. I am better, and there is no need of my remaining in bed longer than to-morrow. Then, too, I have a guest, you should remember, and courtesy demands that I should greet him as soon as possible."

[Pg 32]

"Although a perfect stranger to you. But, perhaps, mama will not consider it correct form for you to visit the invalid," almost sneered Azalea.

"You have called on him, I presume"—pointedly.

"Why, of course"—flushing slightly—"but that is very different. I have known Dorian a long time."

"Ah, and I saved his life," replied Nita quietly.

Their glances met, the artful blue ones, the defiant black ones—in their hearts they knew themselves sworn foes. Nita saw through the girl before her, her artfulness, her assumptions, and despised her already.

"Can it be true that Dorian Mountcastle loves this pretty, shallow girl?" she wondered, with inexplicable anger and bitterness. She thought him a thousand times too good and noble for Azalea, and felt a sudden passionate longing to be free of the hated fetters that held her in thrall that she might measure lances with her for the prize of his heart.

CHAPTER VI.

[Pg 33]

UNDER THE ROOF OF GRAY GABLES.

Dorian Mountcastle belonged to that gay, careless, half-Bohemian class of rich young men, who, without seriously offending the proprieties, manage to set at naught many of the petty conventionalities that obtain in their set, and enjoy themselves after their own fashion in a sort of come-and-go-as-you-please style.

He was five-and-twenty. His parents had both died before he was sixteen, and he had traveled extensively, five years with a tutor, and latterly alone. Many men envied him, and many women sighed for him—or for his fortune, he was not certain which.

Chance had brought the young man to Pirate Beach the night of Nita's arrival there. Two days before he had joined a yachting-party, but caprice, or disgust, at the machinations of a husband-hunting young lady on board, had inspired him with so keen a longing for escape, that he had prevailed on his friend to set him ashore, at an hour when plain people are just seeking their beds.

"I'll seek shelter presently at that imposing old mansion up there," he thought indifferently, and walked musingly along the shore, thinking in weary disdain of the woman who had persecuted him on his friend's yacht.

"And all for the Mountcastle gold, not at all for the owner," he muttered cynically. "How beautiful and heartless women are! Shall I never be loved for myself alone? No, I have proved that," and he turned his face to the sea with a short, angry laugh.

[Pg 34]

There glided toward him across the noiseless sands, like a spirit of evil, the bent and crouching form of an old woman, with a hideous, scarred face, and bright, furtive eyes. A catlike bound brought her within hearing of his last words, and she echoed his laugh with one more cynical and hard than his own.

Turning with a start of surprise, Dorian Mountcastle beheld the witch, and exclaimed, in a tone of comic despair:

"Ye gods, another female! Can I not escape them either on land or sea?"

"No, for a woman is destined to work you bitter woe, young sir," replied a cracked and gibing voice.

"A safe prophecy, madam. Woman has worked woe to man ever since Adam's day, and will no doubt continue it to the end of the chapter," laughed the young man, in a tone of careless raillery.

The scarred, hideous old hag was watching so greedily the flashing diamond on his hand that she forgot to answer him, until he touched her lightly, and asked mockingly:

"Are you so overcome with admiration that you cannot speak? Who lives up there in the great house?"

"They are new tenants—just arrived to-night. I know nothing about them, but the house is called Gray Gables, and belongs to an old man in New York. You must be a stranger, sir, not to know Gray Gables?"—with a glance of furtive inquiry.

[Pg 35]

"Yes, I am a stranger. I landed here from a yacht to-night," Dorian answered, with careless confidence. "I'll tell you the truth, old lady. Some women badgered me so that I was fain to jump overboard into the sea to avoid them, so my friend, the owner of the yacht, kindly consented to set me off here, where I'm as lonesome as Robinson Crusoe on his desert-island."

"You don't know anybody at Pirate Beach?" she suggested.

"Not a living soul but you, my friend—no, not even the name of the place until now. Pirate Beach!

Jove, an unpleasantly suggestive name."

"There's nothing in the name, though there might have been many years ago. There's no danger now, young sir"—wheedingly.

"Glad to hear it, I'm sure. Well, is there any hotel hereabout?"

"A matter of five miles or so on a lonely road."

"Too long a tramp for a lazy man. Maybe they will give me a bed up yonder."

A hoarse cry issued from the woman's lips, and, recoiling from him, she suddenly lifted her skinny right arm on high, and almost shrieked, so loud and uneven was her voice:

"Young man, venture not now or ever beneath the roof of Gray Gables. It is written in the stars that Fate threatens thee there!"

Dorian Mountcastle stared, then laughed at her tragic turn.

[Pg 36]

"So you are a sibyl? Come, read me a page from the mystic stars."

A piece of silver crossed her skinny palm, and she laughed in joy. There was more where that came from. She had caught the clink in his vest pocket. She laughed, then scowled.

"Oh, you may sneer," she cried angrily. "You do not believe that old Meg can read the stars, you jest at her art. But the time comes when you shall weep. Look up yonder at that old gray house, so dark and forbidding, among the trees. It has been accursed and uninhabited for years; but to-night I see in the shining stars a new shadow hovering, vulturelike, above it. You are mixed up in it—you, whom fate has sent here to-night. For you I read woe and despair. You will go mad for a woman's love!"

He laughed at her in keenest mockery, this Dorian Mountcastle, who was so tired of lovely woman and her deceitful wiles.

"You are cheating me, Madam Sibyl! I know the shallow sex too well to lose my head over any of them!" he exclaimed, in a voice of cynical melancholy, and, throwing her another coin, walked impatiently away to some little distance, standing with his back to her, and his moody face turned to the sea.

Meg, the fortune-teller, remained where he had left her several moments watching him with a strange, catlike intentness. Now and then she would throw a cautious glance around her, but there was no one in sight—no one but the young man yonder with the diamond gleaming on his hand, and his pockets full of gold—yes, gold, for the last piece he had thrown her was yellow and shining. A terrible cupidity was aroused in the old crone's breast.

[Pg 37]

As for Dorian Mountcastle; in his careless or cynical self-absorption he had already forgotten the woman and her wild predictions—a fatal forgetfulness. For, as Meg crouched there, on the shining sands, her lean claw slipped inside the long black cloak she wore, and clutched the hilt of a sharp knife she carried in her breast. A low grating chuckle escaped her lips—the laugh of a fiend—and she began to advance upon her unconscious prey.

With his back to her, and his hands in his pockets, he was watching the sea, and softly whistling a melancholy strain from a favorite opera.

Meg crept close, unheard, unseen, threw out a cautious foot, tripped him, and he fell backward on the wet sands, ere he could extricate his hands from his pockets.

That instant she sprang upon her helpless victim. The murderous knife glittered in the moonlight, then descending, sheathed itself deep in his breast. Dorian Mountcastle quivered all over, like one in the agonies of a violent death, then lay quiet, at the mercy of the murderess.

CHAPTER VII.

[Pg 38]

FORGOT SHE WAS A WIFE.

And so Dorian Mountcastle, saved from death by Nita's brave efforts, lay ill beneath the roof of Gray Gables—the house of all others that the murderous old sibyl had warned him to avoid.

And very pale he looked that morning when the housekeeper entered, bearing a fancy basket, heaped high with dew-wet roses of all colors, whose fragrance filled the air of the sick-room with the perfumed breath of rosy June.

"From Miss Farnham, with her best wishes for your recovery," she said graciously.

She saw his eyes light up with eager pleasure as he placed the flowers close to his pillow, and inhaled their spicy fragrance.

"My mistress gathered them for you herself," continued Mrs. Hill, and he looked at her in surprise.

"Impossible! Why, I was told that she was too ill to leave her bed for weeks!" he exclaimed.

Mrs. Hill tossed her head with a knowing air, and answered:

"Them that told you that, Mr. Mountcastle, wished it might be the case, no doubt, but Miss

Farnham is up and dressed, and took breakfast with the family this morning."

"Happy, happy news!" murmured the young man, gladly. "She is better, thank Heaven! Oh, Mrs. Hill, will she be kind enough to come to me and let me thank her for so nobly saving my life?" [Pg 39]

"The same ones that were so anxious to keep her abed so long have busied themselves this morning to persuade her that it would be highly improper for her to visit you in your sick-room," replied the worthy housekeeper, swelling with indignation.

"Pshaw! Why, Azalea has been in here a dozen times."

"They told her that was quite different. You see, sir—old friends, and all that."

She saw his lips curl in angry contempt under his mustache, and he exclaimed angrily:

"Mrs. Hill, I will not submit to this hectoring by the Courtneys. Go at once to Miss Farnham, say distinctly that I demand an interview. If she refuses I shall consider myself an unwelcome guest, and depart from Gray Gables within the hour."

"Oh, sir, it would kill you to be moved!"

"No matter. I will not remain."

Mrs. Hill chuckled to herself, and departed on her errand without more ado.

"Do come, Miss Nita, please. He's that cranky he thinks you don't want him here, and if you don't go and pacify him he'll go away sure, and that will be the death of him, for the wound would get to bleeding again, and the doctor said it mustn't on no account," she pleaded anxiously.

"He has no right to demand," Nita said haughtily, but she followed Mrs. Hill to the sick-room, somehow glad in her secret heart of that imperious message. [Pg 40]

Mrs. Hill pushed her gently over the threshold, shut the door on the outside, and—trembling with a new timidity, her face burning, her heart beating wildly, Nita was alone with Dorian Mountcastle. His eager blue eyes turned to her, dwelling on her beauty in wondering delight.

"Miss Farnham," he cried, and his musical voice thrilled her. Involuntarily, she moved nearer to him till she stood by his side.

"How can I ever thank you enough for your goodness?" he said, holding out an eager hand. She laid hers gently in it, and as he clasped it their eyes met.

When love is young and new there is something wonderful in the spell of a glance. This pair, looking into each other's eyes, wore pale, serious faces, and felt their hearts leap and their breath flutter unevenly over their parted lips. They seemed looking not alone in each other's eyes, but into each other's hearts. The veil of conventionality had unconsciously fallen, and Nita stood with her lips trembling, her eyes wide, solemn, half-questioning as they met and held his devouring gaze.

Suddenly, she recovered her self-consciousness. She started back, flushed vividly, and let her eyes falter shyly from his gaze, while she murmured in a low voice:

"Do not try to thank me. Only live, that is all I ask!"

In tones of tenderness he answered:

"Now that you are well I hope that I shall live. But when they told me you were so very, very ill I did not care if I died," and impulsively he kissed the hand he held, adding, "you know me, Miss Farnham. They have told you my name?" [Pg 41]

She drew away the hand he had kissed, her whole frame thrilling, and with a struggle for calmness, answered smilingly:

"Mrs. Courtney has told me your name and position, and that your sojourn at Gray Gables is an honor to us."

"Nonsense! Mrs. Courtney knows that I am simply a lazy young vagabond who has inherited a fine old name and plenty of money, and that Azalea is making a dead set at me to get it," he rejoined, almost curtly in his vexation. "How I wish no one had recognized me here," he added, "then I should have palmed myself off on you as a poor young man, and tried to win your friendship on my personal merits."

"Is not that the only way, anyhow?" she queried ingenuously.

His blue eyes began to twinkle with the merry light of laughter.

"Mercy, no, Miss Farnham, I've never had a true friend in all my life! People value me solely for the length of my purse. Ask Miss Courtney if that is not true," and he smiled with sarcasm that puzzled Nita, but that also recalled to her mind Mrs. Courtney's displeasure if she should find her here with Dorian Mountcastle.

"I must go now. Mrs. Courtney did not wish me to come in here at all," she faltered, turning toward the door. [Pg 42]

"Please stay a little while with me, won't you? There is not the least impropriety in it, I'm sure. That old cat is only trying to keep you in the background because you are so—beautiful—pardon my frankness, won't you? And do say you're not going yet. I want to thank you for these sweet roses—and, one minute, please—I'd like you to read to me every day to cheer me up. Will you? It would be so good of you to come to my rescue."

With a merry smile she answered:

"Perhaps—perhaps—you might think the same of me."

"Never! I only wish you would! It would make me the happiest vagabond on earth if you only—beg pardon, Miss Farnham, indeed I did not mean to offend," for she had suddenly drawn back from him, her eyes startled, her cheeks pale, her pose haughty.

Nita, who for a few brief moments had been wandering with bounding pulses and dreamy bliss through an earthly paradise, had suddenly remembered.

Remembered that she was not free.

And Dorian Mountcastle, such a short while ago a cynical scoffer at woman's love, gazed in alarm and surprise at the cold white change that had come over that lovely face that but a moment ago blushed with love beneath his eyes.

"Your pardon—I spoke lightly—but I meant no offense," he repeated anxiously.

She turned on him the full gaze of her large eyes, somber now and grave with secret pain, and their sadness pierced his heart. [Pg 43]

"Oh, no, no, Mr. Mountcastle, I am not offended. Do not fancy such a thing, but—I—I have forgotten something. I must go—this moment," she answered gently, but incoherently, and almost staggering to the door, half-blinded by starting tears, she tore it open and hastened out.

In the strange confusion of her abrupt departure Nita did not notice that she had left Dorian Mountcastle's room by a door exactly opposite to the one she had entered.

But in a moment she realized that she had blundered. She found herself in a dark, narrow, carpetless corridor, with closed doors frowning grimly upon her from either side of the moldy-smelling hall.

"It must be the servant's quarters, but I will try to escape this way. I cannot possibly go back through his room," she murmured, and pursued her way timorously along the hall, soon losing herself in an intricacy of abrupt turnings and obscure passages seeming to have no outlet.

"How strange," she murmured uneasily; "I do not seem to be finding my way out at all, and perhaps I could not find it back to Mr. Mountcastle's room. Ah! there is a narrow door and a dark little stairway. I suppose it will lead me out-doors into the garden," and Nita began to descend the dark, rickety old stairway, all unconscious of the startling discovery she was on the eve of making, or she would have fled back in an agony of terror.

CHAPTER VIII.

[Pg 44]

IN DEADLY PERIL.

Slowly and carefully Nita went down the dark, narrow, dusty steps to the rickety door at the foot, expecting confidently that it would lead her straight out-doors, most probably into the kitchen-garden. She found the door slightly ajar, pushed it quickly open, and found herself, without warning or premonition, in a small, dingy, cobwebby room, full of gloomy shadows, and dimly lighted by a flaring dip, in an old battered tin candlestick.

The little closetlike chamber, barely eight feet wide, was furnished with a small table, and an arm-chair, over which was thrown a coarse, dark-gray blanket. Against the walls were ranged a large number of small, iron-bound chests, similar to the one up-stairs in Nita's closet. The lids of several were open, and the wondering girl saw that they were filled to the brim with money, that gleamed bright and yellow in the flaring, uncertain light of the solitary candle.

But not even all this hoarded gold could have surprised Nita as did the central figure of it all—the old man kneeling with his back to her over one of the open chests, and running his shriveled fingers through the bright coins, while his lips worked nervously, emitting chuckling and guttural noises of ghoulisn delight.

Nita's instant alarm struck her dumb. She was for the moment incapable of speech or motion. She could only stare in an appalled silence. She had recognized in the crouching old man gloating over his treasure her miser-husband, Charles Farnham, whom she had supposed to be far away from this place, according to the terms of the marriage-contract. [Pg 45]

Even while she gazed there crept over her a sensation of deadly fear and dread, that seemed to freeze the very blood in her veins. She thought in wild alarm:

"I have blundered upon this secret, and the accident may cost me my life. Heaven help me to escape before he discovers me!"

Absorbed in his fascinating employment, the miser had not noticed her entrance. He continued to play with the gold like a child, pouring it from one trembling hand to the other, muttering and chuckling in a strange ecstasy.

Nita summoned all her will-power to break the thrall of terror that seemed to hold her limbs immovable. Suddenly, the power of motion returned. She turned softly, made two catlike steps, and was on the stairs on the other side of the door, safe—ah, what was that grating sound?

In drawing the door softly to behind her the rusty hinge had creaked harshly! Nita's heart gave a

bound of deadly fear, she gasped for breath, and sprang wildly forward.

If only she could reach the corridor above with its intricate windings, she could elude pursuit in some dark corner.

But from the room she had left came a sound between a howl and a groan, and the old man bounded to the stairs with such wondrous agility that his outstretched hand caught the long skirts of the escaping girl, and dragged her ruthlessly backward. [Pg 46]

Clutching her fiercely, in spite of her cries and struggles for liberty, and bearing her forward into the light, he gazed eagerly into her face. A bitter oath escaped his lips as he beheld in his struggling captive the face of his beautiful, unloving bride.

To Nita, with her nerves yet unstrung by sickness and excitement, the sight of the old miser's face, distorted by rage and surprise, was absolutely terrifying.

She trembled like a leaf in his rude grasp, and moans of terror came from her blanched lips.

"Spy!" he hissed angrily, and in the fierce malevolent gleam of his snakelike eyes she read a wild temptation to grasp her fair white throat in his strong hands and throttle her to death.

"Spy! You have followed me here!" the old man hissed again savagely.

He shook her rudely until the breath had almost left her body, then flung her upon one of the chests, and, locking the little door, dropped the key into his pocket. She was at the mercy of this fiendish old man who had come into her life so strangely, and at so dark an hour.

"Release me, oh, release me!" she gasped faintly, pleadingly, but he looked at her with pitiless eyes, and answered:

"Once before a woman, filled with the greed for gold, followed me here to find out the secret of my hidden treasures. Well—her friends are searching for her yet, as perchance yours will be, too, for many a year." [Pg 47]

"You murdered her!" gasped Nita, with a creeping thrill of utter horror.

"No," he replied, and after a moment's pause continued with a hideous leer:

"I simply left her locked in this room and went away, leaving her alone with the treasure she coveted. It was a long, long time before I came back, and then—I found her still here."

"Still here!" the startled captive repeated. He saw the shudder that crept over her frame, and laughed mockingly.

"Still here—waiting for me still," he sneered. "Always here, waiting for me when I come. Look!"

Turning from her, he threw aside the dark blanket that had draped the chair by the table. Nita looked and shrieked aloud.

The coarse blanket had concealed the fleshless skeleton of a human being sitting at ease in the chair, with the bony digits of one hand resting on the table. About the neck was clasped a golden chain with a shining pendant, while on one finger gleamed a magnificent emerald ring, ghastly mockery of adornment.

Nita's overstrained nerves gave way at the startling sight. She crouched upon the chest of gold with her hands before her eyes, while appalling shrieks burst from her lips.

She doubted not the same awful fate would be her own, despite the fact that she was bound to Charles Farnham by the most solemn tie. [Pg 48]

At her shrieks he turned upon her with the fierce command:

"Silence! Do not think that your cries will bring assistance to this vault! This wing of Gray Gables is utterly uninhabited and isolated from the newer part of the house. You are wholly in my power and at my mercy to punish as I will."

From his excited, remorseless face she doubted not what that punishment would be—isolation and starvation in the miser's hidden treasure-vault in company with that awful thing yonder, the ghastly, grinning, jewel-bedecked skeleton.

There came a swift thought of Dorian Mountcastle. She should never see him again. Would he miss the girl into whose eyes he had gazed with such passion? Would the mystery of her strange fate sadden his life? She cried out, rebelliously:

"Punish at your will! Yet I have done nothing—nothing!" and, falling on her knees, she poured out impetuously the story of the mistake in opening the door that had brought her to this terrible strait.

"Through no fault of mine," she sobbed wildly. "Yet—yet—I am to suffer death for this unconscious wrong. Ah, sir, how can you be so cruel? Why, then, did you save me from the river for this more terrible fate?"

He stood silent, gazing at the beautiful, convulsed face. Yes, it was scarce a week since he had turned her aside from a self-sought death.

He remembered her strange, almost stoical calm, in such contrast with her wild agitation now. Life had grown sweeter, dearer now since that day in Central Park, when, starving and friendless, she had derided him with the scorn of a hopeless and reckless despair. [Pg 49]

"Let me go free, only give me my liberty, and the secret I have unwillingly discovered shall never pass my lips!" she cried frantically. "Do you remember that day in the park when you pretended

that you loved me? Then, how can you be so cruel?"

The old miser's face changed suddenly from rage and malevolence to a leering softness more hateful still to her shrinking eyes. He came closer, and she started back in disgust.

CHAPTER IX.

[Pg 50]

THE SERPENT RING.

"Ah, Nita, you remember that day still!" cried the old man in a transport of joy. "You remember that you are my wife! Do you know that in my wrath I had almost forgotten it? And so you appeal to my love? Have you none to give me in return, pretty one?"

As he approached her she thrust him violently back with hands that were nerved by the strength of fear and hate.

"Do not touch me, do not ask me for love. Remember our marriage-contract!" she exclaimed.

"I remember it," he answered, gazing on her with fiery eyes. "But, listen, Nita; I will give you one chance of escape from the doom that hangs over you. Burn the marriage-contract. Become my wife in reality as you are now only in name, and we will begin our new life to-day. I love you, Nita, but only on these terms can you regain your freedom."

She shrank back with dilated eyes full of horror, and cried:

"I would not abridge one hour of that year if twenty lives were at stake. Ah, no, no, no—sooner death!"

"So be it!" he exclaimed bitterly, incensed by her scorn, and pointing to the skeleton. "I will go now and leave you to the companionship of this grim lady whose fate you will share." He moved toward the door, but she sprang before him with desperate courage to do battle for her liberty.

[Pg 51]

"Do not dare to leave me here!" she cried imperiously. "Listen to me, you wicked wretch! If you leave me here to perish with this woman you have already murdered, I—while I am dying of starvation here in this gold-vault, surrounded by enough wealth to feed famishing thousands—I will curse you with my latest breath! I, to whom Heaven will listen because I am good and friendless, will pray God to chastise you with a terrible punishment, and to bring down on you a death even more awful than mine. And after death I will haunt you night and day, if such things can be, until I drive you mad with horror."

Before the solemn force of Nita's frenzied adjuration, the old man started and grew ashen pale. His eyes glared, his knees trembled. She saw quickly that her desperate words had some effect upon him, and continued:

"See, I will take an oath, if you let me go free, never to reveal the secret of what I have seen here to-night, never to enter this place again. The secret of your hidden wealth, and of this murdered woman, shall be as though I had never known it. Will not this suffice?"

Charles Farnham did not answer at first. With bowed head and ashen features, he remained in deep thought several minutes, while Nita waited in keen anxiety. Then he looked up, and said:

"You promise to take a solemn oath! Very well. For the love I bear you I will spare your life. But there is one condition."

[Pg 52]

"Yes," she breathed eagerly.

"You note the ring on that skeleton-hand there? Come nearer, Nita, and examine it. You shudder. A coiled serpent, with quivering, emerald scales, you observe. Is it not magnificent and unique? It has a history, and was made for this woman by a foreign artisan, who then destroyed the pattern. Note the tiny quivering gold wires that uphold each emerald scale. At the least movement of the hand the serpent-head seems to raise itself, and the eyes and scales to glow with malignant greenish fire."

"Yes, yes," she answered impatiently. "But the condition, sir—the condition?"

Scowling darkly at her, he hissed rather than spoke:

"That you take your oath of silence with that skeleton hand clasped in your own, and afterward withdraw the serpent-ring from that bony finger, and wear it always, in memory of this hour."

She shuddered and recoiled at first, then, catching the gleam of triumph in his eye, answered, with apparent calm:

"I agree to your condition."

With an evil, jeering smile, he said:

"Perchance there are people yet alive who have never given up the hope of tearing aside the thick veil of mystery that enshrouds the fate of this woman. If you wear this ring you may meet them—they will recognize it, they will ask you questions that you will not dare to answer."

[Pg 53]

Her brain was reeling, her limbs trembled, her strength was fast going in this atmosphere of horror, but there was an element of desperate bravery in the girl when driven to bay. She answered her tormentor:

"Only give me my liberty, and I will risk it all—all!"

The die was cast. He looked at her for a moment with a strange expression, and exclaimed warningly:

"One moment, please. You will remember that you will have no chance to prove a traitor to your oath, even if you dared. This door I shall wall up immediately, as there is a secret entrance that I shall use hereafter. So beware of attempted treachery, girl."

With a shudder she replied:

"The wealth of the Indies would not tempt me to return to this dreadful place! Now, the oath."

With wolfish eyes he saw her white hand close shrinkingly over the dead one on the table. Sepulchrally he spake some words which Nita repeated after him through stiff white lips, her eyes dilated with horror.

Then she drew the glistening ring from the skeleton's bony hand, and placed it on her third finger. The emerald scales quivered with greenish fire, and a shock as of electricity seemed to thrill through her at the contact. Repressing a cry of terror, she turned toward the stairway.

"You must return the way you came," said Farnham, unlocking the door, and holding it ajar. [Pg 54]
"Good-by, Nita, and do not forget the oath sworn on the dead hand."

But the girl was speechless. Flitting past him like a shadow she crept up the stairway, and heard with silent thanksgiving the lock turn in the door, between her and the miser's gold-vault.

CHAPTER X.

[Pg 55]

"WILL YOU NEVER FORGIVE?"

When Nita had left him, Dorian Mountcastle lay with half-shut eyes in a delicious reverie. Believing himself proof against all the darts of Cupid, he had yet gone down helplessly before the fire of a girl's dark eyes, and the charm of her sweet, sad smile. Upon his life's horizon had dawned the radiant star of Love.

He forgot his weakness and illness in the intoxication of the moment. He was too well versed in the signs of love not to interpret aright Nita's looks and blushes. It only brought a smile to his lips when he recalled her strange pallor and sudden flight.

"Sweet girl, she was frightened and agitated at the sudden discovery mutually made that our hearts had leaped to meet each other. She will return when she recovers her composure," he thought happily.

A light tap at the door, then it opened softly, and his heart leaped at the thought that it might be Nita already returning. But it was only Azalea Courtney, radiant as the morning, carrying a little silver pitcher full of iced lemonade.

"Alone, Dorian? I thought Miss Farnham was with you?" she cooed, in silvery tones.

"You were mistaken," he replied coldly, vexed that she had disturbed his sweet love-reverie, and out of mere perversity he refused to drink the draft she proffered, declaring that he was not thirsty. [Pg 56]

But if he thought to freeze out his dainty visitor by his indifference he was mistaken. She slipped into the arm-chair by his bed, and began with pretty raillery:

"Miss Farnham made you but a short visit. I fear you did not make a good impression."

"I should be sorry to think so, for in that case I should feel compelled to leave Gray Gables immediately, and be jolted five miles to the nearest hotel," he rejoined maliciously.

"Leave us, Dorian? Indeed, you should not. It would kill you to be moved. Besides, what does it matter what that girl thinks, so long as mama and I are delighted to have you, and to be of service to you?"

"It matters everything, Azalea, since Miss Farnham is the real mistress here. Remember your mama is only her salaried chaperon, and you, like myself, but a transient guest."

Azalea pouted prettily at this rebuke.

"You take pleasure in reminding me of my poverty—you forget the past," she half-sobbed, and he answered impatiently:

"I choose to ignore it, and, pardon me, but it is bad taste in you to recur to it."

"Ah, Dorian, will you never forgive?—never permit me to atone?" she sighed.

The young man made a gesture of impatient scorn, as though dismissing an unwelcome subject, and half-buried his face in the roses that still lay beside his pillow.

Azalea Courtney knew that Nita had sent the roses. A spasm of mingled pain and bitterness crossed the pretty, pink-and-white face, and she cried out sharply. [Pg 57]

"Well, how do you like Miss Farnham?"

He knew well how to stab this dainty beauty—perhaps he knew, too, that she deserved it. He looked straight into her curious blue eyes, and answered enthusiastically:

"She is charming!"

"Ah!" breathed Azalea, with her little white hand pressed against her side to still her heart's jealous throbs.

"She is charming," repeated Dorian Mountcastle, quite oblivious to her pain, and, furious with anger, Azalea darted from her seat and left the room as precipitately as Nita had done a while ago—left the room to hurry to her mother and sob out her jealous longing for vengeance upon dark-eyed Nita, her beautiful rival.

Without the least compunction over the stab he had given his visitor, Dorian Mountcastle dismissed all thoughts of her, and again fell to dreaming of the girl who had bewitched him.

Beautiful women he had seen in plenty, but hovering about this one there was something more than beauty. With closed eyes he lay silent, breathing the fragrance of the roses by his pillow, and going over in his enraptured mind all her separate, distinctive charms.

Suddenly, he started broad-awake, his brow beaded with dews of terror, his heart throbbing painfully. What was the sound that had awakened him? Ah, a timid tapping over and over again upon the door.

"Enter!" he called out in a strangled voice, and the door opened and closed again, admitting— [Pg 58]
Nita!

Nita, pale and gasping, with wild eyes and disheveled tresses, her white gown soiled with soot and cobwebs, her slender hands grimy with dust, outstretched before her like a sleep-walker's, as she staggered across to him, gasping, it seemed, with mortal terror, vainly essaying to speak.

"My dream, my dream!" he cried, in a voice of agony, as she sank with a long, quivering sigh into the arm-chair close to the bed.

Putting out his hand he touched hers. It was icy cold, and he saw on it a ring that he had not noticed before, a serpent, with eyes and scales of quivering greenish fire. It was so lifelike in its malignant semblance that he shuddered through all his frame.

At his gentle touch, Nita started, and lifted her dazed dark eyes to his face. Their expression was piteous, and so was her voice, as she murmured incoherently:

"I—I—went out at the wrong door—and—was lost—oh, I was so frightened!"

Her eyes closed, her head drooped heavily. Drawing her hastily toward him, her pale face sank upon the roses by his pillow. She was unconscious.

It was a mean advantage to take of the helpless girl, but Dorian could not resist the temptation. The dark curls on her white brow mingled with his own fairer ones, and the lovely lips were close.

He turned his face slightly, and his eager mouth brushed hers.

The pressure of his lips recalled her ebbing senses. She stirred slightly, opened her eyes in a dreamy fashion, realized everything, and started back from him in sweet and strange dismay. [Pg 59]

"Nita, Nita, I love you!" Dorian murmured, as she looked at him with bewildered eyes, but ere she could reply the door opened, and Mrs. Hill, her faithful nurse, entered the room. The girl sprang up and clasped her around the neck, sobbing hysterically.

"Do not look at me so angrily, Mrs. Hill, indeed I have done nothing. Miss Farnham went out at that door yonder, got lost in the winding corridors, and found her way back here almost frightened out of her senses," explained Dorian.

"Oh, take me to my room," pleaded the girl, drawing the kindly housekeeper toward the door without a backward glance at her lover.

CHAPTER XI.

[Pg 60]

"IT IS THE RING."

Nita was walking alone in the grounds at twilight. The purple shades of the gloaming were shot through by the opaline light of a new moon swinging like a silver sickle in a rosy-lilac sky, and a wind from the sea—cool, salty, and delicious—stirred the flowers, shaking out fragrance upon the languid, love-breathing air of June.

The beautiful white-robed girl, as she walked up and down the flowery paths, cast now and then glances of yearning tenderness toward one window of the house, through whose lace-curtains gleamed a dim, soft light. She knew that Dorian Mountcastle was waiting there, heart-sick and restless, and pining for her presence.

A little while ago Lizette had brought her a note that set all her pulses beating with blended rapture and despair:

"MY DEAR MISS FARNHAM: How can you be so cruel to a sick and lonely man? It is a week since I have seen you. Mrs. Hill keeps making excuses that you are not well, but how can I believe it when I have seen you from my window every day walking, riding, and even boating, rowing yourself with the most consummate grace and skill? Azalea also tells me you are very well. She is devoted to me, the dear girl, but it is you I want.

"Do you know that I am so much better the doctor let me sit up several hours to-day, and that I shall soon be well enough to go away? I am glad, for I have already trespassed too long on your hospitality, and, of course, you will wish me gone, else you would let me see you when I am so miserable over your displeasure. How cruelly you punish me for that sweet stolen kiss, whose memory thrills my every hour with silent rapture. Ah, Nita, I love you madly! Will you accept the life you saved so bravely that night and make me happy?"

[Pg 61]

"You remember that sweet old song 'Juanita'? It keeps singing itself over and over in my thronging thoughts:

"Nita, Juanita, let me linger by thy side;
Nita, Juanita, be my own fair bride!"

"Ah, Nita, did not our souls rush together at our first meeting? I remember with intoxicating rapture how we looked into each other's eyes—looked and loved. Oh, my dearest, do not be cold to me. You are no heartless coquette, I know. Forego all further punishment. Come to me, dear, and set my heart at rest.

DORIAN."

The letter was in Nita's bosom. The sweetness and the thorn were in her heart. She wrung her slender hands together, as if in pain, then they fell apart, and a stifled cry came from her lips.

The keen little tongue of the emerald serpent had pierced her rosy palm and the blood started. But the wound in the young girl's heart was deeper far.

Everything around Nita—the moon, the flowers, the sea, breathed of love. What wonder that the same pulse throbbed at her heart! She leaned on the railing of a little fountain throwing diamond sprays into the air, and murmured plaintively:

"If this had come to me only two weeks ago it would have opened the gates of heaven to me. To love—to be loved—that is the best of life. But I have lived to be almost eighteen, and never had this crowning joy—never until now, when it comes, alas, too late. Ah, would it be so very wrong to love him just a little while? I have just one year of life, for I have sworn to die ere the moment comes of giving myself to Miser Farnham's arms. One year—only year in this beautiful world! Oh, it is cruel, cruel! And life has been so hard to me; who could blame me for taking this joy that fate holds out to me, this draft of love whose dregs will be so bitter?"

[Pg 62]

Hungry for love and happiness, the girl was faltering with a terrible temptation. For a week she had held it at bay. To-night Love stood sentinel at the door of her heart and proclaimed himself her master.

That night in the old garden when she had believed Dorian Mountcastle dead, she had uttered prophetic words:

"If you had lived, you would have lured my heart from me."

Only time could prove whether it was for better or worse that he had lived, and that they had looked and loved.

"I must go to him!" she cried suddenly, sweeping all irresolution aside.

She gathered a lily from the marble basin of the fountain, fastened it in the bosom of her white gown, and turned toward the house. Coming into the graveled walk at the foot of the steps, Nita almost ran into the arms of a tall, middle-aged man, who lifted his hat with easy grace, exclaiming:

[Pg 63]

"Beg pardon, Miss—Miss——"

"Farnham," the young girl said quietly, and stood waiting.

He bowed deeply, and resumed in his easy courteous manner:

"My name is Donald Kayne, Miss Farnham, and I am in search of a missing friend of mine, Dorian Mountcastle. I set him ashore on this beach about two weeks ago, and on returning only yesterday from our little yachting excursion, I heard that he had not returned to New York, nor even been heard of there. I became uneasy and came down to-day to hunt him up, although now"—with an admiring glance—"his exile is no longer a mystery to me. I learned at the hotel of my friend's accident, and that he was your guest. I hastened without ceremony to call on him."

"You are most welcome," she answered, in a low, musical voice.

"Thank you; and is he better?"

"He will soon be well," she murmured—"you will come to him at once, sir. He will be glad indeed to see his friend."

He followed her up the stately granite steps into a broad marble-paved hall. Then Nita led him to Dorian Mountcastle.

The invalid was resting in an easy chair, and Mrs. Courtney and her daughter were with him in spite of the only half-suppressed yawns with which he slyly evidenced a decided preference for solitude.

[Pg 64]

He was waiting for Nita's answer to his letter. Would she come, his proud, dark-eyed darling, would she forgive his audacity and grant his prayer? And, meanwhile, Mrs. Courtney and Azalea were engaged in holding her up to his scorn.

"The most singular young girl I ever met. She makes the duties of a chaperon merely a sinecure," sneered Mrs. Courtney, and Azalea chimed in with pretended sweet excuses:

"But, then, mama, dear, you must remember that the poor girl does not really seem to have any knowledge of the usages of the best society. I fancy her wealth must have come to her quite suddenly. She cannot play the piano, Dorian, nor sing a note. She knows no language but English, she is brusque, and——" But the sentence uttered in a clear, high-pitched voice, was never ended.

The door that already stood slightly ajar, to admit the evening air, was pushed open by a graceful hand, and Nita stood on the threshold with the stranger. She had heard, for, looking straight at her dismayed rival, she said archly:

"You are quite right, Miss Courtney, I was brought up in poverty until a few weeks ago, when I came into my—inheritance."

Cool, fair, queenly, she bowed to Dorian, and said simply:

"Your friend, Mr. Kayne."

"Donald Kayne!" cried Dorian joyfully.

[Pg 65]

A confusion ensued in which Nita's daring speech was happily passed over. The Courtneys were well acquainted with the newcomer. In their palmy days they had been in his "set," and, although surprised to see them here, he greeted them with the easy cordiality of a man of the world.

A lively conversation ensued from which Nita seemed for a short while necessarily left out. She withdrew to the only vacant seat, regretting that she could not conveniently move the heavy arm-chair away from the strong glare of light.

She leaned back, with languid grace, her eyes downcast, a hovering smile on her scarlet lips, her exquisite arm escaping from the lace of the loose sleeve, resting on the arm of the dark velvet chair, the taper, extending fingers quivering with a slight nervous motion that made the serpent-ring glitter so weirdly one would scarcely have been more startled to hear a sibilant hiss escape from the open jaws.

Nita was unconscious that the stranger's eyes dwelt admiringly upon her queenly beauty as she sat in the velvet arm-chair. She kept her lids lowered persistently, not daring to meet Dorian's ardent gaze.

But, suddenly, she became aware that Mr. Kayne had left his seat and was bending over her chair. His breath swept her cheek as he exclaimed eagerly:

"A very unique ring, Miss Farnham. Will you permit me to examine it closer?"

He took the white hand in his own and lifted it nearer to the light. His fingers felt as cold as the skeleton ones, from which she had drawn the uncanny ring in the miser's gold-vault, and they were trembling strangely. Every one was watching him curiously, the pale, repressed excitement of his countenance was so fascinating.

[Pg 66]

"Good heavens! it is the ring! Miss Farnham, how came you by it?" he cried out in such a startled, eager voice that she quivered with deadly fear, recalling in dismay the old miser's malicious words:

"People will recognize the ring—they will ask you questions that you will not dare to answer."

"The ring—I—oh—you must have made a mistake," she faltered, almost imploringly.

"Impossible! I know the jewel perfectly. I will prove it to you. Inside the serpent-ring there is carved a name—'Pepita'—is it not true? You know it. Come, Miss Farnham, you have solved the mystery of that woman's fate, or you would not wear her ring. The truth, the truth, for God's sake!"

CHAPTER XII.

[Pg 67]

ALL FOR A WOMAN'S SAKE.

Donald Kayne's usual calm demeanor had given place to the wildest agitation. His dark-gray eyes were black with excitement, his brow was corrugated with wrinkles, his chin quivered nervously, and his glance seemed to pierce Nita through and through, it was so keen and fierce. His outburst had been so sudden that at first no one moved or spoke, only gazed in speechless astonishment at the strange scene enacting before their eyes.

With a pale face, full of dread and dismay, Nita stared up into the man's half-stern, half-entreating countenance, but her beautiful lips were dumb.

"Speak," Donald Kayne cried out to her, hoarsely. "Speak!"

The dry, parched lips of the girl unclosed, and she gasped:

"Oh, forgive me, sir; I cannot, dare not, answer you!"

"Cannot—dare not! By Heaven, you shall! Tell me, how came you by that ring, girl?"

He gripped her delicate wrist with unconscious violence, and she shrank and moaned. Instantly the spell of wonder that had held Dorian Mountcastle relaxed, and the young man, springing up, caught Donald Kayne's arm in a grasp of steel.

"Release Miss Farnham's wrist this moment. Beg her pardon for this outrage, or you shall answer to me for this violence to my promised wife!" [Pg 68]

The deep, angry words thrilled through every one like an electric shock. A startled murmur came from every lip, and Donald Kayne's grasp fell inertly from Nita's wrist. That instant Dorian bent and whispered hoarsely in her ear:

"Do not deny it. Let me claim you, if only for a little while, that I may protect you. You have not a friend in the room but myself."

She knew that it was true. In her forlorn state it was sweet to have this true heart for her shield. She bowed in silent acquiescence, and he turned proudly to his friend.

"You have forgotten yourself in your strange curiosity, Kayne. You must apologize to Miss Farnham for your offense," he said sternly.

A devil was aroused in the man before him. He stood erect, pale as death, his eyes wild with wrath and pain, and gazed defiantly at Dorian.

"What if I refuse?" he sneered.

"You shall answer to me for your folly," was the instant reply, and a little shriek from Azalea followed the words.

Donald Kayne stood silent a moment. He was a man of strong passions, but he was striving now to master himself.

"Listen to me, Dorian, my old friend," he said hoarsely. "You do not understand this affair, or you would not interfere. This young lady ought to explain to me how she came by this ring. It is only humanity to do so. I crave your patience while I explain." [Pg 69]

Under the stern control he was putting upon face and voice every one saw that there was absolute agony. No one spoke, and he went on:

"Fourteen years ago a beautiful, rich, and happy woman disappeared from her home in New York, leaving absolutely no trace behind her to guide her friends in their search. Upon her hand she wore that emerald serpent-ring, and it is the first clue to her fate I have stumbled over. She was dear to me, this woman, and there are times when I have almost gone mad over the mystery of her fate!

"Bear with me a little longer. This has come upon me like a blow. Listen, my friends, listen you, Miss Farnham: For fourteen years a cloud of mystery has hung over Pepita's fate, and the hissing voice of calumny has assailed her fair fame. Some believe that she fled with a lover—she, Pepita, who was a wedded wife. Others believe she met with foul play. But the veil of blackest mystery has never been lifted. We know not if she be alive or dead, although thousands upon thousands of dollars have been spent in following uncertain clues.

"At last I am startled at the sight of her ring upon another woman's hand. I am betrayed into harshness most excusable when you consider the cause. Only think, if Miss Farnham will but tell me how she came by the serpent-ring, she will put into my hands a new clue to work upon that will lead most surely to—Pepita and vengeance! If she has a woman's tender heart in her breast, how can she refuse to speak and tell me?" [Pg 70]

He looked at Nita with imploring eyes. He saw agony upon her face, and thought it was relenting. He fell down upon his knees before the beautiful girl as though she had been a queen and he a slave. He held out his hands imploringly.

"See! I kneel to you," he said prayerfully. "I sue to you for that which seems so simple a favor that you should have granted it at the first word. Ah! Miss Farnham, what fair reason can you have for this obstinate silence?"

The unhappy girl shuddered as she recalled the oath of silence sworn upon the dead hand of Pepita, whose ring she wore—Pepita, whose awful fate was so much to this man kneeling at her feet, yet must remain forever a secret in her breast.

In her heart swelled up a wave of pity and regret for hapless Donald Kayne. She felt no anger that he reviled her; she could only sympathize with him in his great despair—despair that matched her own. Appalled by her silence, he cried:

"Still silent? Why, then, you have no woman's heart in your breast. Your beauty is cold and soulless like a marble statue. What can I say to you? Will gold move you? A million shall be poured at your feet! Would you shed my heart's blood? It shall flow. Only one word to take my heart off the rack—one word! Will you not speak it?"

It was breaking her heart to blast all his hopes, to refuse his prayer. She held out her clasped hands to him and the serpent-ring on her finger seemed to mock him with its uncanny glitter. She [Pg 71]

cried out, in a solemn voice like one praying:

"Oh, pity me, pardon me! My heart breaks for you, but—I can tell you nothing, nothing."

"You refuse!" he exclaimed, like one stunned.

"I refuse," she answered, her arms falling, her voice a low moan of the most utter despair.

Instantly a change came over Donald Kayne. He sprang to his feet, trembling with rage, his eyes blazing.

"You have the most cruel heart the world ever knew," he cried bitterly. "God pity my friend there who loves you. You will ruin his life, you heartless beauty. You will part us two, for you have made an enemy of me, and he will be my friend no more. But, mark you, Miss Farnham, you have baffled me now, but yet I feel I have a clue to Pepita. I will find out yet how you came by the serpent-ring. If there is anything you have to fear in the knowledge, beware, for your past life shall become an unsealed book to me, and—" but his ravings were interrupted by an angry voice in his ear:

"Not another word. Be she right or wrong I stand by her as my own. Your violence has destroyed our friendship. Go now, and for those words you have spoken, remember you will hear from me soon."

Donald Kayne bowed with a sneering smile that included all the occupants of the room, then walked proudly out of the open door to which Dorian's finger pointed.

CHAPTER XIII.

[Pg 72]

SECRET PLANS.

Dorian turned quickly back to Nita, without observing that Azalea Courtney had slipped through the door in pursuit of Mr. Kayne. The little beauty's heart was seething with rage and pain over Dorian's announcement that Nita was his promised wife, and in Donald Kayne's anger she saw a chance of revenge by joining forces with him in persecuting the young girl. Following him down the steps to the shadowy grounds, she detained him.

"Oh, Mr. Kayne, wait, please! I—I want to speak to you," she purred.

He turned impatiently, and frowned. He knew Azalea well, and despised her as thoroughly as did Dorian Mountcastle. Yet when she came across his path to tempt him like a serpent, he listened.

"Oh, Mr. Kayne, I know I can help you to find out about that ring if you will accept my services," she continued.

Donald Kayne looked keenly into the lifted face, whose luminous blue eyes glittered wickedly in the moonlight, and that look decided him. He drew her arm through his, and they walked on among the tall shrubberies, in earnest conversation.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Courtney, as soon as the others were gone, walked over to Dorian and Nita, and said stiffly:

"Permit me to offer you both my best wishes for your happiness, although the affair is very hasty, is it not? And do you think your guardian will approve, Miss Farnham?"

[Pg 73]

Instantly, Nita, who had been drooping wearily in her chair, lifted her head with a terrified cry.

"He must not know. Oh, Mrs. Courtney, you will not betray me!"

"Betray you, child? What strange words! Of course your guardian must know this."

"I shall write him at once, madam," began Dorian haughtily, but, to his surprise, Nita faltered, imploringly:

"No, no, Dorian; he need not know it for a little while. He will think, like Mrs. Courtney, that we were too hasty. He will not approve!"

"I am sure he will not," echoed the chaperon decidedly.

And the young man looked irresolutely from one speaker to the other. Nita knew, with a woman's keen instinct, that she could manage her lover, but she was not so sure of Mrs. Courtney. So it was to the lady she addressed herself first.

"Oh, Mrs. Courtney, be kind to me," she pleaded. "My guardian is a hard, stern, old man. He will be so angry, if he learns the truth, that he will separate me at once from Dorian. I pray you be kind to us. Let us be happy together just a little while first, and I will never cease to be grateful."

Mrs. Courtney revolved the matter in her mind a moment, but it was no sympathy with the lovers, only keen self-interest that decided her to grant Nita's earnest prayer. With apparent suavity, she said:

[Pg 74]

"I know I am doing wrong, but I am too tender-hearted to refuse the plea of such devoted hearts, so I will promise to keep the secret for a while; but in order that Mr. Farnham shall not hear of it, it will be best not to let the engagement be known yet to any one else beside the few who are in the secret. Let it be kept especially from the servants, who may be paid spies in their master's

employ."

Mrs. Courtney had tried to make all the servants believe that Dorian was engaged to Azalea, and she felt she could not bear their silent amusement when the truth came out.

"Do you not agree with me?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes, and a thousand thanks for your goodness!" cried Nita gratefully.

But Dorian looked profoundly disappointed.

"I should have liked to communicate with Mr. Farnham and have my happiness assured at once," he said. "But I waive my preference for a time in deference to my liege-lady."

And he bowed to Nita with the grace of a prince.

"And, now," added Mrs. Courtney, with an amiability she was far from feeling, "you two may perhaps like to be alone a little while, so I will ask to be excused."

And laughing lightly, she glided away, eager to seek her daughter whom she expected to find in hysterics up-stairs.

Dorian knelt almost reverently before Nita, and lifted her cold little hand to his lips.

[Pg 75]

"God bless you, my own true love! May you never repent that you gave yourself to me!" he cried fervently.

For answer, Nita suddenly lifted her drooping form, and threw herself with passionate abandon into his eager arms, clasping his neck and hiding her face on his shoulder, sobbing and shuddering in an alarming, hysterical fashion.

Dorian embraced her tenderly, and at length kissed away her tears, leading her to a seat by the window, where the cool sea-breeze fanned her heated brow and cheeks. He did not dream that golden-haired Azalea was crouching stealthily in the thick shrubberies outside, and listening eagerly to their words.

"My darling, you must not be frightened at Donald Kayne's threats. He shall pay dearly for his insolence to you," he said, with flashing eyes.

"Oh, do not harm him, for I forgive him," cried Nita eagerly. "I am sorry for him, too; I would give worlds to tell him the secret he wishes to know, only I cannot—dare not," and she shuddered wildly.

"It seemed strange that you would not grant his wish," Dorian exclaimed uneasily; and she sighed.

"There are many strange things about me, Dorian, and I fear you will some day repent that you ever loved me."

"Never!" he replied, with a passionate kiss that made the listening Azalea tremble with jealous wrath.

"But," he continued tenderly, "I wish you would allow me to get your guardian's consent at once to our engagement. Only think, my darling, how pleasant it would be to be married very soon, and go abroad in this lovely summer weather on our wedding-tour."

[Pg 76]

"Married! Married!" cried Nita, quailing as from a blow. "Oh, we mustn't think of that yet, Dorian—we mustn't, indeed. My guardian would never permit it. I will tell you the truth. He has other views for me. I believe he would kill me before he would permit me to marry you."

"Then we will elope, and forestall his refusal."

"Oh, no, no, no, my dearest! We cannot do that. Oh, Dorian, do not be in such a frightful hurry to marry me. I will not listen to such a thing for a whole year! We must just love each other and be very, very patient for a year, and—then—we will talk about marriage," Nita cried tremblingly, and with pallid lips.

The listening Azalea smiled, incredulously at Nita's protests, and murmured:

"She is pretending to be coy, the coquette. But it is not true that she is in no hurry to marry him. She will doubtless elope with him in a week. But why does she put such stress on a year—a whole year?" and the words sunk deep in Azalea's memory to be recalled in fateful after days.

It was crowded with the elements of tragedy and despair, the love-story of Nita! And while struggling desperately for just a little happiness, she was forging the fetters of a cruel fate. Weak and loving, she said to herself:

"What can it matter if I love him just a little while? A few loving words and kisses, that will be all my sin, and it seems to me that even the angels might pity me for so small a wrong. I am cheating Miser Farnham of nothing, for I shall never be his wife in reality. When the day comes for him to claim me, I shall be lying dead. His offer only put off my death one year longer."

[Pg 77]

And kneeling by her bed that night, Nita innocently thanked God for Dorian's love, and prayed that she might have just a few months of happiness.

TWO PISTOL SHOTS.

Before retiring, Dorian had written a letter to a friend in New York asking him to come down to Pirate Beach to see him. He hoped to be strong enough in a few days to go out, and with his heart on fire at the angry words Donald Kayne had rashly spoken to Nita, he was resolved on sending Kayne a challenge to a duel.

In the meantime, his perplexed thoughts ran constantly on Nita, the wonderful serpent-ring, Kayne's interest in it, and the young girl's mysterious refusal to explain how it came into her possession, and last, but not least, he was full of wonder at Nita's assertion that Miser Farnham would sooner kill her than permit her to marry him.

"That is very, very strange," mused Dorian. "Why should he object to me for Nita's husband? He lives in New York, and he must certainly know that I am considered an unexceptionable parti. I certainly shall not give up Nita if I have to elope with her, and thus defy her crusty old guardian."

It was strange how this new love had struck its vigorous roots deep down into Dorian's nature. Some loves he had had before, but they had burned themselves out in brief flirtations, and he had grown to distrust the sex. Then all at once he had come to a new era in life.

In the very depths of his soul Dorian felt that this was a resistless passion sweeping him before it like a feather on the waves. [Pg 79]

Several days passed away very quietly and uneventfully—the quiet that precedes the storm. To the surprise and relief of the lovers no effort was made by the Courtneys to hinder the course of their true love. Azalea raved in secret, and smiled in public. Through Donald Kayne she hoped to avenge her fancied wrongs on both.

One day while lingering in the grounds with Nita, Dorian told her simply the story of his acquaintance with Azalea.

"We were once engaged," he said frankly, "and at the time she was rich. Not that I cared for that, but I always had an ardent desire to be loved for myself alone, and a dread of being married for my money. So I laid a clever plan to test Azalea's affection for me. I made her believe that I lost all my fortune by the failure of a bank. In reality I had lost only a few thousands, but that served my purpose, and the scheming Azalea immediately broke off with me, declaring that she could not marry a poor man. When I was gone she discovered the truth, and tried to win me back, but I had found out that I did not really love her after all, and I was too happy over my escape to be coaxed into her toils again. Soon after they lost all their wealth, and dropped out of society, and I never saw them again until I came to Pirate Beach. Azalea is a regular little cat, purring and deceitful, and I know now that I never really loved her, or I should not have been so anxious to put her to the test, or so glad when she proved faithless."

Nita did not tell him that Azalea had told her that she had made up her quarrel with Dorian; she felt that the disappointed girl had already sunk low enough in the eyes of her old lover. [Pg 80]

She felt herself, too, as guilty as Azalea, for was she not deceiving Dorian herself?—deceiving him because she loved him so dearly, and could not deny herself the happiness within her reach.

"Although I can never marry him I want him to love me," she thought.

A week had passed. Dorian, growing impatient at the strange silence of the friend in New York to whom he had written, resolved to go to the city and see him.

At parting with Nita he begged her again to let him speak to her guardian at once. And again she became frightened at the bare idea, and tearfully refused her consent. Grieved and disappointed, he went away.

Nita was sad and lonely when Dorian had gone. She took to walking and boating with the faithful Lizette as her attendant, and the rich, warm air soon blew a lovely rose-tint into her pale cheeks, and a new sparkle into her eyes.

"Miss Nita, you have been getting prettier and prettier every day since I first saw you. It's no wonder Mr. Mountcastle is so much in love with you," cried the faithful maid, who, although she had not been told of the engagement, comprehended very well how matters stood.

"Hush, Lizette! Do you not know that Miss Courtney says that he is engaged to her?" replied Nita demurely.

"It isn't true, miss, and nobody believes her, for it's perfectly plain that he adores the ground you walk on; and who could blame him?" answered Lizette loyally. [Pg 81]

The third day brought Nita a long love-letter from Dorian. When she had read and reread it many times, she blushing kissed it, and hid it in her bosom. The next morning she said to Lizette:

"I have a secret. Mr. Mountcastle is coming back to-morrow evening. He is coming in his own yacht from New York, and he wants you and me, Lizette, to meet him on the beach, and take a moonlight trip—no one else to know it. Do you think it would be very wrong, Lizette?"

"Not with me along to take care of you, miss," promptly answered Lizette, who at twenty-five felt herself quite a mature person.

"Then we will go," cried Nita joyfully, thinking how romantic it would be to have a little moonlight sail with Dorian on his yacht. And there was nothing wrong about it with her maid for a companion, she thought.

She and Lizette slipped out at sunset the next evening, and as there was some time to wait they strolled along the beach toward old Meg's picturesque cabin, and suddenly came upon the old hag loitering idly along.

She scowled angrily when she saw the mistress and maid, and Nita bade Lizette drop back out of hearing.

"I wish to have a little private talk with old Meg," she exclaimed, and the fortune-teller said gruffly:

"I want nothing to say to you."

"No matter—I have business with you. Is it really true, Meg, what you told me that night when I made Lizette spare you?" [Pg 82]

"Yes, it is true."

"I am sorry for it. I cannot see why Heaven ever chose to afflict me so cruelly. You cannot blame me for being sorry. Why, you are the most wicked old woman I ever saw. Are you not afraid that Mr. Mountcastle will have you punished for your attempt at robbery and murder that night?"

The hag broke into a torrent of curses and denials, but the listener said scornfully:

"He is certain it was you, although, at my request, he has not betrayed your attempt upon his life, but suffered people to think it was an unknown assailant."

"It would have been better if you had not saved him, Nita—far better," exclaimed the old woman, with sudden solemnity, and, falling into abject whining, she continued wheedlingly:

"I did it out of kindness to him, Nita. He was on his way to Gray Gables, and I read in the stars that fate lowered over him there—a fate worse than death. I tried to spare him, but you saved him—saved him to repent it, maybe, till the last hour of your life! There is a strange doom hanging over you, Nita; I saw it in the stars last night, but I could not read it very clearly, and ___"

"Miss Nita, it is time. Come," called Lizette shrilly, and, nodding to the old hag, Nita ran breathlessly away to watch for Dorian's yacht.

A boat brought Dorian ashore from the beautiful yacht that was already rechristened *Nita*, and he ran joyfully to greet his betrothed, sorry that Lizette was looking, and he could not steal a kiss. [Pg 83]

He pressed her hand very tightly, however, and there was such a tender kiss in his eyes as they looked deep into hers that she blushed and dimpled exquisitely.

It was twilight now, and Dorian assisted her and Lizette into the boat and rowed them over to the yacht that was anchored as near as possible to the shore.

Nita felt a strange, tremulous thrill sweep over her—was it ecstasy or a premonition of evil?

Two gentlemen were standing on the deck of the yacht, and when they were safely on board Dorian introduced them to Nita as New York friends—Captain Van Hise and Mr. Irwin. They gazed in deepest admiration at the young girl's brilliant beauty, and, after a few moments' pleasant chatting, Captain Van Hise looked significantly at Dorian and observed:

"If you will set me ashore here, Mountcastle, I shall be infinitely obliged to you."

"With pleasure," the young man replied, and suddenly drew Nita away from them all into the little cabin.

"I must leave you for a few minutes just to set my friend ashore. You will not mind waiting, will you, darling?" he asked, as he drew her to his breast and kissed her fondly.

"It is strange you did not bring him ashore when you came for me," she answered.

"You see he had not asked me then. The presence of women on board may have driven him to sudden desperation as it did me once upon a time," he replied mischievously. [Pg 84]

"Oh, I do not wish to alarm your friend. Let me return," she murmured, clinging to him.

"No, no, my darling, forgive my foolish jest!" he cried, and strained her to him with a solemn, yearning passion.

Blushing warmly, she escaped from his lingering caresses, and then he led her back on deck.

"Mr. Irwin will amuse you while you are waiting for me," he said, and then shook hands with the gentleman ere he climbed down the yacht's side to the little boat.

Captain Van Hise was carrying a black leather case, and he was very cheerful—two facts that would have impressed an initiated person. The two young women suspected nothing.

Mr. Irwin did not look especially attractive to a young girl's eyes. He was more than middle-aged, and his attire had a clerical cut in keeping with his formal gray whiskers. His voice, when he essayed a remark, was nervous, and the slight attempt at conversation fell through soon, for a sudden shadow had fallen over Nita.

In a few minutes she became very restless, and strained her eyes through the deep purple haze of twilight toward the shore.

"It is time for Dorian to return, but I do not hear the oars yet," she ventured tremulously.

At that moment there came across the water the sound of pistol-shots from the shore!

Nita and Lizette both shrieked simultaneously, and sprung to their feet. Mr. Irwin also arose in alarm. [Pg 85]

Nita caught his arm in a convulsive grasp.

"Oh, what is it? I am so frightened!" she shuddered, and just then the sound came again—two pistol-shots across the water.

CHAPTER XV.

[Pg 86]

A DUEL ON THE BEACH.

Mr. Irwin was a nervous, timid man, and the two women clinging to him alarmed him almost as much as did the mysterious shots from the shore. He saw the captain of the yacht hovering near, and beckoned him frantically to his assistance. The jolly sailor approached and exclaimed:

"Ladies, ladies, you need not feel the least alarm. It's only somebody shooting seagulls."

This plausible excuse had an instant effect on the mistress and maid. They released the trembling Irwin, and Nita blushing apologized for her extreme nervousness. In a few minutes more the captain observed:

"I hear the dip of the oars. Mr. Mountcastle is returning."

And so it proved. But, alas, for Nita, Dorian was not returning as he went. He lay prostrate in the bottom of the boat, an attentive surgeon bending over him, while Van Hise plied the oars with ease and skill.

The yacht captain, who had been straining his eyes across the rapidly darkening water, turned and whispered to Lizette:

"You had better take your mistress into the cabin now, for there has been a duel over there between Mr. Kayne and Mr. Mountcastle, and——"

But he never finished the sentence, for Nita's quick ears had overheard, and she fell upon the deck with a shriek of despair. [Pg 87]

"Dorian is dead!"

But Dorian was not dead, although severely wounded. It was Donald Kayne who lay upon the shore stiff and stark, slain by his friend for a woman's sake.

The accursed serpent ring had already borne ghastly fruit, just as the chuckling old miser had foreseen when he forced Nita to wear it as the price of life and liberty.

"A most deplorable affair," Captain Van Hise said later, when telling the horrified Irwin about it. "You see, Kayne had said something reflecting on the lady Dorian is to marry, and so he challenged him. I was his second, and Kayne came down with his own second and the two surgeons on his own yacht, so both principals were ready for instant flight if the authorities got wind of the duel. Kayne's yacht is at the regular landing, half a mile from here, and my friend came to this point to take up the lady, and also to be handy to the dueling-ground over yonder. Well, it was a gallant affair. They fought at ten paces with navy revolvers. Both escaped the first fire, but at the second, Donald Kayne fell dead and Dorian severely wounded. And, sure enough, the authorities were down on us. We just barely got our man into the boat and pulled out before they galloped on horseback to the meeting-place, and hallooed after our party."

Mr. Irwin was startled, distressed, indignant.

"This is most outrageous!" he exclaimed. "I have been grossly deceived by your friend. He employed me to perform a marriage ceremony, not to attend him to a dueling-ground." [Pg 88]

"The marriage all in good time, reverend sir. The duel was merely an episode by the way," returned Captain Van Hise airily.

"But I shall be mixed up in this notorious affair. It will do me incalculable injury. I demand to be set ashore at once," groaned the timorous preacher.

"Impossible, my dear sir, dearly as I would love to oblige you. The yacht is already under way escaping pursuit. Besides, you may be needed presently to soothe the last hours of a dying sinner, which is even more important than the tying of a matrimonial knot, I take it; so be tranquil, please. No harm shall come to you from this."

The clergyman saw that all remonstrances were useless; he must accept the situation.

"And you believe that Mr. Mountcastle will die?" he asked in a tone of awe.

"Can't say, but hope not. The doctor is dressing his wound now—shoulder—ball went clean through. Poor fellow's having hard luck lately! Stabbed and left for dead on the beach three weeks ago, and barely out of bed when he came to New York to challenge Kayne. Yes, dismal affair, very, but couldn't be helped, you know."

The half-crazed Nita had already been told part of the truth by Captain Van Hise.

"Donald Kayne was mortally wounded, we fear," was the way he put it about Dorian's opponent. [Pg 89]

She lay weeping bitterly in the cabin attended by faithful Lizette. The surgeon would not let her see Dorian yet in spite of her prayers.

"The wound is not necessarily dangerous, but he is weak from loss of blood, and so agitated that he cannot bear any excitement," he said.

But when the wound was dressed, and he was resting easily, he was permitted a few minutes' conversation with Captain Van Hise. Then the jolly soldier said ruefully:

"I can't refuse you, Dorian, since the surgeon won't let you talk for yourself, but, by Jupiter, I'd rather face the enemy's guns any day than that girl with this story! What a cheek you must have had to plan such a thing!"

"She will forgive me even if she refuses to grant my prayer," answered Dorian, for he knew women better than the gallant captain, who had wooed the goddess of war more assiduously than the goddess of love.

So it came to pass that while the yacht *Nita* skimmed lightly over the moon-lighted waters, Captain Van Hise sat in the cabin with her namesake, floundering through a story that would, he fully believed, enrage her so that she would never, never marry Dorian, and, more than likely, would never even forgive him.

"He is so weak and nervous, Miss Farnham, the surgeon won't let him do his own talking, so, as I've been his confidant in the whole affair, he has sent me to tell you—to tell you—" The doughty warrior broke down and mopped his damp brow, murmuring under his breath:

[Pg 90]

"Blamed if I don't wish myself well out of this!"

"To tell me—" echoed Nita, with heart-piercing anxiety. And thus encouraged, he returned to the charge:

"You'll understand it all better, my dear young lady, when I tell you that Dorian has always been a spoiled boy—had everything he wanted all his life—cousin of mine, known him from boyhood—so, of course, he was frantic when you vowed you wouldn't marry him for a whole year—eternity, you know, to a man in love. Don't blame me, please! but as soon as the details of the duel was arranged, Dorian planned to elope with you."

"Oh, Heaven!" cried Nita, in wildest alarm, and her face became ashen.

"Don't excite yourself—please don't, Miss Farnham," cried the soldier anxiously. "Or at least let me get through first, then rave if you will."

Lizette moved nearer to her young lady's side in mute distress, and he went on eagerly:

"Didn't you think it strange, Dorian's inviting you to go yachting with him by moonlight? Bless you! he brought along a preacher—Irwin, you know—to marry you to-night; that is, of course, if you were willing—no gentleman would want to marry a lady without her consent. You see, he didn't expect to get wounded in the duel, and—oh, a mere episode that—and so, if you'll excuse my bluntness—here we are at sea, afraid to go back because the authorities are after us about the duel, and it might be best to stay away till the excitement blows over. And Dorian is wounded, and maybe you would think it real romantic to nurse him. Now would you be willing—so Dorian sent me to ask you—to marry him now!"

[Pg 91]

He drew breath and looked at her apprehensively. Lizette had uttered a smothered little shriek, but Nita sat speechless and terrified, as if she had seen a ghost. All in a moment the enormity of her folly and her sin rushed over her.

Oh, why had she let him love her? Why had she, in her weakness, drifted into this sea of difficulty. She gasped for breath; she felt like one drowning; and the doughty captain murmured cajolingly:

"Although Dorian has acted very impetuously, and you have a perfect right to be angry, still I know the poor boy would be dreadfully broken up if you refused his prayer. And Irwin, too—poor fellow!—he did not know how dreadfully uncertain the affair was, and would be so very much disappointed."

"This is cruel, cruel!" Nita murmured. "I told Dorian my—my—guardian—"

"Yes, I know, Miss Farnham; but the impulsive boy thought it would be great fun to outwit your crusty old guardian. You weren't fond of him, anyway, were you?"—anxiously.

She began to murmur something about duty and obedience, but he broke in, almost curtly:

"You owe him neither now, my dear young lady. Oh, how can I tell you? Only, I don't suppose you ever cared much for the—ahem!—disreputable old party—miser, and all that—but the truth is, there was an accident on the elevated road to-day, and Charles Farnham was badly injured and taken to the hospital. Just before we left New York we got news of his death."

[Pg 92]

CHAPTER XVI.

[Pg 93]

"WITH THIS RING I THEE WED."

"You have killed my mistress!" cried the maid angrily.

Nita had fallen unconscious at his feet.

"It is only a faint," he replied.

And between them she was soon restored to consciousness, although still dazed and white and trembling from the shock she had received.

Miser Farnham dead! She could scarcely realize it, and she tried hard to keep from feeling glad and happy over the startling news. It seemed cruel and wicked to rejoice over any one's death.

Captain Van Hise returned to the charge as soon as he thought she could bear it.

"Of course, if Dorian could have foreseen this he would not have planned to carry you off," he said. "But as things have fallen out, don't you think you had better forgive him and marry him to-night?"

"You are perfectly certain that Mr. Farnham is dead?" she asked him, with such shuddering anxiety that he knew how all depended on his answer, and hastened to reply:

"Perfectly certain. We had it from the best authority."

This was a white lie, but he considered it admissible in his friend's behalf. He had only heard the current rumor, but he did not suppose that the old man's death had any special bearing on Nita's marriage to Dorian, except that it seemed to him a very desirable thing that the objectionable guardian had been removed so opportunely from this mundane sphere.

[Pg 94]

"Not a very desirable connection for a lady in the position that Mrs. Dorian Mountcastle will occupy, for everybody in New York had heard of Miser Farnham, and his record was not a straight one," he mused, and thought he saw relenting in Nita's eyes.

"Oh, come with me to Dorian," he urged. "The surgeon has agreed to a brief interview, only you must be very calm and not excite him."

Lizette who, for a maid, was a very superior sort of person, beamed cordial approval.

"Miss Nita, I think the easiest way is to consent!" she cried. "If you refuse it may make him worse, and since you intend to marry him some time, anyway, what's the odds?"

"Yes, what's the odds?" echoed Van Hise cheerfully, and led her to Dorian.

She wondered in a dazed way if she ought to tell her lover the truth—tell him she had been married to the repulsive old miser, but her whole soul rose in rebellion against the humiliating confession.

She remembered how he had scorned Azalea because she would have married him for his money. No—no, he would despise her if he knew—he who had never known poverty and hunger and bitter need—that she had sold herself to the horrible old miser for a chest of gold.

When she saw Dorian lying in the berth so wan and pale, wounded in a chivalrous defense of her, she forgot everything else but that she loved him wildly—madly! Loved him with a love that was her doom.

[Pg 95]

Quite overcome, she sank upon her knees by Dorian's berth.

"Oh, my love, my love," she whispered, with her lips against his brow.

And then Dorian knew that the victory was won. If she had wavered for one moment his pale, handsome, suffering face had turned the scale in his favor.

And her dark eyes answered without words.

"You are an angel," he murmured. "Oh, Nita, I will pay you for this with a life's devotion. But I should have died of my wound, I think, very soon if you had said you would not marry me!"

"My dear Miss Farnham, permit me," said Captain Van Hise at this juncture.

He raised her gently, and placed her in a seat by Dorian.

"You were not to have much excitement, you know, Dorian, so let us have the agony over as soon as possible," he remarked genially.

And though Nita's heart leaped in sweet alarm, he gave her no respite, but went and brought the preacher, the surgeon, the captain, and Lizette.

Propped up by the surgeon's arm, Dorian held Nita's cold little hand in his, and a few solemn words made her his bride.

"To have and to hold from this day forward," went on Irwin's solemn voice.

And directly the ring was slipped over Nita's third finger, and she was bending her stately head for her husband's kiss. Then they all congratulated the pair very quietly and retired, the surgeon lingering to give Dorian a sedative, after which he said gravely:

[Pg 96]

"Now, Mrs. Mountcastle, you may sit by your husband until he falls asleep, but no talking, remember, for he must have a long night's rest."

They were alone together. He looked up at her in grateful, adoring love.

"We are on our wedding-trip, darling," he murmured.

"Yes, Dorian. Now sleep," she whispered, as she placed her hand caressingly on his white brow. He closed his eyes, and the beautiful bride sat and watched him, her heart thrilling with passionate love and joy.

"He is mine—all mine—my darling husband!" she thought, with a thrill of thanksgiving that she had been turned aside that day in the park from the fell purpose of self-destruction. "It is always darkest just before dawn, and thus it was with me," she whispered in blissful unconsciousness of the lowering future.

By and by Lizette came to lead her away, and much as she would have preferred to remain by Dorian, she felt that the surgeon would be better pleased if she left him.

The sky was cloudy and the sea rough. Mr. Irwin and Captain Van Hise had succumbed to sea-sickness and were invisible. The captain of the yacht was busy, and the surgeon, after a few pleasant words, went down to watch over his patient.

"Miss Nita, dear, don't let's stay on deck. Seems like it's getting colder, and the wind is so high and the waves so rough they break over the deck. You'll get splashed all over if you don't come into the cabin."

[Pg 97]

"Not yet, Lizette, for I love old ocean in all his moods, and this is sublime. How the wind roars, and how fast the dark, ragged clouds drift over the moon, showing silver edges now and then, again all inky black. Isn't it grand?"

"It just frightens me so that I can't see anything pretty about it. Oh, dear, Miss Nita, ain't you afraid of the mountain waves rolling so fast? Seems like one of them will go right over the yacht presently, and bury us in the bottom of the sea."

Lizette shivered with fear, but Nita answered smilingly:

"No, I am not afraid, but, still I think we are going to have a little bit of a storm. Ah! did you see that lightning flash? Hark the thunder!"

Then the rain began to patter upon the deck, and both ran into the cabin, breathless with the wind and cool air, the maid lamenting:

"Oh, why did we come, why did we come? The yacht will be wrecked. We shall all be drowned!"

Nita tried to encourage the frightened creature, but all in vain, for the torrents of falling rain and the boom of the waves produced so much noise that they could not distinguish each other's voices.

"Oh, what shall we do? what shall we do?" shrieked the frightened maid, half-crazed with alarm. "I'll go to the captain this minute and beg him to take us back home."

[Pg 98]

Half-crazed by fear, she ran shrieking out upon the deck, and, at a sudden lurch of the yacht, fell prostrate. Nita followed, and stooped to help her to rise. What followed was told afterward with a white face of horror by the yacht captain who, just coming to seek them, became an eye-witness of a terrible tragedy, and himself narrowly escaped becoming a victim.

The night was inky-black, only for the fitful lightning flashes; the wind violent; the rain pouring in torrents, and he began to feel alarmed himself for the safety of the yacht and its passengers.

As Irwin and Van Hise were both suffering the agonies of sea-sickness, he thought of the two solitary women who might be frightened, and started to speak a word of comfort to them.

Staggering over the rocking deck toward the light that flickered from the cabin door, he beheld Lizette rush out shrieking with fear.

The yacht dipped down into the trough of a sea, and the maid lost her footing and fell prostrate. The next instant a blinding electric flash showed him Nita clinging to and trying to lift Lizette; then the bow of the yacht dipped lower still and the curving billow rose up high in air; then it broke over the deck in a fury and flung the man prostrate upon his face. He clutched at something—he never knew what—and the mighty mass of water swept over him.

The yacht bounded upward again, and—but for the man clinging and gasping for dear life—the deck was swept bare.

[Pg 99]

On the wings of the sobbing gale came to him shrieks of despair from the two doomed women swept off into the sea.

A few minutes longer the storm raged wildly, then as if the elements had wreaked their fury, the sea grew calmer, the winds lulled, the rain ceased, the black clouds parted above, and silvery moon-rays fringed the rents with heavenly glory.

But to the little knot of men huddled upon the deck of the *Nita* watching the sea with agonized eyes came no sight of the lost ones—the fair bride and the faithful maid—who had been engulfed in the mighty mass of foaming waters.

They looked at each other with ashen faces, these sorrowful men; they spoke in despairing voices; they were wounded to the heart by this awful tragedy.

And the burden of their cry was that it would kill Dorian to learn the tragic fate of his bride.

"He must not know," said Doctor Ray, the surgeon. "Through all the tumult of the storm he has slept peacefully under the influence of a sedative, and it is likely he will rest quietly until morning. When he asks for his bride he must be told that she is ill of sea-sickness, with her maid in close attendance. This excuse must serve until he is convalescent. Let no man forget, for whoever should tell him the truth would be guilty of murder."

No one doubted it, and they acquiesced in his decision. So the long night passed, and the summer morning dawned with the balmy air and cloudless skies, but Dorian, when he waked, was feverish

[Pg 100]

and out of his head.

They did not have to make any excuses to him about the lost one. In his delirium he seemed to forget her existence.

In the week that followed upon her compact with Donald Kayne, Azalea Courtney had not been able to gain a single clue to the mystery of Nita's possession of the serpent ring. She had duly communicated to him the conversation she had overheard that night between the lovers, but neither one could make anything out of Nita's words, except the natural agitation of a young girl who knows certainly that her guardian will disapprove of her heart's choice.

The week that followed, before Dorian went up to New York, was one of secret, silent, but exquisite torture to the baffled Azalea. Her plans and schemes for bringing about a misunderstanding between the lovers, and winning Dorian for herself, had failed utterly.

Dorian was so nearly well that he would not permit himself to be treated as an invalid. He took his meals with them in the dining-room; he spent his evenings in the drawing-room, and, although he listened to Azalea's songs and politely turned the pages of her music, she knew that she bored him inexpressibly, and that he was always glad to escape to his betrothed at the window, where she always sat, after turning her beautiful, grave face from them all, to gaze at the sea, and listen to its solemn tone, that was so much sweeter to her ears than Azalea's voice. [Pg 101]

When Dorian turned from the piano, and went back to his love at the window, Azalea's heart would swell with jealous wrath until her voice would falter almost into silence, and the greatest aim of her life grew to be revenge upon Nita, who had won the prize she had worked for in vain.

Those golden summer days, while Dorian and Nita loitered in the old garden, laughing and pelting each other with roses like two gleeful children, or read poetry to each other in the honeysuckle bowers, Azalea could hardly bear her life, but she smiled on, like the Spartan boy, sure that, somehow or other, with Donald Kayne's assistance, she would find a way to torture the proud and happy lovers.

At last the end of the week and the love-making came, for Dorian went up to New York on that mission that was to prove so disastrous to all concerned.

And Nita, left alone with the two hostile women who barely masked their antagonism to her under a thin veneer of courtesy, relapsed into a profound melancholy. With Dorian by her side she could almost forget the dark shadow that clouded all her future with the blackness of despair.

Their mutual love, so strong, so pure, had the talismanic power to ward off evil and disquieting thoughts, but with Dorian away, Nita was haunted by vexing fears that would not down. Soon came the letter inviting Nita and her maid for the moonlight trip upon the yacht.

When Azalea saw her rival's flushed and happy face she grew almost frantic with secret rage. A longing seized upon her to know what Dorian had written in the letter that had brought back the fading roses to Nita's cheeks, and that light of gladness to her dark eyes. [Pg 102]

When Nita and her maid went down to the shore at sunset Azalea stole up to the girl's room, determined to search for Dorian's letter. Nita had placed the precious missive in a silver jewel-case on her dressing-table, and, after a short search, Azalea found it, and flew to her mother with flaming cheeks.

"Read this," she panted breathlessly. "Oh, mama, all is lost! They are going to elope, I am sure!"

When Mrs. Courtney had read the letter she agreed with her daughter. Dorian and Nita had certainly planned an elopement.

"Oh, mama, you must not permit it! You can certainly assume that much authority! Come, come, let us go down to the beach and force her to return with us," cried the excited Azalea, and, carried away by her impetuosity, Mrs. Courtney obeyed.

But they were just a little late for the execution of their designs. Azalea was doomed to disappointment. Nita was already on board the yacht with her maid, and while yet at some little distance from the scene they became the startled witnesses of the duel fought upon the beach by the two enemies in the purple light of the gloaming with the sound of the solemn sea in their heedless ears.

With shrieks of fear Azalea flew toward the scene, but too late to interrupt the duelists. Captain Van Hise was already pushing off from shore the little boat with Dorian and the surgeon, and the officers of the law were surrounding the other group upon the shore, where Donald Kayne lay stretched out upon the silvery sands. [Pg 103]

Upon the confused group Azalea broke with hysterical shrieks and cries, and soon all that she knew was told; Mrs. Courtney, coming up as soon as she could follow her lighter-footed daughter, confirmed the story of the elopement. To-morrow that and the duel would startle the world at large.

The officers of the law agreed that Donald Kayne should be taken back to New York on his own yacht, and then the group dispersed, Mrs. Courtney leading the hysterical Azalea back to Gray Gables, where she spent a wakeful night with her daughter, who actually threatened to commit suicide because Dorian had carried off Nita to make her his bride. But by morning Azalea was

able to discuss the situation, and she agreed that it looked very discouraging for her mother.

"Mr. Farnham will be furiously angry with me for letting it happen, and I have no doubt that as soon as he reads it in the papers he will come down here to turn me out of the house," Mrs. Courtney complained bitterly, for this luxurious home was a palace compared to the humble lodgings in the city where she would be forced to return when she lost her well-paid position as chaperon to Miser Farnham's heiress.

"But, mama, you must, of course, insist upon receiving the whole year's salary," cried Azalea.

"Of course," replied her mother, and took up the morning paper, adjusted her glasses, and began to read. [Pg 104]

"Is there anything about the duel?" eagerly inquired Azalea, from the couch, where she was enacting the part of a semi-invalid.

"No, nothing yet. Too soon, you know, Azalea; but, of course, all the evening papers will have it. Oh, good gracious, what is this! Accident yesterday afternoon on the elevated railroad, and several people killed and wounded. Azalea, listen to this:

"Charles Farnham, very well known as a peculiar character of New York, called the miser, was seriously wounded, and at first reported killed, but revived a little, and was taken to Bellevue Hospital, where he now lies in a semi-unconscious condition."

CHAPTER XVII.

[Pg 105]

"SHALL I NEVER SEE YOU AGAIN?"

"Lizette, Lizette! Oh, where am I?"

A weak, languid voice asked the question, while a dark, graceful head raised itself wearily from the pillow, and dark, solemn eyes, shining out of a waxen-white face, stared wonderingly over at a trim figure knitting lace at an open window. The figure gave a start, dropped the needles and some stitches together, gave a bound across the room and knelt down by the couch.

"Oh, you little darling—you little darling, you are better, you know me," cooed Lizette, lovingly patting the pale, delicate cheek.

"Lizette, of course I know you," her mistress answered with wondering impatience. "But where am I?"

"In your own room, of course, Miss Nita," answered the maid, with a certain air of evasiveness.

"In my own room? Why, it all looks very strange to me! Oh, Lizette, was it all a dream? The yacht—Dorian?" cried the girl eagerly, a warm, pink flush creeping over the pallor of her waxen cheek.

"Dearie, you have been ill and your dreams were wild," soothed Lizette. "But you must not talk now. Wait till you take some food."

She went out of the little bedroom, and presently stood face to face with a tall, dark, anxious-looking man, who exclaimed: [Pg 106]

"She has recovered consciousness—I see it in your face!"

"She knows me, sir, but I have omitted nothing yet. And you, sir, must be cautious. One sight of your face would frighten her, I think, almost to death."

"I shall not intrude upon her yet, Lizette, but as soon as she can bear it, she must know the truth," he answered grimly.

Meanwhile, Nita lay with wide-open, wondering eyes. For days everything had been a blank, but now memory was returning with startling rapidity.

Lizette entered with a tray of delicate food.

"After you have eaten something you may talk a little," she said, and Nita ate with the relish of returning health.

"Lizette, do let me talk, for I am so much better," she coaxed. "You say I have been dreaming, but," blushing deeply, "was I not on the yacht? Was I not—married—to—Dorian?"

Lizette smiled a gracious assent, and then Nita said quickly:

"Why, then, did you call it all a dream?"

"Tell me your dreams, dearie," replied the maid taking the little hand and holding it gently in both her own.

"It was terrible, Lizette, if it was a dream. I thought there was a storm at night. You were frightened, and ran out of the cabin. You fell down, and I followed to catch you. But a great wave like a mountain rushed over the deck and swept us both into the sea. Lizette, how you tremble. It is terrible even to hear of such a dream, is it not? [Pg 107]

"Oh, Lizette, how vivid it was for a dream! There we were struggling for life in the dark, tempestuous waves. When you fell you had caught at the rungs of a steamer-chair, and while you clutched it, I clung to your waist. Although I am a good swimmer, I could not help myself in so

rough a sea, and it seemed as if death must soon be our portion—death, and it was so cruel to die like that when I had just been wedded to my lover. But we clung to hope, and the great waves tossed us hither and thither like feathers away from the yacht and toward our death, for we knew that no one had witnessed our accident, and even had that happened we could not have been saved in such a terrific storm."

"Oh, Miss Nita, you will make yourself worse talking so much!" cried Lizette nervously.

"But," continued Nita smilingly, "now I come to the best part of my dream. Very suddenly—and, oh! the gladness of that moment—the wild storm lulled, the thunder, lightning, and rain ceased, the black clouds parted overhead and silvery moonrays glimmered through. I seemed to hear your voice cry out in joy; then my nerves relaxed, my senses reeled, I seemed to fall from a dizzy height into the darkness of death. Oh, Lizette, how real and vivid it seems to me—those moments or hours of deadly peril in the dark sea, yet you say it was only a dream."

Lizette smoothed the wavy tresses back from the girl's brow with a trembling hand and answered gently: [Pg 108]

"My dear young mistress, you seem so much better that I will not deceive you. It was no dream—it was terrible reality."

"How, Lizette? No dream? Then we were rescued by the people on the yacht after all. Thank Heaven! But Dorian, my Dorian, why does he not come to me?"

"Yes, we were rescued, Miss Nita, the moment you became unconscious. Just as the moon's ray pierced the gloom some yachtsmen near by saw us struggling in the water. They quickly rescued us, but the doctor on the yacht worked over you an hour before you showed any signs of life. Since then you have been ill and knew no one till now."

"How long, Lizette?"

"Oh, several days, miss," evasively.

"And I did not even recognize Dorian! How very, very strange. Why, Lizette, was he so ill they could not let him come to me? And is he better now?"

"Oh, of course he is better now."

"Lizette, how strange your voice sounds. Is it possible— But no, no! do not tell me my—husband—died of his wound, or I shall go mad with grief!"

"He did not die, Miss Nita."

"Then why does he not come to me?"

And Nita made a movement as if to rise, but fell back upon the pillow exhausted.

"Oh, my dear young lady, please calm yourself, please try to bear what I have to tell you. Mr. Mountcastle is all right—yes, indeed, I hope and believe he is all right, but it is impossible for him to come to you just now because——" [Pg 109]

She paused timorously.

"Because——" the young bride echoed with piercing anxiety, and then the maid blurted out with a bitter, stifled sob:

"Because it wasn't your husband's yacht that rescued us, but another man's. Oh, my dear, don't take it so to heart, please don't. Let us be thankful we are alive, and that some day you will be reunited to your dear husband again."

There was a blank silence of such terrible despair that it could find no outlet. Then Nita asked in a low, sad voice:

"Then, Lizette, where are we now?"

"Oh, Miss Nita, can you bear it? The yacht that saved us brought us to a lonely island way up here in Fortune's Bay, hundreds of miles from New York."

Again there was a blank silence of sorrow and disappointment. Nita's heart ached with the pain of this strange separation from her husband.

They looked at each other, she and the faithful maid, and Lizette tried to smile, but it was a wretched failure. Her poor lips trembled with the effort to restrain a bursting sob, and Nita felt instinctively that she was keeping something back.

"Lizette, have you written to my husband?" Nita asked faintly.

"Yes, my dear lady."

"Then he will soon come for us, will he not?"

"I hope so."

"Lizette, how evasively you speak. You are hiding something dreadful from me, is it not so?"

"A mere trifle, my dearie, and you must be brave and bear it calmly when I tell you, for, of course, all will soon come right."

"Go on, for Heaven's sweet sake, Lizette. I think I can bear anything better than this awful suspense."

"Miss Nita, you know the gentleman that fought the duel with your husband, and they said was [Pg 110]

mortally wounded? It was on his yacht we came to Fortune's Bay. His men saved us."

"And he is dead, poor fellow!" Nita murmured, in a tone of profound pity and awe.

"No, but I wish he was," Lizette returned, with surprising vehemence. "Oh, my dearie, they thought at first he was killed, but, bless you, his wound was no more than a scratch hardly, only he fainted away so dead at first from the shock they thought he was gone. The worst is, that he lived at all, the wicked wretch!"

"Oh, Lizette, how can you be so unkind? I pity Donald Kayne."

"Pity Donald Kayne, Miss Nita—the worst enemy you have on earth unless it be that little cat, Azalea Courtney!"

"Yes, he called himself my enemy, Lizette, and yet I pity him."

"You're wasting your kind feelings, Miss Nita. Now where do you suppose you are this blessed moment?" [Pg 111]

"On an island in Fortune's Bay, you said, Lizette."

"Yes, on the loneliest island in the bay, and shut up in a lonely old stone house far away from any but fishermen's huts, for nobody lives here only the roughest, poorest sort of people, and mighty few even of that sort!"

"But what does it matter, Lizette, since my husband will come soon and take us away?"

"Not while he thinks we are both drowned and dead."

"But you have written to tell him we are rescued."

"Yes, I have written, but I have not been able to bribe any one to post my letter yet. Oh, my poor little darling, don't you understand? We are prisoners!"

"Prisoners!" gasped the girl, horrified.

"Yes, Miss Nita, or perhaps I ought to say Mrs. Mountcastle. Would you like it better?"

"Yes, for it seems to bring me nearer to my darling husband," cried Nita, blushing warmly. Then her lip quivered. "Oh, why does Donald Kayne hold us prisoners?" she cried.

"That is very easy to answer, Mrs. Mountcastle. It is all about that emerald ring you are wearing. He says he will never let us go free from this house until you confess how you come to be wearing that serpent ring."

Nita groaned, and looked down with loathing eyes at the baleful jewel that hung loosely on her wasted hand.

"Lizette, how thin I have grown! I must have been ill some time." [Pg 112]

"It is two weeks since your wedding-night, and we landed here nine or ten days ago."

"And Donald Kayne?"

"He is here with two people—an old fisherman and his wife—our jailers. We are closely watched and guarded, for the old people believe you are crazy. He has told them so. But, dearie, don't lose heart. Now that you are getting well we will watch our chances to escape."

"And you know, Lizette, my husband will be searching for us. He will be sure to come here. Love will show him the way."

"You forget that he thinks you were drowned that night, when the great waves washed us off the deck of his yacht."

"Yes, I forgot," sobbed Nita, with raining tears. "Oh, my darling, I shall never see you again!"

And for a few moments she wept in uncontrollable despair. Lizette, although almost heart-broken herself, tried to soothe her, and she began to catch at little straws of hope.

"Cannot we bribe those old people to let us escape? Oh, Lizette, I would give them my whole chest of gold for liberty!" she cried.

"Alas! I have already tried them, and failed. Kayne has them completely under his control. You will never get free unless you tell him that secret he wants to know. Oh, my dear young lady, do tell him—do tell him! for he wants to know so badly, and surely it cannot matter to you." [Pg 113]

"Oh, Lizette, Lizette, you do not know—you cannot dream—"

Suddenly there came to her a wild temptation. Miser Farnham was dead. Captain Van Hise had told her so. What if she broke the oath of silence whose keeping was about to wreck her life? She need not fear his vengeance.

While these frenzied thoughts ran through Nita's mind Lizette walked restlessly over to the window, and leaning against the iron bars that ran across it, stared restlessly out over the blue bay dotted with fishing-boats and green islands.

Suddenly Lizette's pretty blue eyes grew bright and alert, and she strained them eagerly over the water. A few minutes of silence; then she bounded across the room to Nita, who, with her face bowed down, was lost in troubled thought. Stooping over the young girl, she lifted her up in both arms.

"Can you walk across to the window if I lead you, dear? I want to show you such a pretty sight."

She half-led, half-carried the weak girl, and pointed with a shaking finger out over the blue bay.

"God be praised, we shall escape!" she panted joyfully. "Look, darling, at that pretty yacht riding into harbor at this very island. Do you see her name?—*Nita*. Heaven has sent your husband to Fortune's Bay!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

[Pg 114]

"HE WILL KILL MY HUSBAND."

Nita gazed with joyful eyes and a wildly throbbing heart at the graceful yacht lightly skimming the blue waters of the beautiful bay, as it glided into harbor at the island. He was near her now, her own love. Surely he would come to her rescue, for it must have been Heaven's own guiding that had brought him to Fortune's Bay—Heaven that had saved her from the perils of the stormy deep, and that was still watching over her fate.

She thought with a shudder of the temptation that had assailed her just now to break the oath of silence sworn on the dead hand in the miser's gold vault. No, no, she must not. An oath was a solemn thing, and she had been desperate with despair, or she would not have dreamed of breaking it.

And what would it avail her enemy to know the tragic death that had befallen the woman whose fate he had sought to know. He had loved her, he said. Would it not break his heart to know how she had suffered and died? Surely, it was a mercy to Donald Kayne to keep him in uncertainty.

"Lizette, what if we wave our handkerchiefs from the window? Perhaps some one on the yacht might notice it and make inquiries," she exclaimed.

They spent some time at this, but of no avail, although they could see moving figures on the deck. But no one noticed or recognized the frantic signals from the window of the far-off stone house.

[Pg 115]

"Lizette, can you make out any of the men on her deck? My eyes are so weak, the glare of the light blinds them," murmured Nita.

"No, dearie; they seem like little black specks to me. If I had some glasses we could make them out plainly. I'll go and ask the old woman to lend us a pair," and Lizette hurried down-stairs on her errand.

Mrs. Rhodus, the fisherman's wife, looked at her with suspicion when she made her request.

"What do you want with them?" she asked roughly.

"My mistress wants to watch the ships upon the sea."

"Hain't got no glasses—never had none," replied the woman nonchalantly.

"Where's your husband?"

"Out in his boat."

"And Mr. Kayne?"

"He went for a walk just now."

"And is there no one here but you?"

"No, not a soul; but don't go for to think you can get away from me. I'm as strong as two men; besides, there's a big dog out in the yard that 'ud tear you both in pieces if you went outside."

Lizette smiled scornfully.

"How could we get away, and my mistress too weak to walk?" she exclaimed.

While she was haranguing the woman Nita continued to gaze eagerly toward the trim little yacht in the offing, her heart throbbing wildly with the burning desire to see Dorian again.

[Pg 116]

"He is there—there, so near me, and yet so far, believing me dead," she sobbed. "Oh, how his heart must be torn with anguish at the thought! How strange and sad a fate is mine."

Her weak eyes, tired with the glare of the light and sun, drooped wearily to the ground, and a cry of wonder and dismay broke from her lips.

Directly beneath her window stood a large, tall man in sailor garb gazing up into her face. But it was not the mere proximity of the man that had so startled the young girl. It was the fact that she had recognized in him the son of old Meg, the fortune-teller—a man who had once madly loved her, and from whose unwelcome love she had fled in fear and loathing.

For more than three years Nita had not looked upon the face of Jack Dineheart, and when she saw him gazing up at her with eager eyes, she could not repress a cry of surprise at sight of this ghost from the past.

Jack Dineheart had a bronzed, handsome, sullen face, seamed with the lines of thirty-five years or more, and his big brown eyes snapped with triumph now at the girl's low cry of recognition.

"So it is you, Nita?"

"Yes it is I, Mr. Dineheart," answered the girl, with a sudden wild hope that she might move his

heart to pity.

"What are you doing up there behind bolts and bars like a prisoner?" he continued, his heart leaping wildly at sight of the lovely face.

"I am a prisoner," she answered sorrowfully. "Oh, Jack—Mr. Dineheart—do help me to escape, won't you?" [Pg 117]

"But I don't understand. Who brought you here? Who is keeping you shut up?"

"A New York gentleman—a Mr. Donald Kayne."

"Wants to marry you, I s'pose?" with an angry, jealous frown.

"No, no, he hates me, but he wants to know a secret that I hold, and he swears he will never let me go free until I tell it; but—but I will never tell, never, not if I die here."

"Must be a very important secret," commented the sailor curiously.

And he saw a look of terror leap in the lovely eyes; but she answered carelessly:

"No, no, it is not much, only I will not tell it. I will tell no one. Oh, Jack Dineheart, have pity on me, and help me to escape, and I will make you rich."

"A likely story. When did you come into a fortune?" cried the sailor eagerly.

"No matter, but I am rich, and I will give you half my fortune, Jack, if you will do one little errand for me. Do you see that yacht that has just come into the harbor yonder? Look, you can just make out her name—*Nita*. Go there, Jack Dineheart, and tell the owner of the yacht that I was not drowned when the storm swept me with my maid from off the deck of the yacht. Tell him Donald Kayne lives, and that he saved my life and Lizette's, and that he is keeping us in prison here until I reveal a secret. Oh, go, go, go, I pray you, and do this errand, and my prison doors will fly open, and you shall be made rich, while my blessings shall follow you throughout your whole life." [Pg 118]

She paused, panting and exhausted, her small upraised hands clasped in pathetic pleading. Jack Dineheart looked up at her with sullen curiosity.

"This man who is to open your prison doors—the owner of the yacht—what is his name?"

"Dorian Mountcastle," answered Nita.

And the very tone in which she spoke, the lingering cadence of her voice, betrayed her love. Jack Dineheart caught the sound of her heart in her voice. His face paled under its bronze, and his big eyes flashed with anger.

"Dorian Mountcastle! I've heard of him before. Rich New York swell. Owns one of the fastest yachts a-going. Well, and what is Dorian Mountcastle to you, my girl?" he demanded hoarsely.

"He is my husband," Nita answered proudly; then recoiled in terror, for an angry cry, coupled with an oath, burst from the sailor's lips.

"It is a lie, by —!"

Nita gazed appalled at his dark features, and realized with terror that the old, fierce love lived in Jack Dineheart's heart yet. She drew back from the window, and the man beneath it raved on in fury until spent with passion, then called ardently:

"Nita! Tell me that it is not true. You know how I've worshiped you, and wanted to marry you! I've hunted you everywhere, and now, here you are at last, and you say you're married to that rich swell! I'll not believe it. He would not marry a poor girl like you." [Pg 119]

"Oh, but it is true. He loved me, and we were married two weeks ago. Oh, Jack, don't be angry. You have no right, for I always said I couldn't marry you. And I ran away, you know. But I love Dorian, and he loves me! Oh, be generous, and go and send him to me here!"

His face, when he looked up at her again, was murderous in its expression, and he hissed, in savage rage:

"Send Dorian Mountcastle to you? Yes, I'll send his black soul to hades within the hour, and make you a widow!"

Whipping a long-bladed knife from his pocket, Jack Dineheart flashed it before her eyes, adding wildly:

"This blade will soon find the traitor's heart!"

Then he rushed away madly toward the yacht.

"Oh, Heaven, save my husband!" shrieked Nita, and fell back unconscious.

There Lizette found her on returning from an unsuccessful attempt to bribe Mrs. Rhodus, and, being ignorant of Nita's interview with the sailor, she vehemently blamed herself for having taken her young mistress from the bed and leaving her in the chair at the window.

"She was too weak, poor darling, and could not bear it," she sighed, as she applied restoratives, and got Nita back into bed.

It was some time before Nita recovered, and then her voice failed her when she tried to speak. The shock of Jack Dineheart's threat had almost killed her, and Lizette hung over her despairingly. [Pg 120]

"Oh, it is my own fault, my own fault! I ought not to have told her the yacht was coming. It makes

her suspense all the more terrible," she murmured self-reproachfully.

Suddenly Nita's closed eyes opened, and she moaned sadly:

"Dorian will be murdered by the sailor with the terrible knife! Oh, Lizette, save him! save him!"

Lizette's heart gave a muffled thump of terror.

"My mistress is raving," she exclaimed. "Oh, Heaven, if I could only get away to the yacht and tell Mr. Mountcastle his wife is alive! I do not believe there is any big dog outside, as that woman says, for I have never heard one bark, and I've a great mind to try to get away and——"

But she did not finish her speech, for there was a rap at the door, and she opened it to admit Donald Kayne—Donald Kayne with a pale, startled face and glittering gray eyes.

"I have but just come in, and Mrs. Rhodus said you wanted me," he began, with cold courtesy.

"Yes, Mr. Kayne; I wanted to tell you that Mrs. Mountcastle's husband came to Fortune's Bay this afternoon. Look through those iron bars there, and you will see his yacht."

But he did not look from the window; he was gazing with troubled eyes at Nita's pale, excited face as it lay upon the pillow. [Pg 121]

"I have seen the yacht, and I know that Dorian Mountcastle has come," he answered, in a strained voice, and added: "I have been told that he is very ill on board the yacht, and that his heart is breaking over the loss of his bride!"

Nita did not seem to be aware of the presence of her foe, although her brilliant eyes were wide open and staring. She threw out her hands with a desperate gesture, and cried out, in a voice of agony:

"The sailor will murder Dorian! See his knife, how it flashes in the air! Oh, Heaven, save my husband!"

Donald Kayne started and trembled with emotion.

"My mistress raves!" cried Lizette reproachfully. "Oh, sir, for pity's sake, release us, restore her to her husband's arms!"

"Never, until she confesses where she found the serpent ring!" he exclaimed, and, almost as though fearing that Nita's ravings might move him to pity, he rushed out of the room.

The hours wore on toward night, and Nita slept under the influence of an opiate administered by the maid.

Night fell and the moon and stars came out and shone through the iron bars that held Lizette a prisoner with her hapless mistress. The faithful maid watched patiently till midnight by the restless invalid.

Suddenly she fancied she heard a slight noise outside the window, and hastened to look out. She saw a man in sailor garb climbing up a strong ladder placed against the house. At sight of her startled face he held up a warning hand, whispering: [Pg 122]

"Hist! Not a word! I am come to save you and Nita. Wait till I wrench off these iron bars."

CHAPTER XIX.

[Pg 123]

TREACHERY.

Lizette could scarcely repress a cry of surprise, she was so startled by the sudden appearance of the sailor whose bronzed face and glittering eyes shone weirdly in the dim light outside the strong iron bars at the window. But at his warning she clapped her hand over her open mouth.

"Be quiet, please, miss," said the sailor. And as Lizette bent nearer, he continued in a low voice: "I am here to save you and your mistress, but if the people in the house should hear us we are lost. I have brought tools to wrench off these bars, and if your mistress will only come quietly with me all will be well."

"But who are you?" whispered the maid. "How did you know about us? Did you come from the yacht? Is it possible Mr. Mountcastle knows we are here?"

"Yes; he has found out everything, but he could not come himself. He is very ill, so he sent me. But excuse me, miss; we mustn't stop to talk. You must prepare your mistress to go while I wrench off these bars. Don't let her make any outcry, or the game will be up, for Rhodus and Kayne will be down upon us at the first sound."

Lizette knew that it was true, and she saw no cause to distrust the sailor, who seemed to be honest. With a heart full of joy she returned to her mistress, who was now stirring restlessly. Lizette bent over her and whispered: [Pg 124]

"Wake, dearie, wake. We are going to escape from our prison."

But the influence of the opiate she had taken had dulled Nita's tortured brain. At Lizette's loving efforts to arouse her she only stared in a dull, uncomprehending way.

"It does not matter, for if she was fully awake she might be frightened," thought Lizette, and

hurriedly dressed her mistress in the serge boating-suit she had worn on her wedding-night—the only gown she now possessed. She was simply quiescent and passive, like a little child only half-awake.

The sailor had now succeeded in removing the heavy iron bars with but slight noise, and he was leaning on the window-sill waiting with impatience.

"Do not wake her if you can avoid it. I can carry her in my arms," he called softly to Lizette.

Lizette gathered the passive form to her breast and bore it to the window. The man held out eager arms, and the dark head dropped unresistingly upon his shoulder. Lizette did not notice the keen thrill of joy that shook the sailor from head to foot as he clasped the precious burden.

"I will carry her down, and you must follow," he said gently. "Do not attempt to descend until I am safe at the bottom. The ladder is not very strong."

Slowly and carefully he bore his burden down the ladder, clasping her close to a heart that was throbbing quick and fast with triumph, while Lizette looked on with trembling suspense. [Pg 125]

He reached the ground safely, then—was it accident or design?—a movement of his arm caused the ladder to slide from the window-sill, and fall with a dull thud to the ground!

Lizette, who had climbed upon the sill ready to step out, gave a stifled cry of dismay as she saw the ladder fall, and the sailor striding away with Nita, while a low laugh came back to her on the night wind. The deserted maid threw up her hands with a moan of despair.

An awful suspicion had rushed over her mind at the sound of the sailor's taunting laugh—a suspicion of treachery dark and dire. She had been duped, deceived! The sailor had not come from Dorian Mountcastle as he had falsely pretended.

Doubtless he was the paid tool of Donald Kayne, who, wishing to separate Nita from her only friend, had laid this cunning trap to carry out his purpose. And, thanks to her simple credulity, he had succeeded even more easily than he could have hoped. Here she was locked securely in this second-story room, for Mrs. Rhodus always turned the key on her prisoners at night, and yonder her young mistress was being borne away by the sailor into another cruel captivity uncheered by the sight of a friendly face.

Lizette was wild with fear and grief for her lovely mistress. It seemed to her she had betrayed Nita to some fearful fate. She hated herself for her dreadful mistake, and, frantic with grief, she exclaimed: [Pg 126]

"I will follow or die!"

Springing upon the broad window-sill, she let herself down first by her hands, then dropped as gently as she could to the ground.

Then a shriek of uncontrollable pain rent the air. In her heavy fall she had twisted or broken one of her ankles.

The pain was so excruciating that after one moment of supreme agony, she trembled all over, then relapsed into unconsciousness.

It was, indeed, Dorian Mountcastle's yacht that had come into harbor at Fortune's Bay. The Reverend Mr. Irwin had been put ashore more than a week previous and sent back to New York with a full purse of gold and a new stock of experience. Captain Van Hise and the doctor had remained by Dorian, and helped him pull through his tedious illness.

He was now slowly convalescing, but there were two things that greatly retarded his recovery. One was a deep and silent remorse over the death of Donald Kayne, whom he had last seen stretched apparently dead upon the sands at Pirate Beach. The other cause was anxiety over Nita, about whom the surgeon still kept up the little fiction of sea-sickness.

One of Dorian's first conscious requests on hearing the story of his bride's illness was that they should put into land so that Nita might get well.

"And then we will continue our journey on land, for although I enjoy yachting very much myself, I do not wish for my poor little wife to suffer from the agonies of sea-sickness," he said tenderly. [Pg 127]

So by one of the accidents of fate that we call blind chance the *Nita* was steered into Fortune's Bay.

"And what the deuce shall we do now? He's asking for her all the time, and mad with impatience for a sight of her face," groaned Van Hise to the doctor that night when they were smoking together upon deck. The hour was late, nearing midnight, and the surgeon yawned sleepily.

"I shall keep up the fiction till to-morrow," he said; "then I shall have to invent something else, for this one will not serve my purpose any longer. But only Heaven knows how I am going to get out of this trouble. Tell him that his bride is drowned I cannot, dare not, for he would either die or go mad from the shock in his present weak condition. Well, I will go and have a good-night look at him and turn in and sleep on it."

"Think I'll go to bed, too," said the captain.

But he lingered a moment with his weed, silently drinking in the beauty of the summer night, then suddenly concluded to have a stroll upon the shore before he retired.

"Just to stretch my legs, for, by Jove! I prefer the land to the deck," he muttered, as he strode up the gang-plank and felt his feet on terra firma.

The doctor found Dorian awake and restless, tormented by the yearning desire for Nita's presence.

"Doc, you must let her come to me to-morrow. I cannot bear this separation any longer!" he cried with impatient pain. [Pg 128]

"Didn't I tell you that Mrs. Mountcastle was too weak to leave her berth?"

"Then I will go to her!" cried Dorian.

"You are also too weak to walk," replied his friend.

"Then I will be carried to her berth. I must see her for myself. I fear that she is worse than you tell me."

"You are exciting yourself, Dorian, in a manner that I fear may bring on a relapse of your sickness. And your wound is barely healed, remember. Come, curb this impatience, and to-morrow things may be more to your liking. But now I must give you a sedative, or you will not sleep to-night, and that will be very bad for you."

Dorian was glad to take the sedative that promised oblivion from vexing thoughts. He swallowed it meekly, and bade the surgeon good night. He was well enough now so that they did not have to watch him at night.

The dim flame of the lowered lamp cast a pale gleam on the wan face, as he lay, with half-shut eyes, trying vainly to sleep, for the thought of his young bride, the intense, overpowering yearning to see her again, banished repose.

Was it the sound of the lapping waves that drowned a light, quick footstep? He heard nothing, but suddenly there was a flutter as of woman's robes beside him—some one falling on her knees, stretching out tender arms to clasp his neck.

His thoughts had taken embodied shape—Nita's self was here, her head on his breast, her kisses burning on his lips! Dorian clasped his love with passionate tenderness, and kissed her lips over and over in the mad joy of seeing her again. Low murmurs of love escaped their lips, between sweet caresses. He comprehended that her yearning for him had matched his for her. Weak and ill as she was, she had eluded her watchers and sought his side. [Pg 129]

"Oh, my love, my darling, how pale and thin you are! You have suffered greatly," he whispered.

"And you, too, love," she murmured. "You have suffered also, have you not? But you will get well, now that I have come back to you, my husband! Oh, how thankful I am I did not perish in the gloomy sea that dark night when I was swept into the water with Lizette. Now I will stay by you and nurse you while you get strong again. Oh, Dorian, how I love you! Hold me tight, darling; do not let any one take me away from you!"

They were wild with joy over their reunion, and to neither one came the slightest presentiment of the cruel truth—that these were parting as well as greeting kisses.

Something put out the dim flame of the lamp, and there was the sound of a heavy, creaking footstep in the room. The next moment Nita was torn rudely from her husband's arms, and her head and face muffled in something dark and heavy, and she was borne swiftly away from the yacht.

CHAPTER XX.

[Pg 130]

A GHOST ON BOARD SHIP.

Quite close to the yacht *Nita* was moored a trimly built, compact little sailing vessel of which Jack Dineheart, the sailor, was master. It was toward this little bark that he bore Nita after his daring exploit in kidnaping her from the Rhodus house.

He had lain at anchor near the island two days, and was getting ready to sail that night when, upon starting on an errand to the house of Fisherman Rhodus, he had been startled by seeing Nita's face behind the barred window as she watched her husband's yacht in the bay with sorrowful eyes of love and longing.

After his brief, angry conversation with the girl, Jack Dineheart had forgotten all about his errand, and rushed away toward the yacht with murder in his heart toward Dorian Mountcastle.

Upon nearing it, and seeing several men upon her deck, his wrath became tempered with prudence, and he retreated toward his own vessel, where, after fortifying himself with several glasses of liquor, he concocted the scheme of kidnaping the imprisoned girl and carrying her to sea with him, and perhaps back to Pirate Beach to the grim guardianship of his mother, old Meg Dineheart, the fortune-teller.

Laughing in fiendish glee at the discomfiture of the deceived Lizette, the sailor bore Nita away in his strong arms, his heart leaping with joy. [Pg 131]

In the old cabin by the seaside at Pirate Beach, Jack Dineheart had watched a lovely, somber-

eyed little child budding into exquisite girlhood, and when she was barely fourteen had sought her for his bride. Her proud refusal had been followed by a year of such bitter persecution on the part of himself and his witchlike mother, that at fifteen Nita had fled from them to the great metropolis where her valiant struggle to earn her bread had ended three years later in Central Park, and she had given her hand in marriage to the old miser for the means of saving herself from starvation or suicide.

And now she had fallen once more into the hands of her sailor-lover, who, loving her for her beauty, and hating her for her scorn, had vowed to punish her by parting her forever from her husband.

But as he hurried on in the clear moonlight with his burden the slight form of Nita began to weigh heavily in his arms.

So he laid Nita, who still seemed fast asleep, down upon the ground a few moments, and, turning his gaze from her, began to scrutinize the sky and the sea for auguries of a successful voyage.

And lying there alone in the cool night air, Nita suddenly recovered full consciousness of herself and her surroundings, although she could not remember how she had come to be there.

Lifting her head and gazing about her in surprise, she saw before her the ocean, and near at hand the yacht of her husband. Behind her, absorbed for the moment in his scrutiny of the sky, was Jack Dineheart.

[Pg 132]

Fear and hope combined lent her a new, strange power. Struggling to her feet, Nita darted noiselessly forward toward the yacht.

Jack Dineheart, however, discovered her flight just before she reached the yacht. Furious with rage, he followed, and, finding every one asleep, audaciously penetrated to Dorian's cabin and dragged the hapless girl from the arms of her husband.

Unheeding the loud cry that burst from Dorian's lips, he escaped safely to his own vessel, and a few minutes later it left its moorings in the harbor, and set sail for Pirate Beach.

Dorian Mountcastle was again bereft of his bride, and Nita was in the power of a relentless lover whose love was even more dangerous than his enmity.

Captain Van Hise, returning from his moonlight stroll upon the land, saw the graceful little bark gliding out upon the ocean, with no thought that she bore Nita away. He believed that Nita was dead, and in his manly, honest heart there was a ceaseless sorrow over her untimely death.

He stepped on the deserted deck, where all was so still and calm, and his vigorous walk having driven away all his sleepy feelings, he stole softly to Dorian's berth, fancying he might be awake and restless and glad of company. All was dark and still, but at the sound of his footstep Dorian spoke:

"Is that you Van Hise? Make a light, please."

The captain obeyed; then asked who had put his light out.

[Pg 133]

Dorian answered in a strangely excited voice:

"Nita was here with me a few moments, and I fancy she must have stolen away from Lizette, for suddenly, as I held her to my heart and kissed her, the light went out and some one dragged her away from my arms, and in spite of my outcry carried her off in dead silence. It must have been Lizette, of course, but her behavior was very rude, and so I shall tell her to-morrow."

"My God!" exclaimed Van Hise, his face white, his eyes staring. A shudder shook him from head to foot; then he exclaimed uneasily:

"My friend, you have been dreaming!"

"A very blissful dream, although, alas! too brief," Dorian answered, with a smile of languid rapture. "My wife was here, kissed me, and talked to me for a few happy moments before the maid dragged her away. To-morrow I must see her again. Oh, Van Hise, I am so happy that I have seen my darling again I do not think I shall sleep a wink to-night!"

Van Hise sat down, trembling, his face dead white.

"You must have been asleep," he said decidedly.

"No, I have not slept to-night. Doc was down and gave me a sedative, but it seemed only a few minutes later that Nita came to me, and since Lizette took her away I've been lying here in a happy waking dream."

The soldier repressed a groan, and thought:

"He has dreamed the whole thing, or he has seen poor Nita's wraith. I should not like the seamen to know it, for only last night they were talking together, and I heard them say that to see a ghost on board ship was a sign of shipwreck. Decidedly they must not know of this, not even the good captain, or they might desert the yacht in a body!"

[Pg 134]

He waited until Dorian seemed to fall into a light doze; then went and woke up the surgeon to tell him the strange happening.

"Oh, pooh! it was no ghost—only a vision evoked by his morphine pill. He can be told to-morrow, if he persists in his fancy, that Nita's imprudence to-night has given her a relapse, and that will afford us a new excuse," replied the clever surgeon.

DONALD KAYNE'S RETURN.

Through Azalea Courtney's revelations the elopement of Dorian Mountcastle and Nita Farnham had become the sensation of the hour, and innumerable newspaper paragraphs had chronicled the facts of the duel, the death of Donald Kayne, the elopement of the young lovers on the yacht. And then Irwin returned with the story of the tragedy of Nita's loss at sea with her maid Lizette.

It was a tragedy so full of woe that it thrilled every heart that read it with sympathy and sorrow. Even the Courtneys, who hated the girl, grew pale as they realized how soon Nita's happiness had come to an end, and that Dorian was so terribly bereft of his love.

But into the ward of Bellevue, where Miser Farnham lay barely alive, so terribly had he been hurt in the railway accident, and so slight were his chances for life, penetrated no tidings from the outer world. None there knew anything of the beautiful ward who had eloped with her lover the very night of the accident. Charles Farnham was supposed to be friendless and poor, save for some miserly savings of whose hiding-place none had any knowledge. No one took any interest in his fate except the doctors and nurses at Bellevue, and they all believed that it was impossible that he should recover from his internal injuries. He was alive and little more. He had never uttered a conscious word since the accident.

[Pg 136]

As for the Courtneys, they were still at Gray Gables, carrying out their policy of masterly inaction. The flight of Nita and the condition of the miser made no difference to them. A lawyer, acting under instructions received from Farnham previous to the accident, was entrusted with the conduct of expenses incident to the housekeeping at Gray Gables. Everything went on like clock-work, except that the good housekeeper, Mrs. Hill, who had grown to love her young mistress so dearly, carried always a sad face and aching heart for poor Nita's tragic fate.

Weeks flew past, and it would have been very lonely at Gray Gables but that the Courtneys invited some city friends for a few weeks, and got through the July days with some bathing, dressing, boating, and dancing, not keeping up any pretense of mourning over Nita's supposed death.

Meg Dineheart, the old fortune-teller, still prowled about the beach like a bird of evil omen, and had twice been driven ignominiously out of Gray Gables with threats of arrest if she ever showed her face there again.

To tell the truth, Meg was slyly seeking for Nita's chest of gold that Lizette had carefully hidden in the closet of her mistress, but she found such lynx eyes watching her whenever she ventured into the old stone mansion that she almost despaired of success.

During the summer, Meg had made two trips to New York to see Miser Farnham at the hospital, but she got no good out of these visits. He still lingered in that strange, comatose condition, taking no notice of anything, and yet improving slowly but appreciably, so the nurses said, until they began to believe that he would really get well again.

[Pg 137]

"The old wretch! I wish he would die, then maybe Jack and me would get the handling of all that money if only we knew where it was hid," muttered Meg angrily, and she was in no wise pleased to learn that he was likely to recover.

She was very anxious for her son Jack to return from his last trip to sea, for he had been away several months, and she was eager to know what he would say to the happenings at Pirate Beach since he went away, the return and death of Nita, whom he had wished to marry, and the accident to the miser, whose gold both mother and son greedily coveted.

New York had another sensation the middle of August when Donald Kayne, the millionaire, who was believed to have been killed in the duel with Dorian Mountcastle returned, alive and well, to the city in his own yacht.

"It was all a mistake, the report of my death. My antagonist was much more seriously wounded than myself, and I have heard had a hard tussle for life," he told his friends carelessly.

Yet a strange change had come over Donald Kayne. Always nervous and restless, his friends observed that he was now more so than ever before. He veered from place to place. He could hardly be seen at his club any more. And no one had any news of Dorian Mountcastle's whereabouts until received through him.

[Pg 138]

"My yacht stayed a few days at Fortune's Bay," he said. "While there I heard that Dorian Mountcastle's yacht had been there before me. Dorian had been recovering slowly from the wound I gave him, and he had not been told of the tragic death of his wife. When it could be kept from him no longer the truth was broken to him gently, but it almost bereft him of reason. The last I heard of him was that his friends had taken him abroad for a year to recuperate his health."

He went down to Pirate Beach to see the Courtneys, who were very gracious. Azalea had almost given up all hope of ever winning Dorian, and she tried all her fascinations on Donald Kayne.

But he was cold, taciturn and moody, and had no interest in anything except the mystery that had brought him to Pirate Beach—the mystery of Nita Farnham's possession of the serpent ring. But in spite of Azalea's efforts she had nothing to tell him, beyond what she had written him before the duel.

"And yet, I believe," she said, "that the old fortune-teller, who lives in an old boat-cabin down the beach, knows more about Nita than the most of us. I have talked with her, and she is very mysterious. She would neither admit nor deny any knowledge of Nita, but if I had not been too poor to bribe her I believe she would have given me some information."

Donald Kayne sought Meg Dineheart at sunset, and found her standing alone in the strange purple glow by the sea, a weird, witchlike figure, with elf-locks streaming on the breeze, while she shaded her eyes with her hand and strained her gaze across the darkening waters, watching, as she was always watching now, for her son's bark to come sailing home.

[Pg 139]

She turned upon the intruder with a curse, but Azalea had been right in believing that gold would loosen the old harpy's tongue.

Kayne soon learned that Nita had been reared at Pirate Beach by the old fortune-teller, until at the age of fifteen she had run away to make her own living at the metropolis.

"What is the girl to you?" asked Donald Kayne, but she leered and refused to reply.

"And the serpent ring she wore? I will make your fortune, old woman, if you will tell me how Nita Farnham came by that ring," he exclaimed eagerly.

Bitterly did Meg regret that she could not gratify his curiosity.

"I know nothing of the ring, except that I saw it on Nita's hand before she went away on Mountcastle's yacht. Stay—you say there is but one ring like it in the world? Then I saw the same ring more than fourteen years ago on another woman's hand."

"You saw her? Where? Where, woman?" he cried in fierce excitement.

The old witch peered curiously into the face of her interlocutor. Donald Kayne's face was wild and haggard. Unconsciously to himself, in his wild excitement, he stretched out his hand and clutched the woman's shoulder in a grasp that was painful.

[Pg 140]

"Speak!" he uttered hoarsely; "speak this instant, and tell me when and where you saw the woman with the serpent ring. Why are you so dumb when you see how impatient I am! Answer before I throttle you!"

But with a ghastly grin Meg writhed herself out of his grasp and sneered:

"That secret is worth gold to me!"

"Harpy," he cried, and thrust his hands into his pockets, but withdrew them disappointed. He had already given her all the money about him. He tore the watch from his pocket, the ring from his hand, and flung them at her feet.

"Take these, and speak!" he cried, but Meg spurned them with her foot.

"It is not enough! Besides, I do not want jewels, but money!"

"You shall have money to-morrow. But do not keep me waiting, I implore you! I am mad, mad for the clue you can give me. Speak now, for sweet pity's sake! Tell me all you know, and if it is worth anything to me, I will reward you richly."

But the woman began to realize that her knowledge was valuable, and decided to sell it dearly.

"The gold first!" she cried. "You are a stranger to me, and if I told you the secret first you might go away and never pay me!"

Vainly he entreated and implored, promising money upon the morrow, but Meg was immovable. She was insensible to the pitiful anxiety of his haggard face. She obstinately refused his prayer, mocking at his impatience.

[Pg 141]

Donald Kayne, mad with impatient wrath, lifted his hand and struck her lightly across the mouth.

"Take that, you devil!" he cried hoarsely, and with a shriek of rage Meg sprung at him with a knife drawn.

"I will kill you!" she hissed, with savage fury.

But Donald Kayne was more than a match for the tigress, and soon disarmed her, although in the struggle he received a wound in the hand.

He flung the knife into the sea, and wrapped his handkerchief about the wound, while she stood at a little distance watching him with glowering eyes.

But his heart sank as he realized that his imprudence had defeated his own object, and that he might never be able to wrest from her the longed-for secret. But there was no present help for it, and he hurried from her along the beach toward Gray Gables.

Meg shook her fist after him, and muttered anathemas upon him until he was almost out of sight; then turned her eyes again upon the sea, where the last fading rays of sunset lingered in radiant light.

A sudden cry of joy shrilled over her lips. Across the water, in clear sight, was riding a trimly built little sailing craft, that had a very familiar look to her old eyes.

"My son's bark!" she shrieked joyfully.

PEPITA!

Donald Kayne did not hear the old woman's shriek of joy, nor see Jack Dineheart's craft. He flung along the sands with a long, striding step, his heart seething with rage and pain, and, entering the grounds at Gray Gables, sought a seat among the thick shrubberies to muse undisturbed over his troubles.

The startling disappearance of Nita from the Rhodus house had filled him with vague alarm and unowned remorse. He knew that she was not with Dorian, and also knew that the bereaved young husband had been told that his young bride was dead.

He had heard, too, while in hiding on the island, that grave fears were entertained for Dorian's reason. He had been terribly shocked the morning after Nita's disappearance when poor Lizette had been found moaning upon the ground, where she had fallen from the window. The maid's ankle had sustained a dreadful sprain, and she had several bruises of a very painful character. She was carried into the house and carefully attended, but it was several hours before she could tell how her accident had happened.

Donald Kayne believed at first that it must have been an emissary from Dorian who had carried Nita away, but the careful inquiries made afterward revealed the fact that she was not upon the yacht.

The guilty man who, in imprisoning Nita, had not intended that any harm should come to her, was confronted by the terrible mystery of Nita's betrayal into some unknown and awful fate. Cruelly disappointed and angry as he had been over Nita's refusal to gratify his curiosity, he could not rid himself of the impression that it was not mere girlish perversity on her part.

[Pg 143]

He was haunted by the look in Nita's eyes the night when he had knelt at her feet, begging her to confess the truth. He had told the girl he was her enemy, and that he would persecute her, but he had not dreamed of anything like this.

He had promised Azalea to return and report his luck with old Meg, but he felt averse to seeking the pretty girl yet, so he remained in the old garden-chair, with his head bowed despondingly on his hand, while darkness fell round him, and up at the old stone house the windows began to glow with lights, while from the open windows of the parlor Azalea Courtney's voice broke upon the air in a song.

Azalea's voice was clear, sweet, and well-trained, and she had chosen a sweet and melancholy strain that blended fittingly with the pensive twilight hour:

"There never was a love like mine,
For since my darling went away
There has not been a night or day,
Through winter's snow or summer's shine,
But he is with me
Constantly!"

The pathetic words sank deep into the tortured heart of the man, listening out in the dusk and dew, with the murmur of the sea in his ears and the heavy perfume of flowers all around. He pressed his heavy brow against the back of his seat, murmuring over the words:

[Pg 144]

"There never was a love like mine!"

Azalea stopped singing, but played on in dreamy mood a low, sad nocturne.

Suddenly, through the stillness of the garden, a faint sound reached his ear—a sound like a human sigh, then:

"Donald!"

With a start and a cry he lifted his head.

"Donald," was breathed tremulously upon the air again.

But there was no one near. Thrilling with awe, he glared into the darkness. The night was dark, and there in the shade of the tall firs and shrubberies, the shadows were dense. He could barely distinguish the outlines of his own hand. And yet as he gazed the voice called him again, softly, tenderly, beseechingly:

"Donald!"

"Who is there? Who calls?" he asked eagerly, and no voice replied, but out of the darkness there began to form before him at a little distance a faint, silvery something like a cloud taking shape and form. It grew more and more dense until it assumed the form of a woman—a mist-woman, shadowy, faint, yet luminous with a soft, unearthly glow, and beautiful as an angel with spiritual face, and slender, beckoning hands.

A strange spell came over the gazer, a spell of tender awe and ineffable peace. He spoke, and his voice was low and soft, like a sigh of love:

[Pg 145]

"Pepita."

For a moment the silvery mist wavered there in its wondrous beauty before him; then, all at once, it began to move backward from him with a floating movement of ineffable grace, the dark, solemn eyes still fixed on his, while the beckoning hand and ethereal voice both breathed:

"Come!"

Donald Kayne arose like one in a dream, and followed the floating mist on and on through winding paths overgrown here and there with grass and weeds, toward the house, blundering on in a dazed way like a drunken man, tearing his hands upon thorny, outstretched branches of roses, shaking down splatters of dew that wet his face and hair.

The radiant shape was leading him on and on toward the house, and the nearer they came the more faint and indistinct it grew.

At last—when close to the old gray stone wall, and when his outstretched hands almost touched it—the phantom shape moved straight against the wall and melted into thin air like a bubble.

Donald Kayne, with a cry of agony, clutched at the fading form, and fell forward heavily against the wall, striking his temple with resounding force. The blow stunned him and flung him backward, half-unconscious upon the grass. He did not know that he lay there for an hour ere he struggled back to thought and memory.

He struggled up to his feet and gazed at the blank wall, so chill and dark, where the spirit-form had disappeared. [Pg 146]

"I have seen a ghost," he shuddered. "It was Pepita in all her beauty. Yet I saw through and beyond her the trees and flowers. She is dead, my Pepita, I know it at last!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

[Pg 147]

NITA AT GRAY GABLES AGAIN.

The sun was sinking out of sight, and the curlew's call came shrilly across the waves when Jack Dineheart's fishing-boat anchored in the bay, and a little cockle-shell of a row-boat brought him across to his mother's cabin.

She was watching for him eagerly and with amazed eyes, for when the sailor left the little boat he carried in his arms the form of a woman lying inert like one dead against his shoulder, while her face and head were shrouded in a large plaid shawl.

"Hush! not a word," he breathed hoarsely to his mother, with a warning nod toward the sailor who had rowed the boat across, and he strode to the cabin with his silent burden. When he laid the quiet figure down upon a lounge and withdrew the shawl from the face, Meg recoiled with a cry of wonder and alarm.

It was Nita—Nita, whom every one believed dead. She looked like a dead woman now. Her face and lips were white, and the long, black fringe of the thick, curly lashes lay heavily against her cheeks.

"Don't look so frightened. She is not dead," said Jack Dineheart roughly. "I drugged her to bring her here without an outcry—that is all. She'll come to presently, all right."

"But, Jack, where did you find her? I thought she was dead."

"Old woman, I can't stay to answer questions now. I've got to go back to my ship and steer her into harbor. I'll come back as soon as I can. And, in the meantime, don't you let her get away." [Pg 148]

"I'll keep her all right," Meg replied, with one of her hideous grins, and then he went away, returning later to find her waiting for him on the steps outside.

"She has come to, and is almost crazy to get away, so I locked her in and came out here to wait for you," she said. He sat down close to her, and confided his story to her ears, ending with:

"I brought her over to my boat and told them all she was my crazy sister. Bill Skipper and his wife had seen her here four years ago, and so there was no one to contradict my story, and old Mother Skipper took care of her all the way, for she was sick and nearly died on the voyage."

"And what do you expect to do with her now?" grimly inquired old Meg.

A string of oaths broke from his lips, in the midst of which she distinguished an avowed determination to force Nita to become his wife.

"But you said she was married to that young swell."

"He's dead by now!" was the vicious reply. "And, whether he's dead or not, she shall marry me."

It was so dark Meg could not see his face, but she knew he was terribly in earnest. She sat silently musing several moments until he exclaimed irritably:

"Why don't you say something? You used to be as much up for the plan as I was."

"Things are different now, Jack," she answered in a troubled tone, and when he questioned her she told him the story of the night when the old miser had brought Nita to Gray Gables as his ward. [Pg 149]

"Now, Jack, you know you can defy anybody in the world except old Miser Farnham, and you daren't do that. He claims her now, and all you can do is to let her go back up yonder to Gray Gables and queen it over us again," she ended bitterly.

She was frightened at the terrible explosion of wrath that followed her words. The man raved and stormed, and she, although a fury to every one else, cowered in silence under his wrath. She knew that in spite of himself he must yield to the mysterious power the old miser held over them both. From the cot where he lay half-dead in Bellevue, he seemed to reach out a hand in grim menacing that cowed burly Jack Dineheart into instant, though grumbling, obedience.

"If I had known this I would have drowned Nita in the sea before I would have brought her back here," he growled.

But when Meg proposed to take the girl immediately back to Gray Gables, he did not interpose the least objection. The woman unlocked the cabin-door and entered, finding Nita sobbing hysterically upon the old ragged lounge.

"Dry up that sniveling, girl, and come along with me up to Gray Gables!" she cried roughly.

Nita sprang up in trembling hope.

"Do you mean it, Meg? Oh, will you indeed be so kind?" she faltered.

[Pg 150]

"Yes, I mean it, and I hope you won't forget Jack and me for our goodness. We are poor as dirt, you know, and it's worth a pretty penny to rescue you from prison and bring you safe back to Pirate Beach," grunted the hag, making the most she could out of her son's enforced relinquishment of his prize.

"Oh, I will reward you richly! You and Jack shall have handfuls of gold to-morrow," promised the grateful girl, and, leaning on Meg's arm, for she was very weak, Nita left the cabin, and proceeded slowly toward Gray Gables.

She saw no more of her rough suitor, for, furious with disappointment, he had taken himself out of the way.

Nita's heart beat high with hope as she neared her home. Meg had not thought of telling her that Miser Farnham was yet alive, and the girl could think of nothing except how soon she would be reunited to her young husband.

More than six weeks had elapsed since Nita and Lizette had left Gray Gables for the yachting excursion with Dorian Mountcastle that had resulted so disastrously. Yet, how familiar everything looked as the girl went with weak, faltering footsteps up the broad steps into the lighted hall.

The broad front doors were wide open, and also the parlor door. From it came the sound of gay voices and merry laughter. Meg Dineheart, with a love of sensation, dragged Nita to this door.

The Courtneys had several city guests lingering still, and Donald Kayne had joined them but a short while before. He sat near the window, with a dull, dazed look on his face, speaking but little, and listening with an effort to the careless words of the guests.

[Pg 151]

Upon this scene broke the bent figure of the old fortune-teller, with Nita by her side.

Mrs. Courtney was entertaining a guest in her most stately manner, but the words she was uttering died unspoken on her lips, and she sprang up with a strangled cry of alarmed surprise:

"Nita Farnham!"

"Nita Farnham!" echoed Azalea, in appalled tones, as though she had seen a ghost.

Ere Nita could speak old Meg's thin, rasping voice broke upon the hubbub of surprise, exclaiming:

"Yes, it's Nita Farnham, ma'am, sure enough. She wasn't drowned at sea, in spite of the storm. My son saved her life, and brought her back to Pirate Beach to-night. I hope you're glad to see her back," and she pushed Nita into a chair near the door and retreated, leaving her charge alone among them.

The eyes of the guests were upon the Courtneys, and no matter how they felt, it was incumbent on them to welcome Nita in a cordial manner. Nita got two cold little pecks on the cheek from mother and daughter, and some little murmurs of affection that she took at their true valuation.

Introductions followed, but Nita was weary, and rose from her seat, saying faintly that she would go to her room.

[Pg 152]

Some one came forward and offered his arm, and she shrank and trembled when she perceived that it was Donald Kayne. He bent and whispered, inaudibly, to the others:

"Say nothing yet, I beseech you. I was mad to do what I did, but God only knows the suffering that drove me to desperation."

In spite of herself Nita's heart was touched with pity. He had treated her infamously, yet somehow she could not hate him. Her tender heart always ached over the secret she could not betray to him, and her dreams were often haunted by the name "Pepita," that he had uttered in such a tragic tone.

She raised her dark, reproachful eyes to his face, and whispered sadly:

"You need not fear me."

But she was trembling so that she could not touch his offered arm, and she looked appealingly at

Mrs. Courtney.

"I would like for Mrs. Hill to attend me to my room," she said gently.

"My dear girl, the housekeeper has an evening out, but I will attend you myself," was the affectionate reply, and Mrs. Courtney, coming forward, led Nita up-stairs and unlocked the door of her room.

"Mrs. Hill found it necessary to lock your room," she said. "That old woman you came with to-night has been prowling about here trying to steal something." [Pg 153]

She pushed open the windows and let in the cool air. Then she lighted a lamp, adding carelessly:

"Everything is just as you left it, my dear. Although we believed you dead, it seemed best to trouble nothing until after your guardian's recovery."

Nita had sunk down wearily upon a lounge, her dark head falling among the satin pillows, but at those words she rose up with a startled cry:

"My—my—guardian!"

Mrs. Courtney, settling herself cozily into an easy chair, replied blandly:

"Oh, I forgot you went away with Dorian that day, and did not hear about Miser Farnham's terrible accident."

"But, yes, I did, Mrs. Courtney, oh, yes. They told me on the yacht that night. Captain Van Hise told me—that my guardian had been killed on the elevated railroad," Nita cried eagerly, breathlessly.

"He was mistaken," Mrs. Courtney answered placidly. "He was severely wounded, and it was believed that he would certainly die, but he is still alive at Bellevue Hospital, and although nothing but a wreck still, the doctors and nurses say that he will be sure to recover."

She never forgot the white horror of the girl's face, nor the anguish of despair in her eyes.

"Alive?" cried Nita wildly, "alive? Why, how can that be? I am married to Dorian, you know!"

"Yes; and it was a very reprehensible affair, I think," Mrs. Courtney answered stiffly. "An elopement always carries with it the odor of disgrace." [Pg 154]

But Nita was deaf to her words of blame. With a stifled moan of the bitterest despair, she fell back unconscious.

CHAPTER XXIV.

[Pg 155]

THE MISER SENDS FOR HIS BRIDE.

"What a nuisance!" muttered Mrs. Courtney, but she bathed Nita's face until she came to herself with a long, low sigh of deepest pain.

"I have been dreaming—oh, such a dreadful dream!" she shuddered.

"No, it was not a dream, Nita. I was telling you your guardian was alive, and you fainted—from excess of joy, I suppose," added the lady maliciously.

Nita sat up and pressed her small hand wearily to her brow. Despair made her brave.

"No, Mrs. Courtney, it was excess of sorrow," she answered frankly.

"Oh, you cruel, wicked girl!"

"Do you think so?" asked Nita, with calmness. "No matter, I was glad when I heard that he was dead. I hated him—oh, I cannot tell you how I feared and hated him."

"But why?" curiously.

"Can you ask?" cried Nita despairingly. "Who could love that grim, horrible old man? And I told you once—you remember that night—that he would never, never let me marry Dorian!"

"Yet you married him, all the same, so what does his life matter? He cannot undo the elopement!" returned Mrs. Courtney, wondering at the girl's strange words and manner. [Pg 156]

"But I believed that he was dead. Oh, Mrs. Courtney, listen patiently, please. I did not know that my impatient lover had made any plans to elope with me when I went on the yacht for a moonlight trip. Then came the duel, you know, and Dorian was so badly wounded. He sent his friend to ask me to marry him, but at first I refused, for I knew my guardian would never consent, and I did not dare disobey him! Oh, you cannot guess how I fear that horrible old man! Then Captain Van Hise told me he was dead, and I consented to marry Dorian. We were married, and only a few minutes afterward I was swept into the sea by the great wave rolling over the ship. Oh, God! why was I saved from death to meet this awful fate?—to be parted forever from my own love, when happiness seemed so near?"

"But your guardian cannot punish you for marrying your lover—these fears are quite groundless, Nita," Mrs. Courtney said, coldly, but decidedly.

"Oh, madam, I am the most friendless and unhappy girl in the whole world!" she cried

passionately. "I have no kindred hearts to pity me, no one to care for me! You have never liked me, I know, but I plead with you to have pity on me, and try to be my friend. Oh, I will be so grateful for a little kindness and pity in this dark hour!"

An earthquake could hardly have shocked Mrs. Courtney more than this humble plea from Nita, who had always resented her dislike and given her scorn for scorn. She put out her slender, aristocratic hand and clasped Nita's gently, drawing her to a seat by her side.

[Pg 157]

"My dear girl, of course I am your friend, and will do anything in the world for you," she exclaimed. "But let me tell you that you are very nervous and fanciful to-night. How can you call yourself friendless and alone when you have a rich and noble husband like Dorian Mountcastle? I assure you that a loving husband is always a woman's best friend. Then, too, you have a doting guardian."

The girl rose from her seat and stood before the woman, pale as a ghost.

"Mrs. Courtney, do not call them my friends, those two men," she said, almost sternly. "From to-night and henceforth forever, they are my bitterest foes."

Surprise held the listener dumb, and Nita continued:

"Never again while the world stands will I consent ever to look upon the face of Charles Farnham or Dorian Mountcastle."

"The girl is mad, mad as a March hare. Her adventures have turned her brain," murmured Mrs. Courtney amazedly.

"No, madam, I am not mad, I am perfectly sane, and I wish to make you an offer. Will you and Azalea go abroad with me, and travel wherever you wish for a year? I am rich. I will pay every expense if you will chaperon me on this trip. I will be perfectly frank with you. I want to avoid the two men of whom we have been speaking. I am afraid of them both. I have wronged them both, yet I am innocent of blame. Yet I fear the miser's hate and Dorian's love in equal measure. Oh, madam, be kind to me. Grant my prayer, and I will be forever grateful! And the time will come, I swear it to you, when you will say to yourself and to the world: 'I am glad I was kind to poor Nita, and had no hand in her tragic fate.' What say you, madam? Shall we start to-morrow on our travels?"

[Pg 158]

Nita need not have felt any doubt over the answer. It was the strangest turn of Fortune's wheel that Mrs. Courtney had ever known—the strangest, and the most welcome.

She felt that behind it lay some strange dark mystery, a baffling mystery that it should be her task to ferret out if it lay in mortal power, but in the meantime she accepted Nita's offer with pretended reluctance, putting it solely as a favor to the young girl. Then, after recommending her to retire as early as possible, she returned to her guests with a heart full of secret exultation.

Nita locked her door and fell down on her couch in a fit of hysterical sobbing. Mrs. Courtney's revelation had shown her all the horror of her position. Wife to two living men, she loathed the one who had the legal right to claim her.

And Nita knew, and the knowledge added poignancy to her pain, that it was her own fault. Why had she betrothed herself to Dorian when she was not free, cheating herself with a little semblance of happiness, and so led him on to the elopement that must now wreck his life?

She believed that Miser Farnham's wrath would be murderous when he recovered and learned what she had done. And Dorian, how he would hate her for her sin!

[Pg 159]

She would rather die than meet Dorian again—he whom she had so terribly deceived. If he cursed her for her folly she could not bear it; she must die at his feet of her bitter shame—and if he forgave her madness and loved her still, what then? Still she was not free! And how could she own the truth to him? She could never do that. She would sooner fly to the other end of the world.

She leaned from the window, and gazed upon the great ocean and the starlit sky.

"Oh, how beautiful the world is, and why should there be so much unhappiness in it?" she cried.

Nita's musings were interrupted by the sudden entrance of Mrs. Hill, the housekeeper, who was wild with joy over the news of Nita's return.

"Mrs. Courtney has told me how you were saved by a sailor, and brought back," she cried gladly, and added in a more subdued key: "But poor Lizette, that dear, good girl, what a pity she was not saved, too."

Nita was about to exclaim that Lizette was alive, but she suddenly remembered Donald Kayne's entreaty for her silence, and made no reply. In spite of his cruelty, she pitied the man.

Jack Dineheart had told her that the maid, on finding herself entrapped and deserted, had jumped from the window and broken her neck, but she tried not to believe the horrible story.

All that Donald Kayne had told in New York about Dorian Mountcastle was true. When concealment was no longer possible his friends had been obliged to break to him, as gently as might be, the news of Nita's death, and that it was her wraith, and not a living girl, that had appeared to him on board the yacht that fateful night. The despair of the bereaved young husband was awful in its intensity. His reason tottered, and it was found necessary to place him in strict confinement, and guard him closely for several days until his violent mood subsided into moody melancholy.

[Pg 160]

Captain Van Hise was tender and devoted as a woman to his stricken friend, and when Dorian, after weeks of despair, became a pale, quiet shadow of his former self, he persuaded him to go abroad with him.

They went, but Dorian dwelt ceaselessly on the memory of that strange night when Nita had come to him and laid her head on his breast and her arms about his neck—aye, and kissed him, too, with ardent lips that seemed to burn with the breath of life. He prayed Heaven to grant him that sweet vision of his lost love again.

Van Hise was in despair.

"He will go crazy in earnest if he keeps on this way," he said to himself, despondently.

It was nearing spring then, and they were in Paris. But Dorian was familiar with Paris. Perhaps he had exhausted its delights long ago. He wearied of its splendors.

"I am tired. Let us go somewhere else," he said impatiently.

[Pg 161]

"But, my dear fellow, we have been everywhere."

"No, we have not. I know some men who are going on a journey into the interior of Norway. I have accepted for us both their invitation to join the party," said reckless Dorian.

"It will be quite out of the world," groaned the soldier, but he yielded.

It was strange that Dorian and Nita should both be abroad so many months without meeting each other, or even being aware of each other's movements.

And yet it was a fact that Captain Van Hise and Dorian had never even heard that Nita was alive, and Nita knew nothing of Dorian since the fateful night when Jack Dineheart had torn her from his arms and carried her back to Pirate Beach.

Since she had gone abroad with the Courtneys, life had been one feverish whirl of gayety, change, and sight-seeing. Nita, with her heart upon the rack, and a smile upon her lips, had borne her part bravely in all, lavishing gold like water in the pursuit of forgetfulness. The Courtneys, nothing loath, accepted her munificence, and made the most of it, although wondering at her reckless extravagance. They did not know how often she said to herself:

"The chest of gold is melting like snow in the sun, but why should I care? There remain to me but a few more months of life and liberty, then—darkness, nothingness, and death. Let me make the most of it!"

Mrs. Courtney had been in London in her days of prosperity, and had acquaintances among the nobility. In the spring, when the London season set in, she introduced her ward into the most fashionable set. And the fashionable world raved over the charms of *la belle Americaine*.

[Pg 162]

She had lovers by the score. Hearts and titles were laid at her feet, but all soon echoed what Mrs. Courtney had frankly told them of Nita:

"She has no heart."

Nita only smiled when they accused her of her fault.

"It is quite true," she said. "I have no heart to give any one. Why do you not fall in love with pretty, golden-haired Azalea?"

One man, piqued at her indifference, tried to take her advice. He transferred his attention to the affable blonde.

He was Sir George Merlin, a wealthy baronet, middle-aged, but very goodlooking. He was vain and conceited, and Nita's rejection hurt his pride as well as his love. He proposed to Azalea through pure pique.

The blonde accepted gladly, and Mrs. Courtney was transported with joy. The only drawback to her bliss was that the baronet did not seem in any hurry to name the wedding-day. But the engagement was formally announced, and his sister gave a ball in honor of the fair Azalea.

Nita's thoughts often wandered to Dorian. Where was he? What was he doing? Did he know that she was alive, or did he mourn her dead? Somehow, at first she had looked for him, dreaded his appearance with mingled pain and pleasure. As the months went past she gave up the thought of his coming. She began to fancy that he must be dead.

[Pg 163]

Sometimes it all seemed to her like a feverish dream, those strange past days of love and pain; yet all the time she was drawing nearer and nearer to the fatal end of the year, to the moment when her hated master would claim her as his bride.

It was May now, and the world was all in bloom. Charles Farnham would be coming to claim his bride.

On the very day of Lady Landon's ball for Azalea, Mrs. Courtney received a letter commanding her to return at once to New York with her charge. Mrs. Courtney went at once to Nita in her room.

"Nita, I must break through your rule, never to mention your guardian's name to you. I have a letter from him."

Nita turned a pale face of fear and despair.

"A—letter!" she faltered; "so, then—he—he—is coming for—me?"

The white terror of her face was enough to move a heart of stone. Mrs. Courtney smiled

reassuringly.

"Do not look so frightened, Nita, there is no need, for he writes very kindly of you, and makes no mention of your marriage. Perhaps he means to forgive you and Dorian," she said, feeling magnanimous toward the girl now that Azalea's market was made.

Nita only sunk helplessly into a chair, her face white, her eyes wild. It seemed as if she could not reply. Mrs. Courtney, with her eyes on the letter, continued: [Pg 164]

"Mr. Farnham is quite well again, and wants me to hasten home with you. He says that he has bought and furnished a Fifth Avenue palace for you, with carriages and horses of the finest, and is most anxious to see you queening it in New York society. Indeed, Nita, after the training I have given you, it will be easy for you to do so"—complacently. "Really, my dear, the old man seems very proud and fond of you, and I never heard of a more generous guardian. You are a very fortunate girl, and I am sure you have only to ask him, and he will pardon you and Dorian."

"Ah! you do not know, you do not dream," moaned the girl, hiding her face in her hands.

Must she go? must she obey the old miser's command?

"This letter has been following us about for some time, and I must reply to it to-morrow," continued the lady. "What shall I say to him, Nita? That we will cross next week?"

"I will not go!" cried Nita, with a frantic gesture.

"But, really, Nita, I think we must go. I cannot understand this strange fear of your guardian. A young girl like you must obey either her guardian or her husband. You repudiate the claim of Dorian Mountcastle, and so you remain subject to the orders of Mr. Farnham."

"Let us speak no more of it now. I will decide to-morrow," Nita answered.

Mrs. Courtney knew that it was almost time to dress for the ball, so she retired, determined in her own mind that she would take Nita speedily back to New York and Fifth Avenue. [Pg 165]

"Our leaving now will force Sir George to ask Azalea to name the wedding-day," she thought sagely. "And Nita is so generous I think she will readily purchase the trousseau. The marriage can take place from the miser's place, and Sir George need never know how very poor we are."

CHAPTER XXV.

[Pg 166]

"LET US DIE TOGETHER."

"A gentleman to see Miss Farnham."

Nita was in her ball-dress. There were pearls and diamonds at her throat, and in the wavy masses of her hair.

"Who?" she asked carelessly.

"He did not send his card; he said to tell you a friend. He is waiting in the private parlor."

Nita thought carelessly that it was one of her many lovers come to lay heart and hand and fortune at her feet, and get the same answer she had given others:

"I have no love to give."

She had a tender heart, but it vexed her when men wooed her.

"I am no coquette. I do not encourage them. Why will they not leave me alone?" she thought impatiently.

And it was on her lips to decline to see the caller. The next moment she reflected that if she declined to-night he would come again to-morrow. The unpleasant moment was only deferred.

"I will go, I will have it over!" she exclaimed, and took up her bouquet.

"I will pretend that I am in a great hurry to start to the ball," she thought.

As she entered the parlor a man stood at an open window, breathing in the sweetness of the fair spring night. As Nita softly closed the door he came forward into the light, and stood revealed, tall, fair, handsome—Dorian Mountcastle! [Pg 167]

A thrilling heart-cry escaped from Nita's lips:

"Dorian!"

"Nita, my love, my bride!" cried the young man, and caught her in his arms, straining her fondly to his throbbing heart.

She did not resist him. How could she forego the ecstasy of that embrace, the warm, intoxicating sweetness of that kiss? For one moment she forgot the gulf between them. Her arms crept up about his neck and held him close and tenderly—her lips clung to his. Eden came back for a few moments to earth again. He pressed the beautiful form closely to his breast.

Ah, the gladness, the madness, after believing her dead and lost to him forever on earth, to find her once again, so beautiful, so tender, and so loving, alive in his arms. He drew her at last to a seat, and whispered lovingly:

"Speak to me, my darling. Let me be sure this is no dream!"

"No dream," she murmured happily, then asked, with a smile. "How came you to find me, Dorian?"

"My love, my bride, how beautiful you are," he murmured, "and to think that I believed you dead, drowned in the cruel sea!"

She gave a convulsive start, she drew back a little from him, the joy went out of her face. But there was a mist of actual tears—tears of joy—in Dorian's eyes, and he did not note the curious change on her face.

[Pg 168]

"Ah, Nita, how I have suffered!" he cried. "When they told me you were dead, and that it was your wraith I saw on the yacht that night at Fortune's Bay, I went mad with grief. They have told me that I tried to kill myself, that I raved like a madman. But I remembered nothing for weary days until the reawakening to memory of my loss. Ah, love, pardon me these wild words, but it seemed to me that without you I was in hell—in torment without hope of release! Then Van Hise brought me abroad, but, oh, the long, long months of dark despair that followed—I will not dwell on them, my darling, now that I have found you again. And is it not strange I was so long finding out the truth? You must have written me, of course, love. Is it not strange your letters did not reach me? And all the while, my precious one, you must have been wearying for me as I for you, is it not so, sweetheart?"

"In Norway one night some fellows with us were speaking of beautiful women they had met, and your name was mentioned, my darling—your old name, Nita Farnham. I was struck speechless with emotion, but Van Hise, my true friend, came to the rescue. He asked questions, he learned where you were—you and the Courtneys. The news seemed too good to be true, but Van Hise and I left the party and traveled night and day to reach London, and find out if it were really my bride given back to me from the dead. Thank God, thank God, it is true, we are reunited never to part again!"

But, to his amazement, she drew back from his proffered kiss, she recoiled a little from him, whispering in a frightened voice:

[Pg 169]

"Do not make too sure of that, Dorian!"

Mountcastle threw back his handsome head with a happy laugh.

"No coquetry, my darling, it is quite too late for that," he replied gaily. "You are all my own, you know, and now that I have found you I shall never leave you again."

His arm tightened about her waist, his eyes beamed adoring love into hers, but she trembled and gasped in deadly fear as he held her close. She loved him madly, adoringly, but her soul was as pure as a white rose-leaf, and she knew that to remain with Dorian would be deadly sin.

Oh, why had he found her here? why had they met again, only to part in despair? Better if he had gone on believing her dead, as she would, alas! be soon. No thought came to her that it might be best to confess all to Dorian, and ask him to help her out of her terrible strait. She did not know that anything but death could absolve her from her wifely vows to her husband. She understood his malignant nature well enough to know that he would pursue her to the ends of the earth if she tried to escape him. And in her stainless purity she would sooner have died than seek refuge from him in Dorian's arms.

"Oh, Dorian, Dorian, it breaks my heart to tell you," she sobbed; "but—but our marriage was all a mistake, I—I can never be your wife."

"Are you going mad, my darling? You are my wife already, you know," he replied wonderingly.

[Pg 170]

"No, Dorian, no; it was all a mistake, I tell you. I told you always that I could never marry you while my guardian lived. Captain Van Hise told me that night that he was dead, and so I consented to be married. But there was a mistake. Mr. Farnham was not dead. He lives—he claims me—so I cannot be yours."

Dorian Mountcastle laughed at her childish fears.

"His death or his life makes no difference now," he replied soothingly. "You belong to me alone, and no power on earth can take you from me. Perhaps he has some hold on your fortune. Is that what you mean? Let him have every penny, Nita. I have enough."

"Dorian, words are useless. I never can be yours. We must part."

He looked at her in amazement. He grew impatient at what he considered a silly whim.

"I do not understand all these silly fancies, Nita," he burst out angrily. "Perhaps you have ceased to love me, perhaps you have repented our marriage—is it so?"

"Yes, I repent it," she replied despairingly.

A flood of jealous rage poured like molten lava through his veins.

"You have met some one you love better?" he cried, in a voice so strange from excess of keen emotion that it did not sound like his own.

"No; ah, no, my love, my Dorian," she moaned, and suddenly flung herself at his feet. "Oh, I love you. I love you. I love you," she cried passionately, as she knelt there with upraised eyes.

[Pg 171]

Startled by her emotion, he stooped to raise her, but she resisted the effort.

"No; let me kneel here humbly at your feet and thank you for your love while I implore your

pardon for my weakness," she sobbed. "Oh, Dorian, there can never be any happiness for us, dearest, while Charles Farnham lives. If he were dead—if he were only dead—we might be happy. I wish that he had died that night when he was hurt. Oh, Dorian, he holds a power over me that you do not dream of. We must part, my own dear love, we must go our ways in life alone unless —"

She paused a moment, and searched his face with eager eyes.

"Ah, Dorian, do you love me very, very much?" she sighed.

"Better than the whole world, better than my own soul!" he answered fervently.

And a low sigh of gladness heaved her breast.

"A terrible temptation has come to me, Dorian. We love each other so well that life apart would be worse than death. And yet—yet—we must part. Oh, Dorian, let us foil our malignant fate. Let us die together."

Surely she must be going mad to talk in this strange fashion when there was nothing that could come between their wedded hearts, nothing that could keep them apart. He spoke to her soothingly, tenderly, but she only became more wildly agitated.

"Do you think that I talk strangely?" she cried. "Oh, Dorian, I have heard and read of lovers who died in each other's arms rather than live apart. Let us follow their example. A drop of poison—poison that will kill easily, you know—and, locked in each other's arms, we may drift together—always together, darling—into heaven or hell, or whatever home God gives to reckless, broken-hearted lovers. What say you, Dorian? Shall it be so?"

[Pg 172]

And she gazed wildly into his horrified face.

Dorian gazed in mingled grief and horror at the beautiful girl. Surely she must be mad, he thought. Then his heart sank. Had her love turned from him in their long months of separation?

Dorian had a passionately jealous nature, and the fear of Nita's fickleness once admitted to his mind, caught fire and burned like a devouring flame. The girl's eager, beseeching eyes beheld all at once a strange change pass over his fair, handsome face, and, rising, he pushed her from him, crying out angrily:

"I understand you, Nita. In the months of our separation you have wearied of me. Do not deny it, for I will not listen to your protestations. A moment ago I thought you must be mad, now I perceive that there is method in your madness. You chafe at the tie that binds us together. You would fain be free, so you pretend this baseless fear of your guardian. Fickle heart, you have wrecked my life! I adored you, but you found my love only a weariness. Well, take your freedom! I go, never to molest you again."

The white, crouching figure lifted a pallid, woful face, and moaned:

[Pg 173]

"Oh, Dorian, will you leave me? Must I die alone?"

"Die!" the husband sneered angrily. "No, you will live to make some other fool happy a while, as you did me, then throw him over in this heartless fashion!"

All Dorian's old cynical distrust of woman's love was returning, supplemented by jealous agony too deep for words. It seemed to him that Nita was simply playing a part, pretending this unreasoning dread of her guardian's anger.

"Dorian, my love, forgive my weakness!" pleaded Nita wildly; but his eyes flashed back only a limitless wrath and scorn.

"Forgive you! no—not while life lasts! But—farewell forever!"

Then the door opened and closed—Dorian was gone in anger, and Nita was alone with her despair, her heart breaking with its heavy burden.

Slowly and wearily she dragged herself back to her room. She was glad the maid was not there to see her pale, changed face and crumpled ball-gown. She closed the door, and mechanically removed the bitter traces of tears from her face and rearranged her dress.

"For I must not stay away from the ball. That shallow Azalea would think I envied her triumph," she thought in bitter pride, and as one goes to the stake she accompanied the Courtneys to Lady Landon's ball, never telling them that Dorian had sought her out, and that she had sent him away from her, reckless and broken-hearted.

[Pg 174]

But when Dorian read of it all in the next day's papers that praised the beauty of Miss Farnham, the lovely American, and told how the Earl of Winthrop had paid her such devoted attention, he smiled in bitter mockery.

"It is just as I thought—there is a tittle in the case, and she means to repudiate me. American girls all run wild over coronets nowadays," he said bitterly, to Captain Van Hise, to whom he had confided the story of Nita's strange behavior.

Van Hise was frankly puzzled. He had believed in beautiful Nita, and he would not give up his faith yet. He remembered the night of the marriage, how she had refused her consent until he had told her that the old miser was dead.

"There is something very strange here. I honestly believe in her professed dread of her guardian," he said thoughtfully. "And as for the tittle, Dorian, you know how we were told of her coldness and indifference to all her suitors. No, she cares for no one but you, but she will let her

guardian's influence wreck both your lives unless you take the matter frankly in hand. What say you? Shall we go home to New York, and have it out with the old miser? Beard the lion in his den, and find out the worst of his power. You consent? Good. We will sail this week."

Lady Landon's ball had indeed been a great success, and the Courtneys were highly elated over the admiration excited by Azalea's delicate blond beauty. Her future sister-in-law had been quite cordial, too, but in her secret heart she would have preferred the magnificent Nita with her calm manner and queenly beauty. She hinted as much to her brother, but he told her bitterly that Miss Farnham aspired to higher rank than a mere baronet, and the attentions of Lord Winthrop certainly lent color to the assertion.

[Pg 175]

The Courtneys were eager to return to the United States, whither they expected Sir George Merlin to follow them. They wanted to astonish their old set in New York with Azalea's grand match. Then, too, Mrs. Courtney did not desire to offend the old man who had ordered her with no uncertain sound to bring Nita home.

But her charge had set her face like a flint against returning. Rebellious and desperate thoughts were working in the young girl's mind. Why should she return to America? That was the question that tortured her night and day. She had resolved to die rather than live with her husband, and in a few more weeks the end of the year would come. A dreadful existence stretched before her—the price she must pay for this year of luxury—this year that might have been almost happy but for the madness of love that had come so suddenly and so irresistibly into her life.

"Oh, Dorian, Dorian, I loved you but to lose you—yet I cannot live without you—so I will end my life and its sorrows," she sobbed in the sleepless silence of the night. In her short, eventful life she had had few chances to make real friends, and she had no kins-people except old Meg Dineheart, who had declared herself on that first night at Pirate Beach to be her grandmother. For this reason Nita had protected her from arrest for her crimes, but she shuddered and grew heart-sick at the thought of sustaining any relationship to the wicked old hag, and often longed for a mother's love.

[Pg 176]

"I am alone in the world, with no right to love and happiness like other girls, and surely God will forgive me for ending my wretched life," she sobbed, and began to plan the way in which to end "life's fitful fever."

Mrs. Courtney thought it a strange whim when, instead of attending the opera one evening, Nita went to church. She knew afterward the meaning of the fancy she had combated all in vain. Nita went to church to pray and ask God's pardon for the wicked deed she was about to commit.

She smiled in mournful mockery when her worldly-minded chaperon tried to argue her out of going.

"Dear Mrs. Courtney, I can take my maid; I need not deprive you of the pleasure," she said sadly. "But as for me, I do not care for music to-night. I would rather hear some godly words and prayers."

"It is time enough for piety when you are old and gray," the woman said cynically, and Nita gave her a strange, sad glance.

"What if I do not live to grow old—if I die in my early youth?" she queried.

Mrs. Courtney shrugged her shoulders without replying; but after Nita had gone out, she said significantly to Azalea.

"I think she is suffering from a temporary aberration of the mind. You have noticed how quiet, almost morose, she has been lately. I shall take her home to her guardian without delay. There must be something wrong with her mind, the way she has carried on since she married Dorian."

[Pg 177]

But Nita had her way and went to church, and if ever a tortured soul, about to launch itself into eternity, prayed earnestly for the pity and pardon of Heaven, she did that night.

And the next morning Mrs. Courtney had a shock that she never forgot till her dying day. Nita's maid came rushing into her room with a pallid face and staring eyes.

"Oh, madam, I've found Miss Farnham dead in her bed with a bottle of poison by her side!" she almost shrieked.

CHAPTER XXVI.

[Pg 178]

"YOU SHALL KNOW THE SECRET."

In a shabby third-story room of a cheap apartment-house in New York, old Miser Farnham was sitting alone. The hideous old man was, if possible, even more forbidding than on that day in Central Park when the unhappy Nita had shuddered at the first sight of him, then yielded to his temptations, and became his reluctant bride.

The leering hideousness of his face a year ago was increased now by several livid scars received in the railway accident that had almost cost him his life, and his stooping frame was lean and gaunt, his shabby clothing hanging loosely on him.

Thin, grizzled locks straggled over his brow under the worn old hat that he wore habitually in-

doors and out, and his keen, gray eyes gleamed with a diabolical light of triumph as they scanned the pages of a letter received several days previous from Mrs. Courtney.

"So she is coming home, my lovely bride," he chuckled to himself. "Coming home, and it lacks barely two weeks to the day when I shall claim her for my own. I wonder if she has come to her senses yet, and if she has concluded that life as an old man's darling with unlimited cash is better than the deep, dark river."

"More beautiful than ever, with a score of titled lovers," he read from Mrs. Courtney's sycophantic letter. "Ha, ha! to think of carrying her off from them all. To think of marrying Juan de Castro's daughter. It is a wonder he does not rise from the grave! Ugh! what if he should"—and he shrank and cowered in sudden fear, whining out—"I do not believe in ghosts."

[Pg 179]

The miser had one weakness. He believed in the supernatural, and feared it. Many a night he cowered beneath the counterpane, with his hand before his eyes, afraid to look out into the dark lest he encounter some menacing ghost from a wicked past.

The old man had reached the acme of his plans and hopes and ambitions. His marriage to Nita had secured things that else were doubtful. Let her but come now willingly or unwillingly to his arms, and the triumph of his life would be achieved.

He chuckled in fiendish glee, remembering these things, and thinking of the life he would lead with Nita, for he determined that then he would throw off his miserly habits and live in splendor.

What though all New York had sneered at Farnham, the miser, it would open its doors to the millionaire with the beautiful bride for whom titled lovers had sighed in vain, and with whom one of the richest men in New York had eloped in his yacht, creating the greatest sensation of the hour.

Yes, society would rave over her wealth and her beauty; and, by and by—if she used him well—perhaps it might be discovered that the unknown waif had descended from rich and high-born parents. Yes, this was just possible, if Nita should be kind to him. If she were not, if she were not—and he ground his teeth—woe to the heiress, her fate be on her own head.

[Pg 180]

Just then there came a swift and loud rat-tat upon his door. Visitors to Miser Farnham were things unknown. He started up, trembling. Again there sounded a loud, impatient knock. He advanced with faltering steps and threw open the door.

Before him stood two men. He had seen them both before, and as they stepped over the threshold of the room he confronted them with a snarl of hate.

"I know you both, Captain Van Hise and Mr. Mountcastle. What is your business with me?" he queried curtly.

Van Hise laughed sarcastically at this cool reception.

"Mr. Farnham, you certainly come to the point at once," he exclaimed airily, "so we will not delay what we came for. You know this gentleman, of course, as the husband of your lovely ward, Miss Farnham?"

He nodded at Dorian, and the old miser scowled.

"I have heard of the gentleman," he said angrily.

"Very well. Mr. Farnham, we have come here to ask if you have any objection to him as your ward's husband."

Dorian, with his hat in his hand, stepped in front of the old man, and gazed earnestly into his face.

What a contrast they presented, these two, Dorian in his fair beauty, and the grotesquely ugly, snarling old miser.

Van Hise's courteous question shook the old man with jealous rage, and he asked sullenly:

[Pg 181]

"What can my objections matter since he is already her husband? If the bond is a legal one, I have no power to break it."

Then Dorian spoke.

"We know that," he said in a troubled voice, yet with a frank, manly, half-appealing air. "Yet, strange to say, sir, my bride stands in such mysterious fear of your displeasure that she refuses to live with me—throws me off as if I had no claim on her loyalty."

"You have seen Nita? When?" queried Farnham, with a grin.

"In London, barely a week ago—our first interview since our marriage-night—and I sailed the next day to see you."

"To see me! Why? If she repudiates the marriage, what can I do?" insolently.

"You can remove the mysterious barrier you have placed between my darling's heart and mine. She loves me, but she fears you with a strange, unreasoning terror. She has told me that only for the report of your death she would not have married me at all. My God, sir! what is the secret of your malign power over the hapless girl?" demanded the unhappy young husband stormily.

Farnham glared back at him with a savage fury, as though he would be glad to rend him limb from limb. He put his clenched hands behind him, as though to restrain the wild beast in him.

"So you acknowledge my power over your bride? You would like to know the secret of it?" he

[Pg 182]

hissed in a voice of exultant malice.

"Yes," groaned Dorian in a hollow voice.

And for a few moments there was silence. The miser took a few slow, meditative turns up and down the room. Suddenly, he turned back to Dorian, and said:

"You wish to know the secret of my power over Nita? Very well. I cannot gratify you to-night, but I will appoint a day not far distant for the important disclosure."

"But, my dear sir, my friend is positively ill with suspense, and the sooner you gratify his desire the sooner can the barrier to his happiness be removed," interposed Captain Van Hise suavely.

Farnham turned on him with a grim smile.

"You think the barrier can be removed, eh? We shall see," he said, laughing sardonically; then added: "Gladly would I gratify Mr. Mountcastle's wish to-night. In fact, I should be delighted to do so, but I am not at liberty to reveal the secret. I am bound by a solemn contract not to speak of it for one year. That year, gentlemen, expires on the tenth day of June—barely a week hence."

"We must wait, then," Dorian said, with a suppressed sigh, turning to go.

"One moment!" exclaimed the miser, lifting a detaining hand as he continued:

"When you came in I was reading a letter from Mrs. Courtney, in which she writes me that she will bring Nita home at once—in fact, will meet me at Pirate Beach the tenth of June, for the transaction of some very important business between my ward and myself. Gentlemen, I invite you also to meet me on the evening of the tenth of June, at my seaside home, Gray Gables, at Pirate Beach. You shall hear then, from Nita's own lips, the story of the barrier between your hearts, and then you can judge better if it be removable. Will you come?"

[Pg 183]

"We will come," they both answered in a breath, and bowed themselves out, full of wonder and consternation, for the old miser's manner had impressed them both with grim forebodings.

The tide was coming in with its low, murmurous monotone, washing the silvery sands at Pirate Beach, and the moon was rising full-orbed and majestic, lighting the twilight scene into weird beauty.

It was the tenth of June, the fatal anniversary of Nita's marriage to the old miser—the anniversary of her meeting with Dorian, the one love of her life.

Up at Gray Gables lights flashed from all the windows, and rumor said that the travelers had come home. Far up the beach old Meg Dineheart was pacing back and forth, watching for her son's bark, that had been absent several months.

"Will Jack ever come home again, I wonder? It seems a year since he went," she muttered, with a touch of forlornness, for the one affection of her lonely life was big, burly Jack, her handsome, wicked son. She had been expecting him now for several days, and was growing uneasy and impatient at his strange delay. Suddenly, a rude hand gripped her shoulder, and whirled her around face to face with Farnham.

[Pg 184]

"Good evening, old lady! 'Pon my soul, you look quite romantic star-gazing here alone," he exclaimed gibingly.

"So you're back, you devil!" she hissed. "What fiend's errand are you on now, I wonder?"

"To ask you to congratulate me on my success in achieving the great ambition of my life, Meg."

"I don't know what you mean, Farnham."

"No, but I am here to tell you that the propitious fates have brought to me an hour of glorious triumph, and rewarded all my schemings with success. Come inside the house, and let me tell you the sequel of the story you heard one year ago to-night."

She turned toward the cabin, the old miser following closely, and neither noticed that Jack Dineheart's trim fishing-boat had come into sight, and was riding into anchor close to shore. When the door had closed upon the wicked pair of plotters, the sailor rowed over to land in a tiny little boat, and sprang lightly up the beach toward his mother's cabin.

"Poor old soul, I wonder if she's yet alive," he pondered.

And, stepping lightly to the smoke-grimed old window of the cabin, he peered through with bated breath for a sight of old Meg. He recoiled with a stifled cry just as Nita had done a year ago that night, for the self-same sight met his startled eyes.

[Pg 185]

Old Meg and Miser Farnham were seated by a table in earnest conversation.

"Humph! hatching some new mischief, I suppose," muttered Jack, bending his ear to a convenient knot-hole in order to catch their words.

The sea boomed on the shore, the moonlight silvered the waves, the wind sighed eerily round the old cabin, and the words that Jack Dineheart heard that hour paved the way for a fateful tragedy.

"You say that Nita has come home to Gray Gables, yet how can that be?" cried Meg. "It was only yesterday that I was up there, and Mrs. Hill, the old housekeeper, was wringing her hands and crying because she had seen in a New York paper several days old that Nita had killed herself in

a London hotel by taking poison."

"It was true—and false," answered Farnham angrily. "I had a letter from Mrs. Courtney telling me all about it. She drank laudanum, and it threw her into a deep sleep. At first they thought she was dead, but a physician succeeded in rousing and restoring her to life, although she has been in a strange, dazed state ever since, and it is thought that she may never recover from the effects of the drug she used. But Mrs. Courtney telegraphed me this morning that they had arrived in New York from Europe, and would proceed immediately to Gray Gables."

Old Meg listened with keen interest to every word, then exclaimed:

[Pg 186]

"If Nita had committed suicide in the old, wretched days when she was my hard-worked slave I should not have wondered at it, but it puzzles me that she should attempt it now when she is rich and happy as old Farnham's ward."

With a gulp of rage he answered:

"I will tell you why she wished to die. She was married to a man she hated so much that she would die rather than live with him."

"Hated that handsome swell that she eloped with? I don't believe it. The girl loved the very ground he walked on!" cried Meg.

"Yes, she loved Dorian Mountcastle, but he was not her husband," answered the old man. "Listen, Meg, to one of the strangest stories you ever heard."

And, slowly, and with infinite gusto, as though he enjoyed the telling, he related to her the story of that day in Central Park when he had wooed and won beautiful Nita for his reluctant bride. She listened like one turned to stone; not a syllable escaped her, and he ended with ghoulish glee.

"As her husband all of Juan de Castro's wealth is legally mine. I can take open possession of it now, and if questions should be asked I can point to my bride, his daughter, as the lawful heiress."

She started from her trance of silence muttering hoarsely:

"You—you promised to marry me when you took possession of the spoil."

[Pg 187]

"Be patient, Meg. She will not live long, you ought to know that well. You have known some people who hated me, and then died mysteriously, did they not? Well, this girl, this dark-eyed beauty, she loathes me, and some day—not far distant, perhaps—I shall take deadly revenge for her scorn. But, first, to force her to my arms, to humble her haughty spirit, and break her proud heart. Then your turn will come, Meg. Be patient and wait."

"You are deceiving me, Farnham. You love the daughter as you loved the mother. You will never kill Juanita de Castro when she looks at you with her mother's eyes. You will grovel at her feet for a word of kindness, and Jack and I—Jack, your son, for whose sake I crave the treasure—we will be thrust aside, forgotten! No, no, you traitor, we will not," she rose up and shook her clawlike hands in his face, "no, we will not be trodden upon! We will have revenge, Jack and I will betray you."

He grasped and shook her violently till the breath was almost out of her body, then flung her roughly back into her seat.

"You cat who did my bidding—you and your villainous son—how dare you threaten me? One word from me and you both would swing from a scaffold!" he hissed furiously. "Hold your cursed tongue, or beware of my vengeance!" and with an oath he left the house and took his way toward Gray Gables.

Meg crouched like one dazed in a chair where her assailant had flung her, but Jack Dineheart did not go in to see if she were dead or alive. He followed the miser almost to the gate of Gray Gables with a stealthy, sullen stride, then, suddenly, flung himself on him with resistless fury, and bore him down to the ground.

[Pg 188]

"Oh, you wretch, you devil, to have married *her*, the girl you promised in her bonny childhood should be mine, my wife! Oh, you fiend, to take her from me! But I will save poor Nita and avenge myself. Here at the gates of fancied bliss, you die."

A keen blade flashed in the air, then sunk in the man's breast.

CHAPTER XXVII.

[Pg 189]

THE TENTH OF JUNE.

It was true, as the old miser had told Meg Dineheart, Nita had been saved from death by the skilful efforts of a London physician, and in the stupid, weakened state induced by the drug she had taken, and the measures used to counteract its effects, she was like wax in Mrs. Courtney's hands, so that she was brought home with scarcely a protest.

In fact, she was so ill that during the whole voyage to New York she scarcely remembered the old miser's existence, and the dreadful fact that the year of her marriage-contract was drawing to its

close.

When she was taken to Gray Gables some glimmerings of memory returned to her, but she did not remember that it was the fatal tenth of June.

It was May when she made the frantic effort to end her life. Since then, in the pangs of keen physical distress, time had slipped by unheeded.

It was touching to see the joy of good Mrs. Hill at the return of her beloved young mistress. She wept with joy, and hugged Nita close to her motherly bosom, kissing the top of the drooping little head, with its crown of dark, wavy tresses, threaded with gold.

She did not say one word to her of the story she had read in the New York paper, but when she looked into the pale and lovely face she knew that the shadow of some pathetic sorrow had fallen darkly on the young girl's heart. [Pg 190]

Nita lay wearily on a sofa until it was time to dress for dinner. Then Mrs. Hill came up to help her, for her English maid had not accompanied her home.

"It does not matter what I wear," she said listlessly.

"But Mrs. Courtney expects company this evening, I think," said Mrs. Hill.

"It does not matter," the girl again replied wearily, her eyes full of tears.

But Mrs. Hill had excellent taste, and she laid out a dainty white gown for her young lady.

"I may be old-fashioned in my notions, but to my mind a young girl always looks best in white, and to you, Miss Nita, it's wonderfully becoming," she said, as she shook out the soft, shining robe of feather-light Lansdowne, with its profuse, airy trimmings of white, embroidered chiffon. "This is pretty enough for a bride," she said admiringly. "Won't you wear your moonstone jewelry with it, Miss Nita? It will suit you so well, and I will bring you some pale-pink roses and white jasmine flowers for your corsage. The garden is beautiful now, since the gardener had it in charge. You know last year when we first came it was all of a tangle."

So she rambled on, and listless Nita let her have her way, and barely looked in her mirror when the good woman said enthusiastically:

"Now you are finished, dearie. Look in the glass what a beauty you are!"

She was a beauty. The soft, shining robe draped her form exquisitely, and the filmy chiffon rufflings made a soft mist about her lovely half-bare neck and arms that were clasped with moonstones, set in frosted silver, looking soft and fairylike as linked moonbeams. [Pg 191]

On her breast heaved a cluster of starry-white jasmine flowers mixed with pale-pink, half-opened rose-buds, making a delicate contrast of color with the whiteness of her costume.

Beautiful, yes—but with a tragedy of sorrow in the midnight eyes and on the pathetic curves of the exquisitely chiseled lips. She smiled faintly, and murmured some words of thanks, then went down-stairs.

The drawing-room, wearing a holiday air, with profuse decorations of flowers, was deserted as yet. Azalea and her mother were still dressing. With a sigh of relief Nita turned her footsteps to the garden, that, under the care of a gardener had been rescued from the tangle of last year, and made into a fairyland of beauty and fragrance.

Nita walked slowly along the graveled paths, now in the full beams of the rising moon, now in the long dark shadows of the tall fir-trees.

She paused to rest by the fountain where last year she had come with her lover's letter in her bosom, and her wild heart thrilling with pain and rapture. A sob swelled her throat as she lifted her sad gaze to the star-gemmed sky, and murmured:

"Dorian, my love, Dorian, it breaks my heart to know that you are lost to me forever!"

"Your Dorian is here, darling Nita," answered a voice by her side, and his arm drew her fondly to his breast. [Pg 192]

A low, shuddering cry, and Nita struggled out of those fond, clasping arms, and faced her lover with startled eyes.

"Dorian," she breathed, in mingled joy and pain—"Dorian, oh, why are you here?"

"I followed you, my sweet. Ah, Nita, I know the story of your mad attempt to end your life. Love, love, why did you do it?"

"Fate was against us, Dorian, and I could not live without you, I begged you to die with me, but you were cruel. Life was more to you than love. That is a man's way. But, being only a weak woman, I chose death—only they were so hard they would not let me die."

Her voice sank into his heart.

"Oh, my poor, little love. I did not believe your wild words. How could I think you would try to end so sweet a life?" he cried, but Nita did not reply; she only gazed at him with the fixity of despair.

"Nita, I distrusted you that night. I spoke cruelly to you. Will you forgive me my harshness, my dear wife?"

"Oh, not that word—not that!" and Nita shrank and shivered, drawing back as he approached her. "Oh, Dorian, do not think of me, nor speak to me as your wife ever again," she continued wildly.

"Remember that grim old man—remember Miser Farnham, Dorian. Have I not told you I never can be your wife while he lives! Oh, why does Heaven permit such wretches to walk the earth, a barrier to the happiness of true lovers?" and she wrung her hands despairingly.

[Pg 193]

"Do not give up like this to your sorrow, my darling," he said soothingly, "for I believe that the mysterious barrier to our happiness will soon be removed. I do not like to fight with shadows, Nita, so after my interview with you in London, I came to New York to see your guardian, and ask him frankly what was the secret of his objection to your marriage."

"You asked him—that?" Nita faltered in an indescribable tone.

"Yes, dearest, for it seemed best to know his reasons and combat them in a practical fashion."

"But he did not tell you—he dare not yet!" she muttered, rather to herself than him.

"He did not tell me then, but he made an appointment to meet me here to-night, the tenth of June—when he said I should hear the secret, Nita, from your own lips."

He never forgot the awful look on Nita's lovely face. It was convulsed with agony and deadly fear.

"To-night," she muttered hoarsely—"to-night, the tenth of June—oh, how could I forget that day—of all days in the world? And he—is coming here to-night?" The voice did not sound like her own.

"Yes, Nita; and bade me meet him here with my friend, Van Hise, who went with me to see him. Mrs. Courtney told me you were in the garden, so I left my friend with her and came to seek you here. Farnham will be here presently, and soon the worst will be over. Courage, sweetheart; you are my wife, after all, and he cannot really keep us apart!"

[Pg 194]

But it seemed as if she had forgotten him. Her form trembled like a reed in the wind, her eyes were fixed upon the ground, she muttered hoarsely:

"It is diabolical! That old fiend has planned his triumph with cold-blooded malice! How he will exult in my shame and despair! I cannot bear it—no, no, no!" And with the spring of a startled fawn, Nita flew past her lover, a vanishing white shape, toward the garden-gate.

Dorian stood like one stunned a moment, then followed in swift pursuit. But he was suddenly arrested by an outstretched arm.

"Where are you flying to, Dorian?" demanded Captain Van Hise, who had just come out to look for his friend.

"Do not detain me, Van Hise. I am following Nita, who has just fled from me in some strange alarm. She went out at the garden-gate. Come! let us pursue her, for I fear her terrors will lead her into something dreadful," faltered Dorian, dragging his friend with him in pursuit of the flying girl.

But the slight delay had given her the advantage of them. She flew like the wind along the sands, flying from the degradation that she could not face, flying to seek refuge in the deep, dark sea from her wretched life and its crowding ills.

They could never have overtaken her, she had gained too much the start of them, and terror lent wings to her feet, but—suddenly she stumbled and fell prostrate over an inert body lying directly in her path.

[Pg 195]

In her frenzied flight she had not perceived it, but now—now, as she struggled to rise again, a startled cry shrilled over her lips.

She comprehended the ghastly truth—here, almost at the gates of Gray Gables, murder had been done! Recoiling with a strangled cry, she looked down at the body at her feet—the ugly, twisted body, the hideous face, the evil eyes set in a ghastly stare of death. On the instant she recognized him—Miser Farnham!

He was dead—murdered almost at the gates of Gray Gables, while on his way to claim his bride, to score his horrid triumph and break two loving hearts. It was a dastardly deed, and fate or retribution had met him on his way.

But who had done that awful deed? Some enemy, of course—perhaps the wicked old fortune-teller. But, though she trembled and shuddered, it came to her with a thrill of joy that now she was free—now Dorian need never know the secret of which she was so bitterly ashamed—that she had been for one cruel year a wife in name to the wicked miser.

She would fly back to the house—she would steal up to her own room and remove the white dress with its blood-stains where she had slipped and fallen on the body. No one should know that she had found the murdered man there.

With a stifled moan she turned to retrace her steps, and—ran almost into the arms of the two men coming in pursuit. In the near distance they had seen her kneeling there, they came up just as she turned to fly.

[Pg 196]

"Who is this? What is this?" cried the soldier, bending down over the body at his feet.

Nita answered with a hysterical sob:

"Look, I found him lying here when I was flying to cast myself in the sea. It is—it is—my guardian—and some one has—murdered—him!" with the last words she shuddered violently, and fell unconscious at Dorian's feet.

He lifted her up in his arms, and his hands were wet with the blood-spatters on her white gown—the bridelike robe that looked so stainless when she stood there by the fountain a few minutes

ago.

"I will carry her up to the house, Van Hise, and you had better remain here by the body until I send some one back to help remove it," he said, in a shaken voice, turning away.

At that moment there appeared on the scene the hobbling form of Meg, the fortune-teller. After a few moments of unconsciousness she had come to herself in the lonely cabin, and curiosity had induced her to follow the old miser up to Gray Gables.

She stopped short with a shrill cry, and, stooping down, examined the dead, drawing back with a shudder as her hand became wet with blood.

"Ugh! it is the old miser—and murdered! Who has done this?" she croaked dismally.

Van Hise explained to her that he did not know anything about it, that Miss Farnham found the body there but a moment ago. [Pg 197]

"And it is not more than half an hour since he left my cabin alive and well, going up to Gray Gables to keep an important appointment with Nita," croaked the old woman. She looked after the retreating form of Dorian, and sneered:

"Perhaps she grew impatient and came out to meet the old man, did she not?"

"She came out alone, certainly, but for what purpose I cannot tell," answered the puzzled soldier, who had never seen old Meg before, and he added:

"I know nothing about the matter except that she was very unhappy and excited, and my friend and I followed her as fast as we could, fearing she might commit some desperate deed."

"Some desperate deed, ha, ha! yes, and so she did!" shrieked the old crone, in horrid glee. "She met the old man she feared and hated, and she murdered him—murdered him so that he should not betray her secret!"

"Woman, woman! how dare you utter such a fiendish lie!" exclaimed the soldier angrily.

He sprang forward as though to strike her down, but she eluded him, and drew a glittering knife to defend herself.

"Lay but a finger on old Meg, and you will be stretched out there by the miser's side," she menaced, and again laughing a horrible laugh, she continued:

"She murdered him, I say it again, and before twenty-four hours go over her head she shall lie in prison for her crime! Ah! she thinks her secret safe now, but barely an hour ago he told me she had been his wife in secret for a year, and that he was going there to claim her to-night!" [Pg 198]

Stiff and stark in his last long sleep, Miser Farnham lay in his coffin awaiting burial—this was the end of his plotting and planning—his scheming and sinning.

The inquest was over, and Meg Dineheart, as chief witness, had hounded the hapless girl she hated to a terrible fate. Circumstantial evidence had pointed so strongly to Nita as the slayer of the miser, that she had been consigned to prison to await trial for murder.

There were few who could believe in the young girl's innocence, for the evidence against her was so overwhelmingly strong, and the motive for the murder so plain. And there were not lacking witnesses to prove that the girl had been desperate with despair and misery.

The Courtneys were the first to turn against her, and as witnesses they did their worst. They could tell the story from the beginning of Nita's falling in love with another man, and her fear and hatred of the miser; they could tell of the elopement, of the return, and of Nita's desperate despair and frantic grief when she learned that the miser had survived the dreadful railway accident. They could dwell with telling effect on her wickedness in encouraging Dorian's love when she was another man's wife, they could dilate on the attempted suicide in London.

All their stifled hatred of the girl who had benefited them could be aired now, and without one word of pity for her sorrows, they became old Meg's able allies in hounding her to her doom. [Pg 199]

Even Dorian and Captain Van Hise had been compelled to give damning evidence against Nita. They had found her kneeling and then trying to escape from the murdered man's side, her dress and her hands all wet with the blood.

And there was no one else near, no one until old Meg had appeared. All the evidence given at the inquest had pointed straight to Nita's guilt, and there seemed but one extenuating circumstance—it seemed as if she must have suffered for months from emotional insanity.

In a moment of madness, enraged by the knowledge that her husband had contrived a cunning plot to expose her secret and humiliate her in the eyes of the man she madly loved, she had met the old man coming to Gray Gables, and in her blind rage sprang at him and murdered him.

The weapon had not been found, but it was decided to have been a very keen-bladed knife, and there were two wounds in the region of the heart that must either one have proved instantly fatal.

Doubtless she had thrown the knife away, although careful search had failed to find it. But that was not strange. The encroaching tide, of course, had carried it out to sea.

Only three friends rallied round her, only three hearts believed in her innocence—they were

Dorian, Van Hise, and kindly Mrs. Hill. It was this only that saved her from utter heart-break.

[Pg 200]

With Dorian to believe in her still, Dorian to love her and champion her cause, there was still a little gleam of light in the awful darkness of her fate.

And Dorian, when he engaged the best lawyer in New York to defend her, had told him that he was willing to sacrifice his fortune and his life in her defense.

"Oh, sir, I am not guilty—I am not guilty!" she cried piteously, lifting her great, appealing eyes to the face of the great lawyer, as he entered her gloomy prison-cell.

"I shall prove your innocence—be sure of that," he answered kindly, and then he bade her speak to him without reserve, confiding all her story to his sympathy, that he might best judge how to defend her cause.

And Nita opened all her sad young heart freely and without reserve. From early childhood, as far back as she could remember, her home had been with old Meg, at her rude cabin by the seashore, an unwilling, ill-treated drudge, beaten and cuffed at every small rebellion of her proud spirit.

At length she grew to girlhood, and then Jack Dineheart, old Meg's son, began to persecute her with offers of marriage. She hated Jack, and at fifteen years old ran away to New York to escape his persecutions.

Providence watched over the friendless girl, and she soon found friends, poor, but kind, who took her into their shabby home, and helped her to find work.

For three years she struggled on bravely, first as a nurse-girl, then in a store, as a cash-girl. Then the good old man who, with his kind wife, had befriended her, fell sick and died. His wife, old and feeble, soon followed him to the grave.

[Pg 201]

Nita left the store to attend these sick friends, and the usual lot of the poor in a great, struggling city, fell to her share. Every penny gone, the few sticks of furniture taken for rent, she was turned into the streets, starving and friendless. She could find no work; she was too proud to beg, so she resolved to end her sorrows in the river.

"I lingered in Central Park watching the gay throngs so rich and happy, while I was starving and miserable. I had resolved not to die until sunset," she told the lawyer. "I clung to life, but I was afraid of a night in the streets of the great city, and I was too timid and ashamed to ask strangers for assistance. Then I met the old miser just as I had murmured a desperate prayer for gold. He offered to marry me, and at first I refused. But he finally told me that if I would consent he would give me a chest of gold, and draw up a marriage-contract giving me perfect liberty for one year. I consented; but, oh, sir, I was deceiving him—I never meant to live with him. I only caught at the chance of a little longer life, and luxury that I craved, but had never known."

The lawyer listened to her in the deepest pity, drawing her out with skilful questions. He thought he had never heard anything more pathetic than the story of her love for Dorian, told so frankly and sadly as though he had been her father.

"And have you no relatives, my child?" he asked, and she told him that old Meg had once said that she was cast up by the sea from a wreck, and had afterward claimed to be her grandmother.

[Pg 202]

"But I do not believe her. My heart shrinks in loathing from that wicked woman. I believe that she and Mr. Farnham knew all my past story, and all about my relatives," added Nita passionately.

"I think you are right, and I shall leave no stone unturned to ferret out the truth and punish the real murderer," said the lawyer; and when he took his leave he left a little ray of hope shining like a star in the heart of the beautiful prisoner in her lonely cell.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

[Pg 203]

THE OTHER CLAIMANT.

The sensation was three days old before it came to Donald Kayne's knowledge. He had been out on one of his favorite yachting expeditions. Wild, restless, moody, he loved the sea, with its fierce unrest. It seemed like his own nature, restless and stormy.

He came back to New York, and, taking up a newspaper at his club, was attracted by some sensational headlines at the top of a column, and proceeded to read the whole story with breathless interest.

It came upon him like a terrible shock. Within the hour he was on his way to Pirate Beach. When he came in sight of Gray Gables, he beheld a funeral cortège moving away from its doors. Miser Farnham was being borne to the graveyard to his eternal rest, followed by old Meg Dineheart as chief mourner.

By the side of the old woman rode her son, the burly sailor who had come into port a few hours previous, and professed to be quite shocked at the news of the murder.

To several persons he professed profound regret, saying that the miser had been a lifelong friend of his mother, and had often befriended himself, having made him a present of his little fishing-bark.

Donald Kayne watched the funeral procession winding its solemn way along the sands, then rode on to Gray Gables to see the Courtneys.

They met him with effusion. They had much to tell him of that shocking girl, Nita; how badly she had treated her old husband, and how she had deceived poor Dorian Mountcastle. And they did not fail to tell him of Azalea's engagement to the titled Englishman, who was soon to follow her to the United States.

[Pg 204]

Donald Kayne listened eagerly to everything. At the end of it all he offered Azalea his polite congratulations, and asked if Dorian had turned against Nita, or if he believed in her still. When they told him that Dorian believed in her still, and had employed a lawyer to defend her at the trial, his face changed, and he said warmly:

"Dorian was always noble."

Then they tried to draw him out, to find out what he thought of the case, but he would not say one word either way. He was entirely non-committal. They were piqued, remembering his old enmity against Nita, and his threats of revenge. Surely he ought to rejoice now at the proud girl's fall.

"Where is Dorian now?" he asked, and they told him that Dorian and Captain Van Hise had taken quarters near the jail where Nita was confined, that they might visit her every day. They had tried to get her out on bail, but had been refused.

"You have been to see her?" he asked, knowing well what the answer would be.

"My dear Mr. Kayne, a murderess!" and Mrs. Courtney lifted her aristocratic hands in dismay.

"That remains to be proven, you know!" he said quietly, and arose to take leave.

[Pg 205]

They pressed him to remain, but he told them he wanted to see old Meg again. He might return in the evening. He went slowly through the grounds, haunted by the memory of the apparition he had seen on his last visit to Gray Gables. Was it real, or a phantasm of a tortured fancy? He could not decide.

"Oh, Pepita, Pepita! only to unravel the mystery of your fate, and the mystery of your flight, what would I not give?" he groaned.

He loitered on the lonely shore. The surf rolled up to his feet with a hollow murmur, and receded. Far off, the tapering white sails of an outwardbound ship glimmered on the horizon like a fading hope, and was lost to sight.

He was well armed this time, and carried a goodly store of gold, believing that both were necessary to the success of his mission to old Meg. Suddenly, the sunset light faded out, and the sky grew dark with storm-clouds, while a fast-rising gale began to toss the waves into hurrying foam.

"Ah! a little bit of a storm. I must hasten my steps," he thought, and walked on briskly, but it grew dark ere he reached the cabin, and the sound of voices from the open doorway arrested his steps.

"She is talking to some one. I will wait," he decided, drawing back, and then he heard:

"If we play our cards well, Jack, she will certainly be hanged, and we can manage to claim all the money."

"But what about the other claimant, mom?—the woman you told me of that came here almost fifteen years ago in search of the little Nita, that you hid until she was gone? What if she turns up and unearths the whole plot? She would get all, for old Farnham said she was Juan de Castro's own sister."

[Pg 206]

"She will never turn up, Jack, for she followed the miser up to Gray Gables, and I believe he murdered her, for she has never been seen since, and there was a man here not many months ago who offered me untold gold if I would tell him aught of the missing woman."

At those portentous words from the old fortune-teller to her son, Donald Kayne reeled backward with a smothered cry of agony.

For almost fifteen years a little spark of hope had glowed faintly in his heart. Surely, surely, he would some day find the woman once so madly loved and so strangely lost out of his life!

Alas! old Meg's revelation to her son had trampled out the last spark of hope. No need of his gold to buy her secret now. It was his for nothing.

So Pepita had come to Pirate Beach in search of a child—of Nita? What was the child to her that she had risked so much and suffered death for its sake? In learning so much of the missing woman, Donald Kayne had stumbled upon another mystery. Old Meg had spoken of a plot. Who were the actors concerned in it?

She had spoken of a treasure, too, that she and her son might claim if Nita were hanged. What was it? Where was it? And who was Nita? No one could believe that she was anything to the old wretch who had accused her to the authorities of the miser's murder.

[Pg 207]

His thoughts flew to the hapless girl at whose feet he had prayed in vain for the secret of the serpent-ring. His mind grew clearer now, and seemed to pierce the mystery.

The miser had murdered Pepita—so Meg believed. Then he had given Nita the serpent-ring, and no doubt bound her by a promise not to betray the giver.

And Pepita! What had been her fate? Where was she now? Were her unburied bones whitening in some unknown vault at Gray Gables? It came to him suddenly that it must be so, for that night when she had appeared to him she had vanished into air against the basement wall.

"She is there, and I will pull down every stone in that old house but what I will find my darling," he groaned, and as these thoughts flashed through his mind he heard Jack Dineheart continuing:

"A man offered you money for the secret, you say? I hope you were not such a fool as to betray it."

"Not I—I was too sharp for that," grinned Meg, and then Donald Kayne knew that but for the information he had gathered by accident, he would never have been able to learn the secret of Pepita's fate.

He silently thanked Heaven that had sent him there so opportunely to hear the conversation that was not intended for his ears. He lingered, hoping to hear more, but the lowering storm-clouds suddenly poured out a torrent of rain, and Jack, muttering a curse on the elements, arose and shut the cabin door.

[Pg 208]

Donald Kayne, drenched to the skin, staggered away from the place, buffeted by the mad elements, but almost unconscious of it all in the excitement of his mind.

He was thinking profoundly of all that he had heard, and muttered fiercely again:

"I will tear down every stone at Gray Gables but what I will find my darling, and give her poor bones decent burial, so that at last she may rest in peace in her lonely grave."

Heedless of the warring elements, and with his heart on fire with pain, he trudged on toward his hotel, not caring to claim the hospitality of Gray Gables in his present drenched condition.

The secret he had just heard had given a new, remorseful impetus to his thoughts. They were painfully divided between Pepita dead and Nita living. What connection was there between the two women, and what wrong had Nita suffered at the hands of the old miser and Meg? Therein lay a mystery he longed to fathom.

A great revulsion had come over him. He had persecuted Nita and avowed himself her enemy. He realized now that he had wronged an innocent, helpless girl by his cruelty and hasty judgment.

How nobly she had behaved toward him. To no one had she confided the story of her imprisonment at Fortune's Bay; no one dreamed but that it was Jack Dineheart who had saved her life and brought her home. By her silence when revenge was in her power she had nobly punished her foe.

[Pg 209]

"May Heaven help me to atone and win her pardon," he prayed.

And at the earliest hour permissible on the morrow he went to the prison.

To the last hour of his life he never forgot the thrill of pain at his heart when he first beheld Nita sitting in that dejected attitude with her dark head bowed so wearily, and her small hands folded in her lap. The serpent-ring still gleamed on her wasted finger; but it woke no anger in him now, only intense emotion.

She rose mechanically at his entrance, but no smile lit up the sadness of her great dark eyes. She knew him only as her foe; she believed that he had come to exult over her misery.

But just as he had knelt to her a year ago Donald Kayne knelt now, and bending his proud head, kissed the hem of her gray gown.

"Nita—Miss Farnham—I crave your pardon for the past," he murmured humbly.

She was so taken by surprise she could only stare at him with parted lips, from which there came no speech, and he continued:

"I deserve no pity from you, I know, but my heart is torn with remorse for my fault, and the desire of my life is to prove my repentance for my sin. I hope, too, that I may be able to serve you in your undeserved trouble. Will you—can you pardon the past, and be my friend?"

The heavy eyes grew brighter, and she held out her little hand.

[Pg 210]

"I forgive you, and I am glad to be friends with you," she answered nobly, and it seemed to him she was more angel than woman. He sat down beside her then, and, after thanking her, with moist eyes, for her goodness, made her his confidant in the affair of last night, ending frankly:

"I came here to ask you if you will permit me to explore Gray Gables, in the hope of finding out what I have sought to know so long. I tell you frankly I have sworn to pull down every stone in that old house, but that I will find Pepita. But I am very rich, Nita, and if I tear it down I will rebuild it again."

She gazed at him with eager, sympathetic eyes, and answered:

"What you have told me, sir, makes me believe that I have been the victim of a foul wrong at the hands of old Meg and Farnham, and since he is dead now there can no longer exist any reason for the silence I swore to keep over his secret. I will confide to you the story of the serpent-ring."

And then and there she told him of the day when she had lost her way in the dark old corridors and blundered upon the miser's secret—the gold-vault and the skeleton-woman.

She never forgot his smothered groan of despair when the awful story had been rehearsed. It haunted her long after he had gone, and her heart was so full of pain that in sympathy for him

she almost forgot her own sorrows.

At length Dorian came to make the brief daily visit permitted by the authorities, and then she told him of her visitor, and his overtures of friendship. [Pg 211]

Dorian frowned darkly at first when she spoke of his old friend and later foe, but Nita said in that sweet, irresistible voice of hers:

"Dorian, I forgave him, and so must you, dear."

"It is impossible——" he began, but one look from the tender eyes stopped his speech.

"It is not impossible, Dorian. Why, you forgave me for deceiving you so dreadfully, and so you can forgive him, too. Only think what he suffered, and how frantic he must have been over my seeming obstinacy. But now he repents everything, and I know from what he said that he is going to help find the real murderer if he can. And, dear, he used to love you and you loved him. Ah, Dorian, won't you make up your quarrel with him, and be at peace? If you love me, do not refuse me."

She coaxed until he promised to seek Donald Kayne and resume the old friendship; then she gave him her whole confidence, and he knew at last how the men on Kayne's yacht had saved her life the night she and Lizette had been washed overboard by the stormy billows. He was most indignant when he learned that she had been imprisoned at Fortune's Bay, but again her soft entreaties stemmed the current of his wrath.

"He was mad with grief and pain, do not forget that, Dorian, nor his repentance now," she murmured, with sweet forgiveness.

CHAPTER XXIX.

[Pg 212]

HER FATHER'S NAME AND GOLD.

"But poor Lizette, did you ask him what had been her fate?" asked Dorian anxiously.

"Yes, he told me that Lizette jumped out of the window and sprained her ankle so badly that the doctor said she would not walk for months, so he was compelled to leave her at the Rhodus house. They promised to take the best of care of her, and he gave her money to pay them and to come back to Pirate Beach when she was able to travel. That is the last he has heard of her, but he will write and make inquiries. Oh, Dorian, I miss my good Lizette very much. She loved me dearly, and she would be such a comfort to me now, for since my trouble I do not seem to have but one woman friend, good Mrs. Hill, the housekeeper at Gray Gables."

"And she is a noble old soul, and her friendship is worth having," said Dorian. "But, darling, you will have two more kind friends soon, to stand by you in your trouble. You know I have no near female relatives, but Van Hise has a mother and sister, two of the noblest women in New York, who believe in you so thoroughly, and have such sympathy for you, that they have written him they are coming down here to-day to remain until after your trial, and help you to bear your trouble. Shall you like that, my darling?"

The tears were in her eyes as she listened to him. She had felt so lonely, so deserted, as if the whole world were against her; and the desertion of the Courtneys, their rancor and malice, had cut deeply to her heart. [Pg 213]

She had been so good to them; she had loaded them with gifts and favors, and though she knew they did not love her, she had not believed them capable of such heartlessness as they had displayed in persecuting her, and yet staying on so coolly at Gray Gables without the shadow of a right.

Dorian and his soldier friend were most indignant. Van Hise told Nita frankly that as the widow of Charles Farnham, Gray Gables was her own property, and she ought to turn the Courtneys out. But Nita was too noble for paltry revenges. Somewhere in the blood of this girl, whose ancestry was yet unknown, ran a strain of blue blood.

"No, let them stay," she said. "If I could stoop to revenge myself for their treachery I should be as low and base as they are. Besides, I do not forget that the dear Lord is watching over me. I leave all in His hands."

And Captain Van Hise could say no more, but he thought admiringly:

"Jupiter, what a queen she is, and how proud Dorian must be of this grand creature!"

But the tears of joy came into her eyes when Dorian told her of the true woman friends who were on their way to her side.

"Now I love them already!" she cried fervently, and when they came she leaned her weary head on the motherly breast of the elder woman and sobbed like a weary child. [Pg 214]

"I have never known a mother's love," she said, and Mrs. Van Hise answered tenderly:

"You shall never miss it again, dear."

"And I will be your sister," added Lena Van Hise, with sympathetic tears in her eyes.

She was a beautiful, slender, sixteen-year-old girl, and Nita, who was not yet nineteen, felt her whole heart attracted to her. In that dark and gloomy prison-cell there began that day a friendship that would last to the end of both their lives.

It was one of the proudest and happiest moments of Donald Kayne's life when Dorian sought him out and proffered anew the firm friendship that had been broken off by their quarrel and the duel. Tears stood in the eyes of both as they clasped hands, and Donald Kayne said huskily:

"I do not deserve this noble forgiveness from you and Nita, but I will do my best to deserve it."

"I am sure you will," was Dorian's hearty reply, for he knew his old friend's sterling worth.

Nita had given the unhappy man such minute directions as to finding the narrow stairway and closed door leading to the gold vault at Gray Gables that he did not think it would be necessary to pull down the old mansion, as he had vowed to do. He confided freely in Dorian and asked him to accompany him on the quest, saying frankly:

"With the gold that Nita saw in the chest I have nothing to do. Doubtless it is the treasure referred to in old Meg's confidences to her son, and of course it belongs to Nita. We must keep the secret of it most carefully until such time as she is ready to take possession of it. But in the woman whose dead body rests unburied in the vault I have a painful interest, the secret of which I will later confide to you. But until her poor bones are laid in the grave and her restless spirit is appeased, I can know no rest or peace."

[Pg 215]

"Her spirit!" whispered Dorian Mountcastle, in awe.

"Yes, she walks, for I have seen her in the grounds at Gray Gables, and she vanished into air against the basement wall. Poor Pepita, she was trying to lead me to her hiding-place then," groaned Donald Kayne.

"How strange it seems that our chief purpose now is to find and punish the murderer of Farnham, although there is no doubt but that the old villain met a well-deserved fate."

"I believe the guilty party is the wicked old fortune-teller," said Donald Kayne, and Dorian and Captain Van Hise, who were present, agreed with him.

"But we can find neither evidence of her crime nor any motive for it. She has proved, indeed, that she was his lifelong friend," added Dorian dejectedly, for the utter failure to find the least clue to the murderer of Miser Farnham depressed him very much.

He knew how terribly dark was the circumstantial evidence against Nita, and his soul rebelled against the only verdict by which it seemed possible she could escape conviction—emotional insanity.

"I will not believe that even in a moment of insanity, driven mad by her troubles, she could have committed such a terrible deed!" he cried over and over, but yet all the evidence pointed to Nita's guilt, and all the detectives he had set to work could not find a clue to the murderer, nor a single scrap of evidence on which to hang a warrant for charging old Meg with slaying her friend the miser.

[Pg 216]

Meantime the days flew by, and in less than a week the trial was to come off. There were strong, brave hearts working loyally in Nita's cause, and yet they quailed with fear.

The three friends decided to go that day to Gray Gables to search for the vault, but they determined to take no one into their confidence. It would not be safe to let the hiding-place of the miser's gold be known. As they walked toward Gray Gables they met Mrs. Courtney and her daughter promenading on the sands. Both were elaborately attired, and looked self-satisfied and happy.

Azalea met them with joyous smiles, and detained them several moments in friendly conversation, but when they had passed on the dimpling smiles faded from her face, and she said angrily:

"I hate them all for taking that girl's part and believing in her after all the evidence that proved her guilt."

The three friends proceeded to Gray Gables, and it was a perfectly easy task to induce Mrs. Hill to let them go into the room which Dorian had occupied during his illness there.

They locked the door, lighted a lamp, and proceeded to explore the corridors according to Nita's careful directions. Soon success crowned their efforts. The little narrow stairway was easily found, but the door at the foot resisted their efforts at first, but at last the bolts and bars yielded, and it burst asunder.

[Pg 217]

She was there waiting for them—poor Pepita, in the ghastly grimness of death! Dorian and Van Hise reverently drew aside the coarse gray blanket that covered the skeleton in the chair, and when Donald Kayne saw what remained of the beautiful woman once so madly loved, he fell in a swoon upon the floor.

It was some time before he was restored. Then he was like one dazed. He knelt by the chair with his head on the table, and sobs shook his strong frame.

Ranged around the walls were a dozen strong cedar chests heaped to the lids with Spanish gold coin. Upon a steel plate on the end of each chest was engraved the name: "Juan de Castro."

Nita had told them of the attempt that old Meg had once made upon her life, and the name by which she had called her then: "Juanita de Castro."

They looked significantly into each other's face.

"Her father's name and her father's gold," uttered Captain Van Hise, and choked back a sob at thought of the girl who, having been cheated out of her heritage of wealth and love, had been driven to despair by lack of bread.

"Some dark and hideous mystery lies back of all this," he said to Dorian.

And the young man answered sternly:

[Pg 218]

"And the key to it all lies, perhaps, in the hands of Meg Dineheart, the fortune-teller. Let us search carefully and perhaps we may find papers to throw some light on the mystery. If not, the strong hand of the law must be raised to force Meg to a full confession of the sin that deprived Nita of her heritage."

They searched carefully, but not a scrap of writing rewarded their efforts. After an hour they decided to leave the place for the time, taking with them the bones of the murdered woman. A roll of white silk that Donald Kayne had brought was wrapped about the skeleton, and he bore it in his arms to Dorian's room, where it was decided they should leave it until night, when it might be carried away unseen.

Then Dorian turned the key in the lock as they went out and dropped it in his pocket. He knew that Mrs. Hill would not object to his keeping it till night.

"Let us go at once to old Meg and force her into betraying the secret of Nita's parentage, and the whole conspiracy by which she has been so terribly wronged," suggested Captain Van Hise.

Dorian and his friend agreed, and they set off at a brisk pace for old Meg's cabin, determined to unearth the mystery if possible. But they were entirely ignorant of the fact that, while they were exploring the gold-vault at Gray Gables, the Courtneys had returned to the house, and that Azalea by accident had witnessed their departure.

Burning with curiosity, she flew to her mother with the story.

[Pg 219]

"There is something mysterious on foot surely," she said vindictively, and added, "I mean to get into that room and find out what Dorian Mountcastle has locked up there. I should like to get hold of some disgraceful secret of his and expose it to the world."

"Fie! fie! Azalea! that would not be ladylike!" answered her mother.

"I don't care, so that I get revenge on Dorian for the way he has treated me!" cried the jealous girl, eager to punish the lover who had found her out and scorned her.

"You had better let well enough alone," cried the more prudent mother, who was beginning to feel uneasy over their abandonment of Nita. She knew well that she deserved to be turned summarily out of Gray Gables, and feared to precipitate the blow by any interference in Dorian Mountcastle's affairs.

"I don't care what you say, or whether you help me or not, I'm going into that room and find out Dorian Mountcastle's secret!" she burst out excitedly.

"Very well, Azalea, but take my advice and send that meddlesome old housekeeper away on some errand first, for I know she hates you, and would be delighted to have something to tell Dorian about you," Mrs. Courtney answered coldly.

It did not take Azalea long to despatch Mrs. Hill, and then, armed with a bunch of keys, she proceeded on her errand. The door soon yielded, and with a little chuckle of triumph she glided in and closed the door, but without locking it, for she knew well that her mother was hovering near, consumed with secret curiosity.

[Pg 220]

Azalea wandered from object to object, but her eager eyes encountered nothing strange until by accident her glance roved over the bed. Then she saw the outlines of a long slender object beneath the coverlet.

"Pshaw! I won't be a coward!" she muttered, and thrust out a shaking white hand and turned down the covers.

Something lay there swathed round and round and round in folds of soft, thick white silk.

And catching hold of an end of silk, began to unwind it with rapid hands.

Another moment, and a startled shriek rent the air. Mrs. Courtney, tiptoeing outside, opened the door and darted in, horrified at her daughter's shrill scream of terror.

Upon the bed she beheld the ghastly skeleton.

CHAPTER XXX.

[Pg 221]

DONALD KAYNE'S STORY.

All unconscious that Azalea had penetrated their secret, the three men pursued their way to the fortune-teller's cabin. But they were doomed to disappointment. The place was deserted, the doors locked, the small windows securely boarded over.

Evidently Meg had gone away, and, judging from the preparation made, intended to be absent some time. And yet that could not be, for Nita's trial would come off in a week, and she was one of the witnesses for the prosecution. Chagrined and baffled, they sat down on the low bench before the cabin, wondering what they should do next.

It was a dull and gloomy day, the sea was rough, and the tide rolled in to the shore with a hollow, reverberating moan. They watched it with sad eyes and heavy hearts, each busy with his own thoughts. Suddenly Donald Kayne spoke:

"My friends, I am minded to tell you my story."

They looked into his face. It was pale and wan with a great despair, and his voice faltered as he continued:

"You and I, Dorian, have been friends for ten years, ever since you were a boy of sixteen, in fact. You, too, Van Hise, have known me for years; but it was before I met either of you that I lost my darling wife!"

"Your wife!" cried Dorian.

"Yes, Pepita was my wife," said Kayne, "my wife dead to me now for almost fifteen years, yet with the mystery of her fate unsolved till yesterday. Is it not a wonder I have escaped madness?" [Pg 222]

They could not reply save by mute looks of sympathy. Their feelings overpowered them.

"I will tell you how I first met her," he continued dreamily, with his sad eyes fixed on the sea. "It was on Broadway. I saw a beautiful, young, dark-eyed girl crossing the street in such a careless, preoccupied fashion that she only escaped death from the hoofs of an advancing team by the celerity with which I sprang forward and dragged her out of the way. As it was, she had been thrown down and trampled on, and as I laid her down on the pavement I at first believed her dead. She was dressed in costly garments, made in a quaint, foreign fashion that, with her dark eyes and hair and olive skin, proclaimed her Spanish. A crowd gathered around, but no one could tell who she was, so, as she remained unconscious, a physician was called, and she was removed to the hospital.

"The hoofs of the horses had severely injured the poor girl, and she remained at the hospital several weeks. I saw her daily, for it is needless to tell you that the first moment I saw her I lost my heart. I won Pepita's friendship, and she told me she was a Spanish girl, an orphan, who had come to America from old Madrid to seek an only brother in New York, only to find him dead. Of this brother she told me a romantic story. On attaining his majority, some years before, her brother had come to America, and had met in New York a beautiful, poor girl, whom he made his bride. On taking her home to Spain his proud parents had refused to receive their son's choice, and in anger he returned to America, never to see them again. [Pg 223]

"In a few years misfortune overtook them. They became poor and miserable, and longed for the son they had cast off in their pride. They died, and their only remaining child, beautiful Pepita, crossed the seas to find her brother. On the day that I saved her life she had just learned that her brother and his wife were both dead. Despair made her reckless. Alone and friendless in a strange land, with but a few dollars in her purse, she wandered along, wondering if she could ever return to her native land.

"The tears blinded her as she crossed the street, and she did not notice that she was under the horses' heads until they trampled her beneath their feet. You guess the end, my friends. I married the lovely Spanish stranger, although my friends blamed me, and for a year we were blissfully happy. We traveled several months, and it was in Paris I had the serpent ring made especially for her and the design destroyed. She had a great fondness for unique trifles, and I always gratified her fancy to the utmost in everything. We returned to this country, and over our home Pepita reigned a lovely queen, seeming not to have a wish ungratified. Our happiness seemed as pure and perfect as mortals could enjoy.

"Suddenly as a thunder-bolt falling from a clear sky my happiness came to an end. My wife left home one day in my absence and never returned. Oh, God! how did I ever live through it? The shame, the horror, the agony! For the world sneered and said I had married unwisely, and that my darling had fled from me with some favored lover. I could not believe it, although her maid told me she had received a letter that had agitated her very much, and that she had gone away directly afterward, saying that she intended to spend the day with a friend. I had gone to Boston at the time, and when I returned two days later I found that she had not returned, and that the city was ringing with the news of her flight. I employed detectives. I almost wrecked my health in the vain search for her, for I would not believe there was anything guilty in her flight. No—no, I was too sure of her love and truth for that. But, alas! the days and weeks and months lengthened into weary years, and there came no news of the lost one, nor even the faintest clue until that night you remember, Dorian, when I first saw Pepita's ring on Nita's hand, and almost went mad over her refusal to tell me how she came by it." [Pg 224]

"I can no longer wonder at your passionate vehemence!" answered Dorian gently.

"Yes, think of what I suffered from her refusal. I knew not if Pepita were dead or alive—until this spring, when, lingering one twilight hour in the grounds at Gray Gables, my lost wife appeared to me in spirit-form and led me to the basement wall, where she disappeared. Ah, then I knew at last that my darling was dead, and I know now that she was seeking to lead me to her hiding-place in the miser's gold-vault."

The listeners were silent. Could it be true, or was it but a vision of superstitious fancy? Donald [Pg 225]

Kayne would always believe that he had seen a spirit from another world.

When they all grew calmer, they agreed that he had been right in believing his wife was faithful. It must have been a decoy letter that had called her away, perhaps some promised news of her brother or his child, although Pepita had never spoken of any child.

"She fell into a trap set for unwary feet, and was murdered, although for what cause we may perhaps never know unless we can wring the secret from old Meg," said Donald Kayne.

The rest of the day was spent in making very quiet and private arrangements for removing all that remained of Donald Kayne's young bride from Gray Gables and conveying it to New York, where the unhappy man wished to have the interment in his family vault.

"And after I have solved the mystery of my darling's death the world that wronged her so cruelly by its base suspicions shall know the truth," he said bitterly.

They made arrangements with Mrs. Hill to come back at midnight, having taken her into their confidence regarding the finding of the skeleton. She was full of interest and sympathy, and they found her waiting in the dark to admit them into the house.

"Every soul is asleep but me," she whispered, and they went noiselessly to the room where they had left the shrouded skeleton on the bed, Mrs. Hill waiting at the front door for them.

They closed the door, struck a light, and turned to the bed.

[Pg 226]

The white coverlet was drawn up as they had left it, and the slight outline of something was visible beneath.

Donald threw down the cover and lifted the bundle of white silk in his arms. He laid it down again, turned back a fold of silk and looked within.

A cry of horror came from his lips. Some one had taken away the skeleton and left the bed-bolster in its place.

Dorian brought Mrs. Hill to the room, and they talked in whispers of the strange loss. The housekeeper soon jumped at a conclusion.

"I believe the Courtneys have done this," she said. "They came in to-day while you were shut in here, and maybe they saw you go out and suspected something. I will tell you why I think so. Azalea came to me soon after, as sweet as sugar, and got me to go to the druggist's, a mile away, on a silly little errand for some cosmetic she wanted. I expect she wanted to get me out of the way so she could ransack the room in my absence. It is nobody but she that has taken it away and hid it for spite, I'm sure of that! Don't make any outcry for a few days, please, gentlemen, and don't let her know you suspect her, and I'll watch the little cat and find out where she has hidden it away."

It seemed best to follow her advice, and they went away together, heavy-hearted enough, for fate seemed to baffle them at every turn. But they hoped much from Mrs. Hill, for they did not believe that Azalea could have taken the skeleton away from the house, and it seemed as if she must surely be detected in her wickedness by the espionage of the clever housekeeper.

[Pg 227]

Tears fell from Nita's eyes the next day when Dorian told her all that had happened, and added:

"All the evidence points to the fact that poor Pepita was your own aunt, and must have met her death seeking for you."

"Surely, surely Miss Courtney could not be so vile as to secrete those poor remains," she cried indignantly.

Dorian gave one of those cynical laughs of old, and answered:

"Azalea Courtney is vile enough for anything. She has no more heart or soul than a stone, and her only god is herself. She would like to have the whole world fall down and worship her, and no words can describe the virulence of her hate toward any one who discovers her true character and despises her as she deserves."

"And she is one of the witnesses against me. She will try to hound me to my doom!" cried Nita.

"Yes, she will certainly do all she can against you," admitted Dorian. "But you need not fear her malice, my darling. She cannot harm you, for Heaven itself is watching to defend you!" and he smiled at her cheerfully, for he had the greatest faith that a fitting retribution for all her wickedness would yet come to Azalea.

Meanwhile the jealous beauty was already suffering the punishment for her curiosity, for her nerves had been so shocked by the finding of the skeleton that fit had succeeded fit, and for several days she was quite ill from the effects of her scare, and talked wildly in her dreams of the terrible thing, fancying herself a bride, in white-silk robes, about to be wedded to a skeleton, and often screaming out wildly in her sleep.

[Pg 228]

But Mrs. Courtney kept the secret of Azalea's illness carefully to herself, and gave out to the servants that her daughter was suffering from a persistent headache. Only Mrs. Hill suspected what was the matter, and laughed in her sleeve at thought of the fright Azalea had received.

"It was good for her, the sly cat, and I wish it had turned every hair of her head white when she found it!" she said to herself, chuckling with delight over Azalea's discomfiture.

But outwardly good Mrs. Hill was very solicitous over the young lady's welfare, and quite won over Mrs. Courtney by her kind inquiries. In truth, that lady was glad of the courteous manner of

the housekeeper, for there had always been furtive enmity between them, and the interloper feared lest it might now come to open warfare. She knew that she had now no shadow of right at Gray Gables, and that after the antagonism she had displayed toward Nita, she should in common decency have taken her departure from the place.

But since her poverty had fallen on her she had developed what Mrs. Hill slangily called "a very hard cheek," and she was determined to stand her ground until she was ordered to leave. Knowing how noble and high-minded Nita was, she had no fears of being thus dispossessed, and stayed coolly on, looking every day for the advent of Sir George Merlin, who had promised to soon follow his betrothed across the water.

[Pg 229]

Mrs. Courtney had contrived to make the baronet believe her a rich woman, and she had no mind to let him find out the imposition until he had married Azalea. But, in the meantime, the question of Azalea's trousseau became an all-absorbing thought. Where could they get the wherewithal to purchase it?

They had jewels, but they did not want to sacrifice them, and they could not expect anything more from Nita. She was becoming very despondent over it when her daughter's discovery of the hidden skeleton put a clever idea into her head. She hid it away carefully, believing that a handsome ransom would be offered for its recovery.

Several days passed, but, to her chagrin, no notice seemed to be taken of the disappearance of the skeleton, so she decided to write a blackmailing letter to the parties concerned in secreting it, threatening them with arrest by the authorities unless they paid a large sum for its return. The epistle was signed by a fictitious masculine name, and arrangements were made for the payment of the money in a way by which the receivers need not be detected. Unless the sum demanded was forthcoming in a week the authorities would be informed, or the skeleton would be destroyed.

Dorian Mountcastle was the party to whom this precious epistle was sent, and he decided not to inform Donald Kayne of its receipt until after he had held an interview with Mrs. Hill.

"Make no reply to it," advised Mrs. Hill. "I am almost certain that Mrs. Courtney has got it concealed, and as soon as her daughter gets well enough for them to go out riding together I will make a careful search for it. She will not destroy it, for she hopes to get money for it; neither will she inform the authorities, for that would defeat her hopes of gain. Only keep silent, and trust all to me, and, I will promise, you shall have it back safe. But don't tell Mr. Kayne about the blackmailing letter, for it would excite him so much that he would probably gratify Mrs. Courtney by giving her the thousands she is after."

[Pg 230]

Dorian thanked her gratefully for her faithful interest, and promised not to let Kayne hear anything of the blackmailing project, for he was anxious to defeat the Courtneys if he could.

CHAPTER XXXI.

[Pg 231]

LIZETTE A PRISONER.

Donald Kayne had told Nita the simple truth when he said that Lizette's sprained ankle was so severe that she had been obliged to remain for long months at Fortune's Bay. But, to do him justice, he had made every possible arrangement for her comfort and happiness during her long stay at the Rhodus house.

He had provided liberally for every luxury she might desire, sent her a stock of books to read, and of materials for fancy-work, and, having thus provided for her comfort, he made one private stipulation with Fisherman Rhodus and his wife. This condition was that any letters Lizette might write should not be posted, although when she became well enough no embargo was to be placed on her liberty. She was to be permitted to leave the island and return home.

But long and weary were the months before the poor maid could walk, or even stand, upon her foot again. And harrowing was her anxiety over the fate of her young mistress, whom she had last seen borne away in the arms of the sailor. She loaded herself with reproaches for her own credulity that had betrayed Nita into the power of her enemy.

But soon there came to her a letter from Pirate Beach that set her mind at rest. Donald Kayne, after meeting Nita, had thought kindly of poor Lizette's anxiety, and himself wrote her a short letter informing her that the dreaded sailor had indeed kept his promise of returning her mistress to her friends, and that Nita had now gone abroad with the Courtneys, to be absent for an indefinite period.

[Pg 232]

Lizette's mind thus happily set at rest, she became more cheerful under her great affliction, and within the next three months Jack Dineheart made his appearance at the Rhodus house and humbly begged her pardon for the accident he had caused.

Jack was a good-looking specimen of a sailor, and could be very ingratiating when he chose. He was an intimate friend of the Rhodus family, and it pleased him to make a friend of the pretty, plaintive maid in the lonely old prisonlike house.

He swore to her solemnly that the fall of the ladder had been an accident, but fearing it had made enough noise to awaken the family, he had decided not to risk returning for her lest he should

imperil the safety of her mistress. His story was so plausible that Lizette could not refuse to believe it, especially as Donald Kayne corroborated Jack's story that Nita had been returned to her friends.

So pretty Lizette readily forgave the smooth-tongued sailor who, in common with his craft, had the knack of winning his way to a woman's heart.

Jack was often at the island that winter, and when he could overcome the gruffness he often affected, and leave liquor alone, he was always a welcome guest at the Rhodus house.

He even tried to make love in a rough way to the pretty creature who sat so helplessly in the great arm-chair with her wool-knitting in her lap, and had to be waited on by everybody. [Pg 233]

Lizette was not averse to his attentions. They lent a little spiciness to the dull days, and so she let a little coquetry creep into her looks and words, just a little kittenish mischief that amused them both, and made old Rhodus and his wife wag their gray heads knowingly, as if to say:

"That will be a match."

In the spring days, when Lizette's sprain began to mend, she promised Jack that on his next trip she would go home with him to Pirate Beach.

"For I took your mistress safely back there, and I sha'n't feel right until I deliver you safe, too," he said.

So it happened that Lizette sailed with him in that golden June time back to Pirate Beach, her heart full of joy at the thought of a reunion with her beloved Miss Nita.

"But somehow, Lizette, I feel like you may be disappointed. I don't believe she has ever come home from Europe yet," Jack said to her, as they sat together on deck that twilight hour of the tenth of June, as they were nearing the familiar shores of New Jersey. "Tell you what, old girl, suppose we don't land at home unless she is up at Gray Gables. We'll drop anchor near the beach and I'll go over to mom and see if the folks are back. If they are not we can go on up to New York and have a lark. You said there was some one there you wanted to see, didn't you?" [Pg 234]

"Yes, if they're not dead, for I've written and written and got no answer," returned Lizette, with an anxious look in her soft-blue eyes. So it happened that Jack's bark came to anchor near the shore, and Jack rowed over alone in the twilight to seek his mother.

Lizette waited a while on deck, but as the wind freshened and the waves began to put on white-caps, she grew nervous and went into the tiny cabin to talk to the woman who did the cooking and mending for the very small crew.

Presently the woman went off to attend to some small duty, and then the maid sat down by the light with a book and began to read to pass the time away.

She had just reached a very thrilling point in her novel when a stumbling step made her look up, and—Jack Dineheart was by her side.

"Oh, Jack, what is it?" cried the young woman, in dismay, for as he sank into a seat by her side she saw that his face was ashy white, his eyes wild, his frame trembling.

"It is nothing, you foolish girl, nothing. Go get me a drink of whisky," he answered hoarsely, and put up his hand to shield his face from her inquisitive gaze.

Then, indeed, a shudder ran through all her frame, and she cried in sickening terror:

"Oh, Jack, what have you been doing? There is blood on your hand—wet blood—and blood on your sleeve!"

With a frightened oath the man looked, and found her words were true. His hand was red with blood, and so was his light coat-sleeve. [Pg 235]

For a minute they gazed at each other in startled silence. His eyes were wolfish—hers frightened, questioning. A moment, and he broke through the spell that held him, with an uneasy laugh.

"Good Lud! don't look so scared," he cried roughly. "I'll tell you the truth, Lizette. My arm's hurt—a shark bit at me in the little boat, and I had a tussle to get away. I didn't mean to tell, only you saw the blood. Now don't tell any one, will you? See here, Lizette, I won't allow any tattling"—roughly. "I'll go wash the blood off and get a drink; and you'll hold your tongue, you hear?"

"Very well, Jack," Lizette answered, with dignity, offended by his rough, menacing manner; then she caught at his coat as he was turning to go, and asked eagerly:

"But, Miss Nita, Jack? Is she up there at Gray Gables, or not?"

"No, she has never come back from Europe, so we will go on to New York, as we planned, and have a jolly good time; but, mind, Lizette, not a word about the shark and the blood, or I'll cut off the end of your tongue!" and Jack wrenched himself free, and disappeared.

Lizette wept with disappointment because she should not see her mistress yet.

"But I'll spend a few hours in New York, then go back to Pirate Beach and see Mrs. Hill, and find out all about Miss Nita," she thought, as she threw herself on her bunk, and sobbed herself to sleep.

When she awoke again she found herself a prisoner in a low den by the river-side in New York, guarded by a fiendish-looking old woman, who thrust some coarse food inside the door, and disappeared without answering a word to her imploring questions. Jack Dineheart was nowhere [Pg 236]

to be seen, but in a few days Lizette was horrified to find that his mother had taken the place of the mute attendant.

"Meg Dineheart, what does this mean?" she demanded angrily, but with a jeering laugh Meg vanished, and she heard the key grate harshly in the lock of the door.

"Oh, what is the mystery of this strange persecution?" wondered the half-maddened prisoner, forebodingly, but all her fears for the future did not approach the reality of the awful fate that hung suspended over her head ready to fall and destroy her very life.

CHAPTER XXXII.

[Pg 237]

ON TRIAL FOR HER LIFE.

When the day of Nita's trial approached the popular verdict had adjudged her guilty. It was believed that if the jury cleared her it would only be to send her for life to an insane asylum.

Azalea Courtney and her mother read the papers with deepest interest, they exulted in every harsh criticism aimed at Nita, and they hoped that she would get the severest sentence.

"If she is spared to be Dorian's wife, I shall hate her even more bitterly than I do now," asserted Azalea vindictively.

"I thought you had gotten over your passion for Dorian, now that you are going to make such a grand match," her mother returned uneasily.

Azalea was lounging on a sofa, the picture of indolence. She raised herself on her elbow and looked into her mother's face with a spark of fire leaping into her large blue eyes.

"Dorian Mountcastle is the only man I ever loved, or ever shall love," she answered, "I shall marry Sir George of course, but I shall love Dorian as long as I live. I thought that time when I threw him over that I should soon forget, but I was young, and did not realize the power of love. Fancy then how horribly I hate Nita, whom he loves so dearly."

"Somehow I think it would have been more to our interest if we had taken her part and hidden our hatred in our own hearts," said Mrs. Courtney. "Soon we shall be turned out of doors penniless, with no claim on her pity or protection." [Pg 238]

"But, mama, you will get the ransom for that—thing," returned Azalea, growing pale at the memory of her fright.

"I am not so sure of that. There are no answers to my letters."

"Then, mama, it may not be as important as we thought. We had better destroy it before we are suspected," cried Azalea, unconscious that a woman listening at the keyhole gave a start of dismay.

"Yes, I will burn it, and keep the white silk for your wedding-gown," said Mrs. Courtney thriftily, unheeding her daughter's shudder.

"Perhaps I'll never need a wedding-gown, mama. I have not had a letter from the baronet for two weeks. He only proposed to me to pique Nita, you know, and he may intend to back out of the engagement now."

"If he does he will have a suit for breach of promise on his hands," exclaimed Mrs. Courtney viciously, and the woman listening outside the door sneered as she grasped closer in her hands a thin, foreign-looking letter, bordered and sealed with black.

Then she retreated a few paces, gave a loud cough, and, again advancing, rapped on the door and delivered her letter.

"Good Heavens, mama! a London letter in mourning. And, see, it is in a strange hand—a woman's! What can it mean?" [Pg 239]

"Open it, Azalea, and see!"

Her daughter obeyed, exclaiming in another moment:

"Sir George's sister, mama—Lady Landon—oh, mama, this is terrible. Sir George was thrown from his horse two weeks ago, down at his country place, and fatally injured, dying in a few hours. He never spoke, never was conscious again—so farewell to all my ambitious dreams! Fate has baffled me again."

Mrs. Hill, who had taken the liberty of lingering, now had to help bring Azalea out of a fit of hysteria induced by the failure of her brilliant prospects. Mrs. Courtney dismissed the housekeeper, and began to comfort her daughter.

"Don't grieve any more over it, my dear. Fortunately your affections are not hurt in the least."

"No—but it's the money and the position I've lost—that's what I'm thinking of, mama."

"It can't be helped now, and I have another plan—if all goes well."

"What is it, mama?"

"Azalea, you know that old Farnham was very rich. Now, if Nita should be—ahem—executed for

his murder—who is to inherit all that money?"

"I don't know, mama. Perhaps that old fortune-teller will try for it."

"She will be disappointed. I shall claim it myself—or, rather, you."

"Mama, you must be crazy!"

[Pg 240]

"Not at all, my dear, but I have a secret. Miser Farnham was your father's half-brother, older than your father, the black sheep of the family, and disowned by all his kin. Why, barely sixteen years ago that old man was the master of a smuggling vessel—a dishonest craft, so strongly suspected of piratical tendencies that she was seized and sunk by the authorities. Then old Farnham gave up his seafaring life, and became a scamp on land as he had been on sea. But I needn't bore you with a recital of his rascality. Suffice it to say he was closely related to the Courtneys, although we never had any reason to be proud of the relationship. But now that he is dead you are your uncle's heiress; if Nita—ahem—dies, it will come to you—the wealth he has hoarded so long—and even if she is cleared, you can sue for a share unless he has made a formal will and left her the whole property."

It seemed to Nita that she could not live through her trial; as if she should fall dead of her shame and despair when she was led into court that morning to meet the curious faces of the dense crowd.

But there was Dorian, with his encouraging smile, and there was Mrs. Van Hise, with her tender, motherly ways, and Lena, with her steadfast heart; Donald Kayne, too, and Captain Van Hise, with Colonel Harlow, her lawyer—all these true friends were there, and by their love and faith helped her to bear her terrors bravely, and not to mind the dark, glowering faces of Meg Dineheart and her son as they sat ready to swear away her life.

[Pg 241]

There was one thing that surprised her—the absence of Mrs. Courtney and Azalea. At the inquest over the dead miser these two had done all in their power, told all they knew against her, and she had been told that they would be witnesses for the prosecution.

When she whispered her wonder to Mrs. Van Hise, the cheek of the good lady turned slightly pale, and she whispered hurriedly:

"They may have been detained, but I see that Mrs. Hill, the kind housekeeper from Gray Gables, is here. Perhaps she will explain."

Mrs. Hill had nodded and smiled in the most endearing fashion at her favorite, but her kind heart sank at the pale, sad looks of Nita. The long weeks of close confinement those sweltering summer days had told sadly on the young girl's health and strength.

Her cheeks were wasted with sorrow and washed pale with tears, her dark eyes were heavy and downcast, her lips pathetic in their weary, wistful droop. Her black silk costume, plain and close-fitting, was unlike in its simplicity, and had no relief of color except some roses, the gift of Dorian, that she carried listlessly in her small white hand where the serpent-ring still glittered in its baleful splendor.

She had offered the ring to Donald Kayne, but he had refused to accept it.

"Keep it for Pepita's sake, and think of her kindly sometimes, for I believe it was for you she lost her life," he said huskily, and Nita tearfully put the splendid jewel back upon her finger. But the old terror of it was gone now, and she thought often and tenderly of the woman who had owned it, and whose tragic fate had saddened the life of Donald Kayne.

[Pg 242]

Pale and trembling with the horror of her awful position, Nita sat, the cynosure of hundreds of curious eyes, some of them soft with pity, others harsh with blame. She shuddered as her thoughts went back over her short life, so full of sorrows, and with so little sunshine in it. Dorian loved her—that was the only gleam of brightness. With that thought she looked timidly at him, and the world of love in the eyes that returned her gaze thrilled her heart with joy.

And, meanwhile, Colonel Harlow had begun to argue his client's case. The grave jury and the eager crowd hung upon the words that fell from his lips.

But the lawyer for the prosecution, who was young, and had his spurs yet to win, had a slightly sarcastic smile on his lips. Colonel Harlow was great, he knew, but he could not clear the prisoner by a brilliant speech unless he had evidence to show that some one else had committed the crime, and Lawyer Field was certain that such evidence was not to be given. So he listened with a smile, and grew impatient for his own turn, when he expected to eclipse Colonel Harlow's oratory and convict the prisoner. In his own mind he felt certain of her guilt.

Colonel Harlow spoke effectively for several hours and then the examination of the witnesses began. They were few, but they were so rigidly cross-examined that it took a long time.

[Pg 243]

Eagerly every one watched Dorian's pale, harassed face, as he gave the testimony he was not permitted to withhold. Nita choked back the rising sob lest it should grieve him, but after he and Captain Van Hise sat down, and were followed by old Meg and her son, it seemed to the girl as if she were already condemned.

Lena Van Hise was sobbing bitterly by her friend's side, unable to restrain her emotion. She believed with Nita that the evidence of those four witnesses would be fatal. Lawyer Field was

certain of it, too. He smiled to himself as he watched Colonel Harlow's pale and troubled face.

"He feels certain of his defeat," decided Fields exultantly.

He did not know what a sensation was to follow upon the call for the next witness.

"Mrs. Courtney!"

Mrs. Hill, the housekeeper from Gray Gables, rose in her place to announce that the witness was dead.

"Dead!"

And a murmur of uncontrollable excitement arose. When it had been quelled she was asked when the witness had died, and the answer was given that she had met her death the night before in leaping from the window of Gray Gables, which had been partially burned to the ground.

"Miss Azalea Courtney!"

Miss Courtney had been saved from the burning house by the brave exertions of the firemen, but was so badly burned she would not be able to come into court for months, if ever. [Pg 244]

Nita's white face dropped into her hands, while she stifled a cry of horror. Gray Gables almost burned to the ground, Mrs. Courtney dead, Azalea injured—how dreadful it was. Her heart thrilled with pity for her relentless foes.

Mrs. Hill was a witness, too, and her loving testimony to Nita's goodness made the girl's heart beat warmly again—love and praise were so dear to her sad heart, even from this humble source.

She looked away from the angry, glowering eyes of Jack Dineheart and his mother, and fixed her gaze on the kind face of the good woman, who, although the cause of the burning of Gray Gables did not come exactly under the head of evidence, managed to give the listeners the benefit of her theory.

Mr. Kayne had left a skeleton secreted in the house, and the Courtneys had stolen and hidden it, hoping, by their blackmailing efforts, to receive a large ransom for it. Failing in their designs, and fearful of detection, they had attempted to destroy their prize by fire, resulting in the disaster by which the mansion had been destroyed, and both women injured, the elder one fatally.

As for the skeleton, she, Mrs. Hill, had discovered its hiding-place several hours before, and assisted Mr. Kayne to remove it to a place of safety.

Nor did Mrs. Hill forget to give the gaping public the benefit of the sensation it received in hearing of the death of Miss Courtney's titled lover across the sea. [Pg 245]

Fate had baffled the pretty plotter at every point, and, penniless and friendless, even her beauty, the weapon on which she prided herself so much, now totally destroyed, she was nothing now but an object of pity and charity to those whom she had sought to wrong.

When Mrs. Hill's highly sensational evidence was all in she was permitted to resume her seat, and the court announced that all the witnesses had been examined and the speech for the prosecution would begin.

At that moment Colonel Harlow arose to say that he had another and very important witness yet, and from the expression of his face the lawyer for the prosecution began to feel rather nervous.

"The new witness," announced Colonel Harlow, "is Miss Lizette Brittain, a former maid of Miss Farnham, who has been missing for some time, but has turned up just when most needed."

When Nita saw the face of Lizette again she half-rose in her seat, with a cry of joy.

Lizette gave her a loving smile in return, and a reassuring nod.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

[Pg 246]

THE PARRICIDE'S FATE.

Meg Dineheart and her sullen son did not care to stay in to hear the new evidence. They were trying to slip quietly away, but an officer, all unconsciously to the guilty pair, had been quietly guarding them both, and they were informed in a curt whisper that they must remain.

With sullen looks of baffled rage the conspirators sat down again, and Lizette, who was looking very pale and ill, although resolute, began her story.

She told of her return to Pirate Beach on Jack Dineheart's bark the tenth of June, and of how he had gone over in the row-boat to see his mother, returning soon, pale, agitated, and bloody, with the story of the shark that had bitten him in the water, and the falsehood that Nita had never returned from abroad. She dwelt on his taking her to New York, and her inexplicable imprisonment there for no reason that she could discover.

"Little did I dream," continued the maid, with tears in her eyes, "that my dear mistress was on trial for murdering her husband, and that Jack Dineheart was keeping me shut up, knowing that as soon as I heard about it I would denounce him as the murderer, for I never did believe that shark-story he told me. But I was in no danger of ever finding out the awful truth, imprisoned as I

was, if a kind friend had not interested himself in my fate. Mr. Donald Kayne had promised my mistress to send for me, and then he learned that I had sailed for home on Dineheart's ship. He learned that Dineheart had landed at New York, but when he sought the sailor and asked him for me, he was told I had died, and was buried at sea.

[Pg 247]

"Not believing the story, Mr. Kayne placed a detective on the sailor's track, and then he decided to murder me so as to escape espionage. He and his mother bound me, while drugged, to a railroad track, believing I would be killed, but they had been followed by the detective and Mr. Kayne, and as soon as the sailor and his mother left me I was rescued and taken to a place of safety.

"That was last night, and when Mr. Kayne told me of the awful plight of my dear mistress, I knew that God had spared me to save her life, for I know—and God knows—that it was Jack Dineheart who murdered the miser that evening of the tenth of June, when he went ashore at twilight and came back with that white, scared face, and the blood on his hand and sleeve."

Mr. Fielding, the lawyer for the prosecution, knew now that he had no case, that the prisoner at the bar was innocent of crime, for Jack Dineheart and his mother, terrified at finding themselves in the power of the law, confessed everything, and begged for mercy.

And a cruel and disastrous plot was laid bare when they revealed the secret kept so long, under threats of death from Miser Farnham, should they dare reveal it.

In his character of a well-to-do ship's captain, Farnham had been an unsuccessful suitor for the hand of the beautiful American girl that the rich Spaniard, Juan de Castro, had married.

[Pg 248]

Hiding his chagrin Farnham had vowed a bitter vengeance on his rival, and the opportunity came to him within a year after the marriage. Juan de Castro was very rich in his own right, having inherited the estates of a millionaire uncle, and when his parents looked coldly on his choice of an American bride, he swore in bitter anger that he would never look on their faces again, but return and become an American citizen.

Converting all his wealth into money, he stored it in a dozen chests and secured transportation for it on the vessel of his wife's pretended friend, Captain Farnham. The young pair embarked for New York, but on the voyage the young mother, after the birth of a daughter, died, and Farnham murdered the unhappy young widower, and pretended that he had committed suicide while in a frenzy of grief at the loss of his wife.

The babe was cared for by a sailor's wife until they reached Pirate Beach, when he placed it in the care of old Meg, whom he had promised to marry.

He stored the stolen gold in the cellar of his old house, Gray Gables, and kept its hiding-place a secret, but he promised that Jack should marry the little Juanita when she grew up, and become master of the great treasure.

Later, when the murdered man's sister, Pepita, came to America to seek her brother, the miser, fearing she would detect his villainy, had sent her an anonymous letter, acknowledging her little niece's existence, and promising if she would come at once, and secretly, to deliver Juanita into her hands.

[Pg 249]

She went, fell into the spider's web, and met death in the gold-vault, from whence her bleached skeleton had now been removed, to rest in a consecrated grave.

When Jack Dineheart, listening at his mother's door that night, first learned that his fiend of a father had married the girl promised in her infancy to his son, he had gone mad with jealous rage for himself, and honest pity for the lovely girl doomed to fall into the power of her father's murderer. To avenge his own wrongs and to save Nita from a fiend, Jack Dineheart had slain his father.

The miserable parricide and his whining old mother were led away to prison to be tried for Miser Farnham's murder, and for conspiracy against the life of Lizette Brittain.

A few months later the old fortune-teller was sentenced to imprisonment for life, and her son was condemned to be electrocuted.

Long before the sentence of death was executed the prisoner became violently insane, and, attempting to murder one of the wardens in the prison, was shot dead.

Old Meg, whose affections had been centered on Jack, after his death never held up her head, dying very suddenly one day, when she had been in prison barely two years.

Mrs. Van Hise had made a charming discovery. When Meg Dineheart had mentioned the name of Gertrude Vaughan as that of Nita's mother, the lady had given a start of surprise, and made a few abrupt inquiries of the fortune-teller. Later she said fondly to Nita:

[Pg 250]

"I have a claim upon you, after all; my maiden name was Vaughan, and from what Meg told me I have discovered that your mother was a cousin of mine whose acquaintance I had never made. So, Nita, dear, you belong to me until Dorian claims you."

"Which will be to-morrow, if Nita will consent," exclaimed the happy lover.

"She will not consent, for she has to order her trousseau first, and I shall take her home with me to-morrow, and she will not be ready to be married until late in the winter," laughed Mrs. Van Hise, determined to hold on to her lovely cousin as long as possible.

They all went up to New York the next day, but before they went all arrangements were made for Azalea Courtney's comfort. Nita went herself to the hospital where the burned and disfigured girl

would have to remain many months.

But the heavy hand of affliction had not softened nor sweetened Azalea's temper. She had heard how the trial had turned out, and her heart was full of disappointment, hate, and jealous envy.

"I suppose you have come here to exult over my misery!" she said bitterly.

"Oh, Azalea, how can you think me so cruel? I am sorry for you; I came here to help you."

"I suppose you think me poor and came to give me money, but I have startling news for you," Azalea returned angrily.

"News, Azalea!"

[Pg 251]

"Yes. You think yourself heiress to all Miser Farnham's money, but my mother told me the day before she died that old Farnham was my own uncle, and that I ought to have a share in his wealth, so I shall employ a lawyer and sue you for a division of the spoils," said the disfigured beauty, with angry triumph.

"You will not need to sue, Azalea, for all of the miser's possessions that can be discovered shall be given to you freely. The chests of gold that have been taken from Gray Gables since the fire are all mine, you know, my father's property, but the house belonged to that wicked old man, and the property will bring you a good sum. I am glad you will have this money, since you are too proud to accept anything from me," Nita said gently.

The next day, Nita accompanied her friends to their home in New York, taking with her Mrs. Hill and Lizette, each of whom she presented with a sum of money that, measured by their simple tastes, made them rich for life.

"Miss Nita, you have made me so happy!" cried grateful Lizette.

The girl was the sole support of her mother and a crippled brother. The sick boy needed country air and food, and would have died in the hot city but for the present of money that Nita had given her the night she had saved her from old Meg's murderous designs.

"With that money I sent them both into the country, my mother and my brother, and it helped them, oh, so much!" cried the maid. "To-morrow I shall seek them out, and now that I am rich, I can live with them and take care of them so nicely, although I hate to leave your service."

[Pg 252]

Nita sympathized with all the good girl's plans and wishes, and lent her aid heartily to their accomplishment, rejoicing in the great good she could accomplish out of her store of wealth.

Mrs. Hill remained with her in spite of the fact that she was now well-to-do.

"I love you too well to leave you, dear Miss Nita!" cried the affectionate creature.

At Christmas, Nita and Dorian were married, and the beauty of the bride and the splendor of the wedding at the Van Hise mansion, on Fifth Avenue, created quite a sensation.

Their wedding-tour was to Spain. Nita had a longing to see her father's birth-place, and Donald Kayne, now her devoted uncle and friend, shared her yearning.

He had a fancy to see Pepita's old home, so he accompanied them, a welcome guest, on their journey.

THE END.

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[Pg 253]

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Transcriber's Notes

This story was originally serialized in the *New York Family Story Paper* as "They Looked and Loved; or, The Mystery of Pirate Beach," from June 4, 1892 to September 3, 1892.

Added table of contents.

Retained inconsistent punctuation after "Alex" in Mrs. Alex. McVeigh Miller.

Some inconsistent hyphenation retained (e.g. "serpent-ring" vs. "serpent ring").

Eagle series list #982 and #1103, changed "Daugher" to "Daughter."

Copyright page, changed "Renewel" to "Renewal."

Page 6, changed "he eyes" to "her eyes."

Page 7, added missing close quote after "Where do you live?"

Page 10, changed "brning" to "burning."

Page 15, capitalized sentence "What if she recognizes me?"

Page 25, changed "suddered" to "shuddered."

Page 29, added missing quote after "Mr. Mountcastle's life."

Page 76, added "in" to "abroad in this lovely summer weather."

Page 87, changed "distressd" to "distressed."

Page 96, changed "prefered" to "preferred."

Page 103, changed "Azelea" to "Azalea."

Page 112, changed "heat-broken" to "heart-broken."

Page 120, changed "Kane" to "Kayne."

Page 133, added missing space in "dead white."

Page 141, changed "first" to "fist."

Page 153, changed "van" to "Van."

Page 160, changed "van" to "Van."

Page 168, changed "Van Wise" to "Van Hise."

Page 174, changed "Van Nise" to "Van Hise."

Page 179, changed "Castra" to "Castro."

Page 186, changed question mark to exclamation point after "walked on," changed "Castra" to "Castro," and changed "committed" to "commited."

Page 188, changed "take her from he" to "take her from me."

Page 196, added missing "in" to "he lifted her up in his arms."

Page 199, changed "bloor" to "blood."

Page 213, changed "heartlesness" to "heartlessness."

Page 214, changed "van" to "Van."

Page 223, added "his" to "her brother and his wife."

Page 224, changed "darding" to "darling."

Page 225, changed period to question mark after "fancy."

Page 234, changed comma to period at end of fourth full paragraph.

Page 237, added "I" to "but I was young."

Page 243, changed "van" to "Van."

Page 251, moved comma from after Nita in "The next day, Nita...."

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