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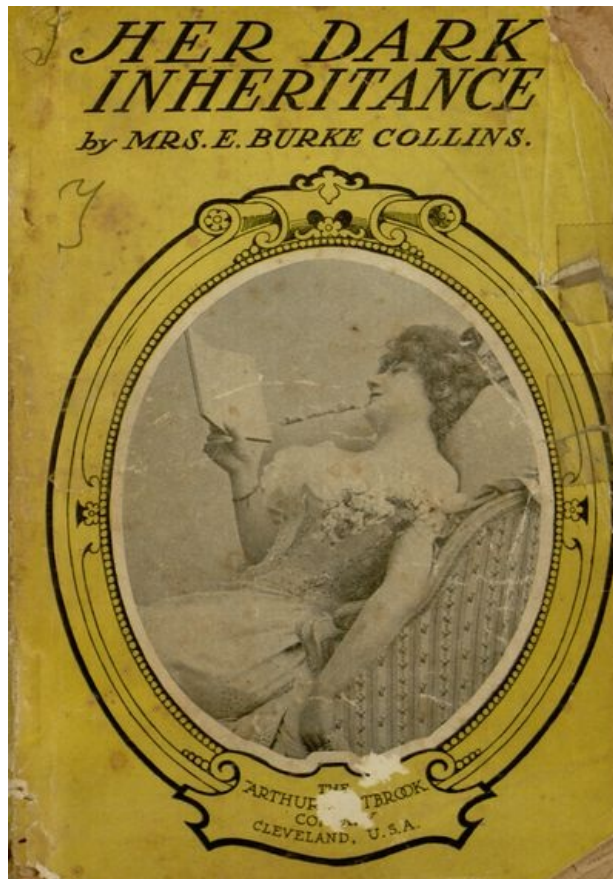
Author: Mrs. E. Burke Collins

Release date: July 22, 2014 [EBook #46363]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Demian Katz and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net> (Images courtesy of the Digital Library@Villanova University (<http://digital.library.villanova.edu/>))

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HER DARK INHERITANCE

By MRS. E. BURKE COLLINS

HART SERIES NO. 66

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HER DARK INHERITANCE

CHAPTER I.

A DARK NIGHT'S SECRET.

A night of storm and tempest, the wind blowing a perfect gale; and above its mad shrieking the sullen roar of the ocean, as it beat against the shore in angry vehemence, recoiling with wrathful force, as though to gather strength for a fresh onslaught. The little town of Chester, Massachusetts, near the beach, lay wrapped in gloom and darkness, under the lowering midnight sky, "while the rains descended and the floods came." It was a terrible night, that tenth of November. One man was destined to remember that night as long as he lived. Alone in his dingy little office, Doctor Frederick Lynne sat, absorbed in the contents of a medical journal, his grave face bent over the printed page upon which his eyes were fixed with eager interest, while the

moments came and went unnoticed. He closed the journal at last with an impatient gesture, and pushed it aside. Arising slowly to his feet—a tall, dark, elderly man, with a troubled, anxious expression—he went slowly over to the bright wood-fire which burned upon the broad hearth, and stood gazing down into the bed of rosy coals, the anxious look deepening in his eyes. A poor country physician, with a wife and child depending upon his exertions, he found the struggle for subsistence growing harder every day.

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"Ugh! what a night!" he muttered, "I dread to start for home. I believe I will wait until the storm subsides a little. Heigh-ho!" claspng his hands behind his head with a weary little gesture; "if only the struggle were not quite so hard—so desperate! If only I need not slave as I do! Hard work and poor pay. It is enough to make a man discouraged, especially a man with a wife like mine. She is always longing and wishing for fine clothes, and a better home and all the luxuries that only money can supply. It drives me nearly mad at times; and there's no way of escape only to come down here to the office and lock myself in. Heavens! I wish that I were rich. I would do almost anything in the world for money; anything—*almost*."

Tap, tap, tap, at the outer door of the office.

The entire building consisted of two rooms—a private consulting-room, and the office proper, which opened out upon the long, straight village street, with its sleepy-looking stores and the great, bare, unpainted hotel, which seemed perennially empty.

At sound of that unexpected summons, Doctor Lynne started in surprise. For five long years he had occupied that office, whose weather-beaten shingle told the passers-by that Frederick Lynne, M. D., might be found within; but never before within memory had he been summoned upon a night like this. Sickness was at a discount in healthy Chester, where people usually died of old age. But as he stood there, staring vacantly about him, trying to persuade himself that it had been only a freak of the imagination, once more that ghostly tapping sounded upon the stout oaken panels of the office door.

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"It *is* some one!" ejaculated the astonished physician, going swiftly to the door and unbolting it.

"You'd better be all night about it," growled a voice from the door-step; and Lynne saw before him a tall man wrapped in a long dark cloak, the high collar turned up about his ears, a broad-brimmed sombrero pulled down over his brows so that no feature of the face was visible save a pair of flashing dark eyes and a prominent nose.

"Doctor Lynne, I presume?" queried the stranger.

The physician bowed.

"I am Doctor Lynne, sir," he returned, simply. "Are my services required?"

"Yes. Wait a moment."

The physician stood there in the open door, through which the wind swept madly, nearly extinguishing the dim light of the little oil lamp upon the reading-table, his astonished eyes fixed upon an unwonted spectacle. A closed carriage which stood without, its driver, enveloped in an oil-skin coat, sitting like a statue upon the box. The stranger walked swiftly to the carriage door and opened it. A pause ensued, during which Doctor Lynne began to feel strangely uncomfortable; then, to his relief, the stranger reappeared at the office door, bearing in his arms the slight figure of a woman.

"Have you any brandy or other stimulant?" he asked, as he placed the limp, unresisting figure upon the old-fashioned sofa which stood in a corner.

"Certainly. Shall I administer some? The lady is—ill?"

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"Very ill. Will you kindly take charge of her while I go to the hotel and make arrangements for our reception there? This lady is my wife. She was taken suddenly ill on the road, and I am a stranger here."

Doctor Lynne was hurriedly searching the old-fashioned corner cupboard for brandy and other restoratives.

"I will do all in my power, certainly," he returned. "Have you come far?"

He turned swiftly as he spoke and found that the stranger had disappeared. The physician rushed to the door and peered out into the night and storm. The carriage had disappeared also; there was no one to be seen. A strange oppression settled slowly down upon Doctor Lynne's spirits; he closed the door and went back to the fire. The silent figure upon the sofa had neither moved nor stirred; the face was hidden from view by a thick veil. But as the doctor paused before the fire to measure some brandy into the glass in his hand, the silence of the room was broken by an unexpected sound—*the cry of a little child*.

With a start of surprise Doctor Lynne hastened to the sofa, and saw for the first time that the sick woman held a child in her arms. He stooped and attempted to remove it—a lovely, smiling little creature of some nine or ten months.

"Allow me, madame," he began, gently. "The babe is too heavy, and you are ill. What is the trouble?"

No answer. No sound to break the silence of the stormy night. Only, off in the distance the shriek of an engine as the down express—having halted as usual at the station—the brief pause which was considered long enough for a dead-and-alive place like Chester—dashed madly on its way once more. Doctor Lynne's eyes sought the silent, recumbent form of the woman, and something

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in her attitude and the strange and inexplicable silence that she maintained struck to his heart with an uneasy sensation.

"Madame," he repeated, venturing to lay his hand upon her shoulder, "you are ill—suffering. Tell me, where is the pain?"

No answer. Something in that awful silence made his heart grow faint and cold. He lifted his hand and swiftly, reverently removed the veil from the woman's face. With a cry of horror he recoiled from the sight. The woman was *dead*—dead and cold, and had been for hours!

He rushed to the door, and opening it glared wildly out into the night and darkness. There was no sign of any living creature. Doctor Lynne closed the door once more and went back to the silent figure upon the sofa. The face before him was very beautiful—a woman of some five-and-twenty years. The body was attired in handsome garments, and one hand—a beautiful white hand, with a plain gold ring upon the third finger—grasped, even in death, a tiny vial. The vial was empty, but it bore the hideous skull and crossbones, together with the significant legend: "Laudanum—poison."

Clasped in the death-cold arms lay the child, a lovely little girl; while pinned to its dainty white slip was a folded paper addressed to "Doctor Frederick Lynne." Bewildered at the strange occurrences, the physician hurriedly opened the folded paper and read these words:

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"DOCTOR FREDERICK LYNNE,—You have wished many a time for wealth; the chance to acquire a competence is now in your grasp. Keep this child and rear it as your own, and every year a sum of money sufficient for her support and that of your entire family shall be forwarded to you, on condition that you make no effort to discover the child's parents or antecedents. Should you attempt such a discovery the remittance will cease. But remember this, she is of good family, well-born, and legitimate. You may call her *Beatrix Dane*."

Accompanying the letter was a crisp one thousand-dollar bill. This was all, but surely it was enough to make the worthy physician stare in surprise.

Inquiry the next morning elicited the information that a strange man had suddenly appeared at the station the night previous and boarded the down express. The carriage had disappeared as mysteriously as it had come, no one knew whither. The whole affair was shrouded in mystery.

The coroner's inquest resulted in the verdict of "Death from laudanum, administered by some person unknown." The body was buried away in the village grave-yard, and Doctor Lynne took the infant to his humble home. It was received unwillingly enough by Mrs. Lynne—a hard-featured, high-tempered woman, who ruled her husband and household with a rod of iron; but for the sake of the money she consented reluctantly to receive the child. And so Beatrix Dane grew up to womanhood; but before she reached her seventeenth year the remittances ceased, and the black shadow of poverty brooded over the cheerless home of the Lynnes. "Troubles never come singly." So just at this juncture Doctor Lynne was stricken with partial paralysis of the limbs, which would render him an invalid for life. All the future looked gloomy and threatening, and the gaunt wolf hovered at the door of the Lynnes' humble home.

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CHAPTER II.

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HER FAIRY PRINCE.

"Any letters, Mr. Grey?"

The voice was low and eager. The girl to whom the voice belonged paused before the dingy counter of the country store and post-office combined, and stood patiently waiting. The postmaster, a rosy-faced old gentleman, with a superabundance of bald head, glanced over the meager assortment of epistolary communications in the little lettered boxes before him, and shook his head slowly.

"No! Oh—yes, to be sure! Wait a moment, if you please, Miss Beatrix," he corrected himself, pouncing upon a large white envelope, which he placed upon the counter before her with an air of satisfaction. "Here you are! I nigh overlooked it. It's for your pa—see—'Doctor Frederick Lynne, Chester, Mass.,' and postmarked New Orleans. Now, who kin it be from? Your pa got any relative down South? No,"—(as the girl shook her head decidedly)—"I thought not. I've knowed Doctor Lynne these one-and-twenty years, and I never heerd him talk o' no relatives down South. How's your ma, Miss Beatrix?"

The girl's dark eyes flashed.

"My mother?" she repeated, with a little tinge of contempt in her sweet voice. "You mean Mrs. Lynne? You will please remember, Mr. Grey, that although I call Doctor Lynne father, his wife is not my mother."

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"Eh? What? Waal, I declar'! But still, arter all, you're right. You're putty nigh always right, Miss Trix. Nothin' more today?" he added, anxiously, as having slipped the letter into her pocket, the girl was about to move away.

"No. Yes, there is. You may cut me off fifteen yards of that garnet merino, if you please, Mr. Grey.

Papa said that I might, and—"

"Yes, yes, Miss Beatrix; it's all right. And mercy knows you need a new dress! Think you'll be able to carry such a big bundle all the way home? Yes? Waal, young folks orter be strong, and you always was able to take keer o' yourself. So, Miss Beatrix"—measuring off the soft folds of merino with deft fingers—"you don't 'pear to like Mrs. Lynne? Waal, 'tain't in natur' for a gal to keer as much for a 'dopted mother as she would for her own. Your mother—no one here knows who she was, Miss Trix; but when I looked upon her dead face, I declar' I thought I was a-lookin' at the face o' an angel."

The girl's dark eyes filled with tears, but she choked them bravely back.

"We will not speak of her now, if you please, Mr. Grey," she suggested. "And, really, I must make haste home, for it is getting late."

Mr. Grey took off his huge steel-bowed spectacles and rubbed them vigorously upon his sleeve.

"To be sure. The days is gettin' shorter, for a fact. November is a dreary month hereabouts; and, upon my word, Miss Trix, I really believe it's goin' to snow. And you have two good miles to walk."

"Yes, sir; I know. I would have come earlier, but Mrs. Lynne objected, and of course I dared not disobey. Then papa glanced up from his books—since his affliction all he can do is to read and write, you know—he glanced up from his books long enough to see that I was really anxious to go, and then he happened to remember that we had not heard from the post-office in three days—three whole days—and so he gave me permission. But I must make haste, for it is five o'clock, and it will be dark before six."

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"To be sure—to be sure, Miss Beatrix. Good-night, my dear. I hope you'll reach home all right."

"Thank you. Nothing will harm me, I am sure. Good-night."

The door of the weather-beaten old building opened and closed behind her, and the girl stood alone under the gray of the November sky—a slight, slim figure in a dowdyish brown serge gown, and a hat of last year's fashion—a graceful little figure with a face of rare beauty. Pale, colorless complexion, with straight, delicate features, and large, velvety dark eyes, and a mass of gold-brown hair, Beatrix Dane was well worth looking at as she stood there; for even her common—not to say shabby—attire did not conceal the exquisite grace and beauty of her face and form. For a moment she stood gazing about her, then with a low sigh she hastened away.

Two weary miles lay between the little country town and the cheerless home of Doctor Lynne whom she looked upon as an own father; but the hard-hearted mistress of the house could never stand in the place of a mother to the lonely girl. She was thinking of it now as she hastened over the hard, frozen road, the sun sinking slowly out of sight in the gloomy west, a light fall of snow beginning slowly to descend.

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"How I wish I were rich!" she exclaimed, half aloud; "then I would not live in a place like this, away from the world. And I would have my own carriage and need not walk. It must be delightful to have all the money you wish, and not have to wear the same old gown forever—a dyed old gown, too, which is positively hideous."

She drew the gayly colored plaid shawl that she wore closer about her shoulders to keep out the chill evening air, and she shuddered involuntarily as her eyes fell upon the ugly wrap. The girl was an artist by nature, and anything incongruous or out of harmony jarred upon her like a shock, while any unfortunate mistake in the blending of colors would send a chill through her artistic soul.

"Oh, dear! I wish my fairy prince would come!" she cried, half laughingly, "and rescue me from my unpleasant surroundings. My fairy prince! Like the princes in the story-books, he must be young, rich, and handsome; courteous and—and everything nice. He must be tall and graceful, with soft dark eyes, and hair as black as midnight; a sweet mouth, but firm and resolute, and a determined chin. I have seen a picture like that—where was it? Oh, yes; in Mrs. Lynne's photograph album. I asked her who it was, and she told me that it was no concern of mine. To be sure, it was not; but then I only asked a civil answer to a harmless question. Ah, Mrs. Lynne! you will be the death of me yet—you and your ugly daughter! Serena Lynne and I can never live as sisters. The thought of it makes me long for the coming of my Prince Charming, who will take me away to peace and happiness. I wish my own father would come for me. I wish my own mother had not died. I—I—Good gracious! *what is that?*"

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She came to a frightened halt, gazing about her with terror-dilated eyes. A few rods before her a little river remained to be crossed—a narrow stream, but very deep and with a very rapid current. Spanning the stream was a dilapidated bridge, which had already been condemned for the use of vehicles; but still a few venturesome pedestrians trusted their lives upon its frail strength. Beatrix had crossed upon the bridge; she had fully expected to return in that way; but now, as she came to a frightened halt, the sound of a horse's feet broke the silence, and she beheld an unexpected scene. Just before her, half-way over the bridge, she saw a big black horse, and upon his back a man—a young man—a stranger in that vicinity. He was crossing the dilapidated structure without a suspicion that it was unsafe. Even as the girl's eyes fell upon the scene, *crash!* went the rotten timbers. There was a wild cry, a rush through space, then the thud of a falling body as man and horse struck the swift-flowing current below. The horse, once freed from its rider, swam swiftly toward the shore and reached the opposite bank, up which it scrambled and soon disappeared. Pale and trembling, the girl crept close to the river-bank, and glanced over. She could see that tall, dark form battling manfully with the waves; the river was

deepest and swiftest at this point—the water ice-cold. If the swimmer was able to keep up for a time, he must soon succumb to the cold, half-frozen element. She stood transfixed with horror, her eyes riveted upon the dark figure rising and falling with the current as he strove to keep himself afloat, and made a desperate fight for life.

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"Heaven have mercy!" cried the girl; "must he die there alone? Oh, what shall I do? What can I do?"

There was no one within a mile of the spot. Long before she could summon help he would have sunk to the bottom, chilled through and through. How could he long persist in his mad efforts to save himself? All at once an inspiration rushed into the girl's heart—a slim chance, but it seemed the only one. Fortunately, the stream, though so deep and swift, was not wide. Her plan seemed feasible. Removing the long, stout shawl from her shivering shoulders, she crept to the very edge of the bank and leaned over. The swimmer was nearly paralyzed from the cold, and was fast giving up; but his eyes fell upon the girl, and he saw at once what she was trying to do.

"Can you swim near enough to reach it?" she called aloud.

For answer he made one more desperate effort; then she saw for the first time that he had been injured in some way by the falling timbers—one of his limbs seemed nearly useless. But with superhuman efforts he strove to swim within reach of that bright colored banner streaming out upon the water. A little nearer—a little nearer! He was faint and chilled to the bone.

She leaned far over the brink of the stream, her teeth set hard together, her eyes flashing with resolution.

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"Try!" she cried once more in her clear, cheery voice. "Don't give up yet. Try—*try hard!*"

One more desperate plunge and he had caught the strong woolen fabric in both chilled, numb hands. Could she tow him to shore? Would she have strength—that frail, slight creature? She stepped slowly backward, and with all her might pulled upon the impromptu rope.

Moments passed, which seemed hours to Beatrix Dane, but she did not give up. Her face was set and pale, the little white teeth shut closely down upon her under lip, her hands grasped the shawl with a strength born of desperation.

And so at last the deed was done; the body of the man—for he was quite unconscious now—was dragged to shore, and Beatrix Dane stooped and gazed into the still, white face. She fell back with a cry of astonishment. It was the face of her dreams—her imaginary hero, her fairy prince. His eyes were closed, but there was the hair as black as midnight, the straight, delicate features, the small, firm mouth, half hidden by the silky black mustache, the graceful figure. He was all that her fancy had painted; he was a facsimile of the picture that had pleased her so.

She gazed upon the still, white face, and her heart thrilled with a strange and unaccountable feeling; a subtle happiness seemed to pervade her being.

"How handsome he is!" she exclaimed. "And oh! what can I do to restore him to consciousness? Poor fellow! he will freeze."

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The cold, chilly winds of November were straying about through the bare, bleak country-side; they swept over the drenched form lying upon the cold ground. And Beatrix's heart grew chill as a horrible fear assailed her that he would soon be frozen to death. His clothing was literally freezing upon his body. Her shawl, the only warm garment which she possessed, was dripping with water; she wrung out its folds as well as she could, and hung it upon a neighboring bush to dry. Then she glanced around her; she must find some way to warm him, or he would perish there before her. Her eyes fell upon the package which lay upon the ground near by; the package containing the material for her new dress—the first new dress that she had had in a whole year. The soft, warm folds of merino would help to keep the life within his chilled frame. There was no help for it, the dress must go. Tearing open the wrapper, she drew forth the pretty garnet merino, and not without a little pang, as she remembered the rebuke which Mrs. Lynne would have in store for her, she wound the warm folds about his neck and chest.

Utterly unprotected herself, she stood shivering beside the unconscious man, chafing his numb hands and wrapping them in her skirts to try and restore the circulation.

The sun had long since set; night was coming swiftly down. But she could not leave him to certain death, even were it possible for her to cross the bridge herself. A thought struck her; she ventured to slip her hand timidly into the pocket of the young man's coat. If she could find a few matches! Yes; how fortunate! There, in a tiny metal safe impervious to the water were plenty of lucifers. She heaped together a quantity of brushwood and soon had lighted a fire. All at once, she saw that the stranger's eyes were open and fixed upon her face with a strange, questioning expression—great dark eyes ideally beautiful. He struggled to a sitting posture, his form trembling like a leaf.

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"What has happened?" he faltered, feebly. "How came I here? And you—who are you?"

"My name is Dane," the girl replied. "You fell through the bridge, and I helped you out of the water."

"You saved my life? Ah, yes! I remember now. You are a brave girl. And, by Jove!"—as his glance wandered to the slight, shivering figure—"you have no wrap. What is this?" trying to start to his feet, but falling back once more with an involuntary cry of pain. "I—I fear that I am going to faint!" he murmured, feebly. "Miss—Dane, will you please—look in my coat-pocket for a flask—of —brandy?"

She obeyed him in silence, and fortunately found a flask nearly filled with brandy. She forced him gently to a seat which she had prepared of moss and dry brushwood. Then, with deft fingers, she removed the drinking-cup attached to the flask, and poured it nearly full of the liquor. She held it to his lips, but he motioned it away.

"You must drink some first," he said, in a tone which she never once thought of disobeying. "Oh, yes! you must! It may help to save your life. No matter though you do not like it, you must drink it."

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With a wry face the girl obeyed him, and drank some of the fiery liquid, after which the stranger followed her example. Then they crouched before the fire to await the next move in the little romance.

An hour passed, and then relief came. Two men in a boat, rowing swiftly down the river, saw Beatrix standing in the light of the brushwood fire. A few vigorous pulls and the boat was landed, and the story told. It did not take long to assist the stranger into the boat, and Beatrix was safely seated in the stern before it occurred to her that she had not inquired his destination.

"I was on my way to Doctor Frederick Lynne's," the young man explained. "My name is Keith Kenyon, and my home is in New Orleans."

Keith Kenyon! The name fell upon the girl's ears like a strain of half-forgotten music. Her great dark eyes met his with a startled glance of surprise.

"Why, you were going to my home!" she exclaimed. "I am Doctor Lynne's adopted daughter—Beatrix Dane."

As the words passed her lips their eyes met, and a strange, subtle thrill went through Beatrix Dane's heart at sight of the strange expression in his dark eyes.

But they had now reached the opposite shore, where a team and light wagon were speedily procured, and the kind-hearted men who were acting the part of good Samaritans to the two so strangely thrown together, drove them at once to Doctor Lynne's—the old, weather-beaten, unpainted house where Beatrix Dane had passed her childhood and youth, and where the strange romance of her young life was destined to begin.

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CHAPTER III.

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LIKE A THIEF IN THE NIGHT.

"I wonder what keeps Beatrix so late? I am getting very uneasy about her. It is after dark, and snowing hard. I am very anxious, and besides I've been thinking of the bridge over the river. I don't believe from all accounts that it is half safe. Serena, go to the door and see if she is coming."

Doctor Lynne had grown quite old and feeble in the years that had elapsed since that night of mystery—that momentous tenth of November. He leaned heavily upon his cane, without which he could not walk at all, and turned from the window where he had been stationed for the last half hour.

Serena Lynne glanced up from the depths of the big arm-chair where she sat absorbed in a novel, and a frown disfigured her not very attractive face.

"Why do you bother so about Trix, papa?" she asked, sharply. "The girl is able to take care of herself. It is scarcely dark, and she will be home directly. And she would go, you know, although mamma tried her best to prevent her."

"Go to the door and see if she is coming," repeated Frederick Lynne sternly. "Serena you are utterly devoid of heart. Trix is ten years younger than you and but a child. Poor little thing! if anything has happened to her I shall never forgive myself for permitting her to go."

Serena Lynne laid her book aside with a gesture of impatience, rising to her feet slowly and unwillingly. A tall ungraceful young woman of some six or seven-and-twenty with flaxen hair and pale blue eyes—not a beauty by any means. And it was the sight of her adopted sister's fair young beauty that made her invariably ill-tempered and unkind to Beatrix. She moved slowly and ungraciously to the door, and opened it, making an unlovely picture as she walked, trailing the folds of her slatternly blue serge wrapper over the faded carpet, her feet thrust into a pair of ragged slippers, her hair in an untidy little knot at the back of her head. She wore no collar, none of the pretty little devices which a neat woman always affects, but a soiled white Shetland shawl was huddled about her shoulders, and her sharp, peevish face, with its sallow complexion and wide mouth, did not make a pretty or lovable picture. For a time she stood peering out into the darkness. At last:

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"Papa!"—in a tone of suppressed excitement—"I hear the sound of wheels. I think—I believe—yes, it is a wagon, and it is stopping at the gate. There, I suppose your pet Beatrix is home at last, and no harm done."

Doctor Lynne hobbled slowly to the open door. His wife, the personal counterpart of her daughter, glanced up from the pile of mending with which she was occupying herself, and a disagreeable expression settled down upon her hard features.

"Thank Heaven if she has really come at last!" she ejaculated; "that girl is the curse of my life! I only wish that we could get rid of her! I don't see how we are going to support her, now that the money has ceased to come!"

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"Silence!"

Doctor Lynne turned sharply upon his wife.

"I will hear no more of this!" he said, sternly. "Beatrice Dane shall stay here as long as she sees fit. Poor child! I imagine that she would not remain long if she had her own way in the matter. Serena,"—making his way to the door as swiftly as he was able—"what is the matter?"

There was a slight bustle upon the broad veranda outside, where a group of dark figures were outlined against the blackness of the sky. A moment later and Beatrice flashed into the room, pale and excited, her eyes shining like stars.

"Oh, papa! papa!"—kissing the old man's haggard face. "Such a strange thing has happened! The river bridge broke just as a gentleman was crossing on horseback. He fell into the water, and I—I helped him all I could, and he got out. And oh, papa, just think! He was on his way to this house—to you. He is outside."

Even as she spoke, the two men made their appearance in the doorway, leading between them the faltering, swaying figure of the young man. Beatrice hastily wheeled forward the easy-chair which Serena had vacated, and the helpless man sank into its capacious depths. Then the men who had brought Beatrice and the stranger hither took their departure.

"Mrs. Lynne,"—Beatrice turned pleadingly to that lady—"will you not do something for this gentleman? He is suffering greatly. His name is Kenyon—Mr. Keith Kenyon."

"*Keith Kenyon!*" Mrs. Lynne started to her feet, pale with surprise. "Why, so it is!" she cried, stooping to peer into the face of the half-unconscious man. "Keith! Keith! look up. Thank Heaven you are safe with us! Serena, go and light a fire in the spare chamber for your cousin Keith."

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Beatrice started in surprise. During all the years passed under that roof she had never before heard of the existence of such a person.

"Your cousin?" she repeated, in a bewildered way, as Serena left the room, in obedience to her mother's directions.

Mrs. Lynne's pale eyes flashed.

"To be sure. At least, he is not exactly a cousin, only by adoption; which is all the better for Serena, as I do not approve of the marriage of cousins."

A strange pang shot through Beatrice Dane's girlish heart—a pang which was to her quite unaccountable. Why should she care whom Keith Kenyon married? Surely, it was nothing to her. Poor little Beatrice! Although she did not dream the truth, the spell of love was being woven about her young heart.

"Out flew the web, and floated wide,
The mirror cracked from side to side;
'The curse is come upon me!' cried
The Lady of Shalott."

An hour later the young man was placed in bed in the warm "spare chamber." Doctor Lynne having examined his injuries, found them not as serious as had been feared; and once attended to, Keith slept the sleep of exhaustion.

Twelve o'clock had struck before Beatrice retired to her own bare little chamber, and seated herself before the fire which she had ventured to kindle. No one had thought of her, or given her the slightest attention; Doctor Lynne, because he had been absorbed in his patient to the exclusion of every other object; the two women—mother and daughter—simply because they did not care. Beatrice unfastened her beautiful hair, and seating herself before the fire, wrapped a worsted shawl about her shoulders. The door of her room was pushed slowly open, and Serena appeared.

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"Up yet?" she queried in a shrill, sharp voice. "Well, I would like to ask you a few questions, Miss Beatrice Dane. By the way, I wonder if your name is—really Dane?"

A swift flush crimsoned the girl's pure cheek.

"We will not discuss that question tonight, Serena," she said, gently. "I am quite too tired and sleepy."

Serena came and stood before the fire, resting her sallow cheek against the ugly wooden mantel.

"Tell me all about this thrilling adventure of yours," she began, abruptly; "really, it is quite too romantic!"

In a few patient words Beatrice repeated all that had occurred.

"I did not dream that Mr. Kenyon was a friend of yours," she added, in conclusion.

Serena's pale eyes sparkled.

"Friend? He is more than a mere friend!" she said, eagerly; "he is my cousin by adoption, and—and, Beatrice, I have never told you before; but I expect to be his wife some day!"

"*Impossible!*"

The word fell from Beatrix Dane's lips unawares. In an instant she realized the mistake that she had made. [Pg 26]

"I—I beg your pardon!" she faltered; "I did not mean to offend you, Serena!"

"*Offend?*" Serena's thin lips parted in a disagreeable smile. "*You* could not offend me if you tried; not *you*—a nameless nobody!" she sneered. "And whatever you may say or think in regard to the matter, the truth remains—I am engaged to marry Keith Kenyon. Are you satisfied? What else, do you imagine, has brought him to this out-of-the-way place? It seems that he telegraphed to papa that he was coming; but the stupid idiots at the station neglected to send the message out here. I shall be glad when I get away from this hateful, dead-and-alive hole, and live in a large city, in an elegant house, with everything that heart can wish. Keith's home is in New Orleans, and I have always felt a great desire to visit the South."

New Orleans! The name aroused Beatrix with a little start. For the first time since her arrival home she remembered the letter that had come from New Orleans for Doctor Lynne. She searched hastily in the pocket of her dress for the missive. Yes, it was there, all safe.

"I must see papa at once," she observed, rising to her feet.

"*Papa*, indeed!" mimicked Serena, contemptuously. "If I were you I would wait until I could prove my right to call any one by that name before I—"

"*Hush!* Not another word! I will hear no more of your insolence. Leave my room, Serena Lynne, and never enter it again until you can treat me with proper respect." [Pg 27]

"Well, I declare! Good gracious! what next? How we *do* put on airs! For my part—I—"

"Very well. If you will not vacate, I shall leave the room myself," cried Beatrix, too indignant to endure any more. She was faint and exhausted from fatigue and the exposures of the night. No one had offered her even a cup of tea or the slightest refreshment after her adventure in the cold night air, chilled and half clothed as she had been; and she was not enough at home in the house, where she had lived for sixteen years, to venture to suggest her need of refreshment. She flashed swiftly past the discomfited Serena, and down the bare stairs to Doctor Lynne's large cheerful sleeping apartment. Mrs. Lynne was still with the patient, and peeping in at the open door of Doctor Lynne's room, Beatrix was so fortunate as to find him there alone.

"Papa!"—hesitatingly—"may I speak with you?"

Frederick Lynne glanced up, and a glad light flashed over his worn countenance.

"Certainly, my dear!" he returned. "Come in. Why, Beatrix, child!"—with a startled glance into her white face—"you are ill, exhausted. How thoughtless and selfish in me not to think of you before. Here, drink a glass of wine!"

He filled a glass from the decanter of home-made wine upon the table, and held it to her lips. Beatrix drained the contents of the glass; then she sank wearily into the empty chair at his side.

"Papa, do you know anything concerning my parents—my real parents?" she asked, abruptly.

His face grew pale. [Pg 28]

"No, dear; you have heard all that I know in regard to your history. Do not trouble yourself, Beatrix; it will all come right some time, I am sure. Try to have faith that all is for the best."

"I wish I could. I am tired of this life—tired of living here with Mrs. Lynne and Serena. I shall be glad to go out into the world and earn my own living. Don't look so horrified, daddy, darling. And by the way, I nearly forgot my errand here to you. I have a letter for you."

She drew the letter from her pocket and laid it in his hand.

At sight of the superscription his face grew pale as death. Breaking the seal with a trembling hand, he drew forth two inclosures—two separate letters.

"Go, my dear," he said, gently; "it is late, and you must retire now. Besides, I would rather be alone. Kiss me good-night, Beatrix, my little comfort."

She stooped, and putting her white arms about his neck, laid her warm, red lips upon his.

"Good-night, papa, darling," she whispered.

At the door of the room she paused and looked back. He was sitting in a dejected attitude, his white head resting upon one hand; the other held the letters.

She went slowly and thoughtfully upstairs back to her own room, and, retiring, was soon sound asleep.

She was aroused from slumber by a shrill shriek which resounded through the silent house. Starting to her feet, Beatrix threw on a loose wrapper, and thrusting her bare feet into a pair of slippers, left the room and flew swiftly down-stairs. She made her way instinctively to Doctor Lynne's room. He was seated in his arm-chair before the fire, just as she had left him, while his wife, whose cry of horror had aroused the house, stood near, pale and terrified. One of the letters which he had received had been destroyed by fire—only a heap of smoke-blackened fragments upon the hearth remained to tell the tale; but one hand clutched the other letter in a convulsive grasp, as he sat there, white, and still, and dead. Death had stolen in like a thief in the night, and he was gone forever. [Pg 29]

The letter which that cold, stiff hand clutched tenaciously, was found to contain these words:

"DOCTOR LYNNE,—The time has come for you to know the truth concerning the child of your adoption, Beatrix Dane. The accompanying letter contains a full explanation. When you have read it, you will see that it is best for you to send her to me now. Let her come to New Orleans, to the inclosed address, as soon as possible. You will receive a remittance for all her necessary expenses, by registered mail, in a few days. When that arrives, send Beatrix Dane to me. The time has come when she must learn the hideous secret connected with her birth—when she must face her own future, and enter upon her heritage of woe.

"BERNARD DANE."

CHAPTER IV.

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A MAD PASSION.

Cold and still in death, Frederick Lynne sat in his big arm-chair, one icy hand clutching the letter which bade Beatrix face an unknown and dreaded future—face it all alone. Mrs. Lynne stood near, crying aloud in terrified accents for help, for succor, her face as white as the dead man's, when Beatrix entered the room. One swift glance, which did not comprehend the situation—for poor Beatrix knew nothing of the horrors of death, and had never faced it before—one swift, terrified glance, and she flew to the dead man's side.

"Papa! oh, papa!" she cried in an agonized voice, "what is the matter, dear? Are you ill? Are you —"

"*Hush!*" Mrs. Lynne's bony hand came down upon the girl's arm with emphasis. "Be quiet, you baby!" she panted. "Can't you see that he is—is *dead?*"

The girl fell back as though the heavy hand had struck her a blow; her great dark eyes dilated with horror; the small hands clinched each other spasmodically; her breath came and went in short, panting; gasps. Could it be true? Was this grim death before her? Was the kindly heart—the heart of her only friend—cold and still forever? It could not—could not be!

"Dead?" she repeated, blankly, her lips quivering over the awful word—"dead? Oh, no, Mrs. Lynne! surely you are mistaken! Let us try to do something for him. I will call Serena to stay with you, and I will go for help. I can ride the gentleman's horse—Mr. Kenyon's—it is here, you know. I will go over to town and get Doctor Stone."

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"Humph! You can not. The bridge is gone; and, besides it is utterly useless. I have seen death too many times, Beatrix Dane, to be mistaken. I tell you he is dead and has been for hours; he is quite cold. See!"

With a slow, reluctant movement Beatrix ventured to lay her trembling fingers upon the cold, rigid hand of the corpse. She drew back with a low cry of terror.

"Oh! how cold—how cold!" she moaned. "Oh, papa! papa! papa! cold and dead! It is true—it is indeed true. Oh, Mrs. Lynne! what shall we do without him?"

Mrs. Lynne's thin lip curled.

"What will I do, you mean?" she retorted. "It can have no effect upon you. See! that letter in his hand is a message for you. You are to go away at once to your own home, thank goodness!"

The great brown velvety eyes met the cold orbs before her with a stare of astonishment.

"Go home—to—my—own home, Mrs. Lynne?" she repeated, blankly. "Why, I have no home but this!"

"Indeed! And pray, who gave you a right to call this home? Such as it is, it is the only shelter that you have had for sixteen years. You ought to be ready to leave it now. You are nearly seventeen years old, and able to take care of yourself. Ah! there is Serena at last!" as a limp figure made its appearance in the open door—a tall, ungraceful figure in a calico wrapper, and muffled in a huge woolen shawl.

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"*Mamma*"—in a tone of consternation—"what has happened? What is the matter with papa? Is he ill?"

Mrs. Lynne wound her arms around the angular form of her daughter, and burst into tears—the first real emotion which she had ever betrayed before Beatrix.

"He is *dead*, Serena!" she faltered—"dead and gone! And Heaven only knows what is to become of you and me! Not even sufficient means in the house to defray the funeral expenses; and, of course, with his death, the small pension which he received from his professional brethren of the Medical Club expires also. Oh, dear—oh, dear! it was an unfortunate day when I married Fred Lynne and tied myself down to poverty!"

"Well, well, that was long enough ago for you to forget it now," interposed her dutiful daughter. "Mamma"—putting away her mother's arms from about her neck—"whatever you do, don't be foolish. Have you tried to restore him? He may not be dead, after all."

"He *is* dead. I have done everything that I possibly could before I called any one. When I found all my efforts useless, I gave up in despair, and I screamed so loudly that it awoke Beatrix, and she

came to the room."

"*Beatrix!* Ah!"—with a swift glance of malice into the girl's white face—"and so *she* heard you? She is always sneaking around where she is not wanted. Mamma, have you—have you read that letter?" pointing to the crumpled sheet of paper which Mrs. Lynne had with great difficulty succeeded in removing from the cold hand of the dead man.

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"Yes. It contains the very best news imaginable. It is a letter from that girl's people sending for her at last."

"Impossible! Why, I did not believe that she had any people. But—there is another letter upon the hearth. See! it is burned. I believe papa destroyed it as soon as he read it, for some purpose of his own. How very exasperating!"

Serena was on her knees now upon the hearth, eagerly but carefully turning over the blackened sheet of paper which had been torn in four pieces and cast upon the fire. But the fire was at its last gasp when the deed was done, and the paper had not burned—only blackened and scorched until the contents of the letter were perfectly undecipherable. Serena examined the written sheet attentively, and her face grew dark with intense disappointment.

"How provoking!" she muttered, savagely. "There was, no doubt, something of importance in that letter. I believe in my heart that the news it contained has killed my father. Yet he has destroyed the letter, and there is nothing left to tell the tale."

She rose to her feet and glanced furtively around. Beatrix had thrown herself upon the faded sofa, and was sobbing softly, her face hid in her hands. Mrs. Lynne was beginning to make some attempt at arranging the poor body—an attempt which must be made alone since they were so isolated from neighbors. No one observed Serena's movements. Her eyes glittered with a curious, brassy light. With a swift, gliding movement, she hastened to an old-fashioned cabinet which stood in a corner of the room, and opening it, removed an empty tin box from a shelf. With hands that trembled a little in spite of her efforts to control herself, she carried the box over to the fireplace, and going down upon her knees once more, she lifted the fragments of the smoke-blackened letter and placed them as carefully within the box as though that letter had been worth many times its weight in gold. And so it was. A thousand times over, as Serena Lynne was destined to discover some future day. Securing the lid upon the box, she rose softly, and hastened away upstairs to her own room. Once there, she hid the tin box in her trunk, and locked it carefully. Then, with an inscrutable expression upon her pale, cold face, she glided swiftly down the stairs once more.

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On her way back to the apartment where her dead father lay, she paused at the door of Keith Kenyon's room. It was standing ajar, and she ventured to steal inside. He was sleeping heavily under the influence of the strong opiate which Doctor Lynne had given him. Serena stood gazing at the sleeper, her plain face all aglow with rapture, her pale eyes gleaming with a look of devouring love and passionate adoration.

"Oh, my love! my love!" she murmured, softly. "I would lay my life down for your dear sake! I would die a thousand deaths—I would suffer martyrdom to win your heart! Oh, Keith! Keith! my hero, my only love! whom I have loved all my life, ever since my childhood's days, when you were with us; and I have never forgotten you—never ceased to care. Your little sweetheart, you called me then; and you used to tell me that some day, when we were man and woman grown, I should be your wife. And so I shall! You shall call no other woman wife! Oh, Keith! if you do not love me I shall die—I shall die!"

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The sleeper moved uneasily upon the pillow, and the beautiful lips parted slightly, while, low and sweet, but clear and distinct to the ears of the listener, came the one muttered word:

"*Beatrix!*"

It was enough to arouse the slumbering devil in the woman's breast. She started as though she had been shot. A moan of bitter anguish passed her lips, and fell upon the dead silence of the sick-room. She turned blindly, like one groping in the dark, and fled back to the death-chamber.

Her mother glanced up from her grewsome work as Serena entered, and her ghastly face and flashing eyes made the mother start with a strange alarm and terror.

"What is it?" she cried, wildly. "What else has happened?"

"Where is that girl?" demanded Serena, glancing wildly around the room.

"She has gone for assistance," returned Mrs. Lynne, slowly. "Some one *must* be found to come to my aid tonight, and Beatrix offered to go. She said that Keith's horse had been brought here by the men who drove them home, and she would ride it over to Burtonville, to the Rogerses. Some of them will come immediately, I know. Serena, in Heaven's name, what *is* the matter? You look as if you had seen a ghost!"

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"So I have—so I have!" sobbed Serena, bitterly. "I have seen the ghost of my dead love—my broken life! Listen, mamma. Unless you get rid of that girl Beatrix Dane—or whatever her right name may be—my happiness will be ruined forever. Mamma! mamma! I have reason to believe that Keith is falling in love with her already!"

"*What?* You are mad, Serena!"

"I am not. I wish I were. He is muttering her name over and over in his sleep even now. She saved his life, you know; and that, of all things, would serve to attract and draw them together from the first. Mamma, I tell you I am lost—lost! I love him! I love him! I do not deny it, and if I

can not win his love and be his wife, I shall die!"

"Hush! Be quiet. Control yourself. You *shall* be his wife. We will keep Beatrix away from him, and in a few days, when her money comes, she shall be packed off to New Orleans, and good-bye forever to Miss Beatrix Dane. And before Keith leaves this place to return to his home he must make you his wife. We will try to bring that about, Serena. It *must* be done!"

"It *shall* be! He *shall* care for me!" repeated the heartless girl. "Here, by the side of my dead father, I swear that I—and I alone—shall be Keith Kenyon's wife!"

CHAPTER V.

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ON THE EVE OF DEPARTURE.

Out in the cold starry night Beatrix was riding swiftly on to the little town of Burtonville—a small settlement which lay some three miles beyond the home of the Lynnes. It was isolated from the railroad, and was in fact only a handful of houses dropped down in the midst of the woods for no apparent purpose whatever.

The wind blew shrill and cold, but the girl had wrapped herself warmly and did not mind it as she galloped on in the face of the blast. She had only one thought to occupy her—the good old man whom she had loved as a father, was dead. Never more would she hear his kindly voice, never more would she listen to his gentle words. She thought of the parting that night, and her heart thrilled with thankfulness that she had come back to kiss him and bid him good-night.

"For the last time," she murmured, sadly; "the very last time—poor papa!"

On she went, until the three miles were covered, and she drew rein before a tiny brown cottage, where dwelt their kind friends, the Rogerses. Dismounting, she rapped loudly at the outer door. Her summons aroused the inmates, and in a few moments her sad story was told. Both Mr. and Mrs. Rogers hastily prepared themselves to return with Beatrix to the desolate home of the Lynnes; and so in the course of an hour they entered the weather-beaten old house upon whose portals death had left its dreadful sign.

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Once inside, and satisfied that Mrs. Lynne would be relieved from further cares, Beatrix made her way slowly, falteringly, up to her own chamber, and once there, fainted quietly away for the first time in her life. The natural reaction to all the excitement of the day had come, and the girl's strength could endure no more. A little later, Serena, passing the open door, saw Beatrix lying upon the floor where she had fallen. She came swiftly to her side and gazed into the pale little face with eyes full of hatred.

"I wish she was dead!" hissed the woman, bleakly. "I wish to Heaven she would never recover from this swoon, never open her eyes to the world again. I hate her. I can not help it. She will steal him from me—the only man for whom I shall ever care. Keith might have learned to love me in time; but, of course, a face like hers is certain to win the prize. I am plain—I know it—and I can not deny that Beatrix is lovely. But I would have been a good wife to Keith; I would lay my life down for him; I would be willing to be his slave if only he would love me. Oh, Keith! Keith! Heart of my heart, soul of my soul!" She turned away, wringing her hands frantically. "If I can not win you, it would be better for me to die!"

She left the unconscious girl alone, and calling Mrs. Rogers, sent her to Beatrix's assistance. It was hours before the poor girl was fully restored. She looked like a snow-wreath as she moved silently about the house, in the plain black gown which had been provided for her. She was pale and wan, and her great dark eyes looked unnaturally bright, and shone like stars.

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Two days later the funeral took place, and Frederick Lynne was buried away out of sight in the bare, bleak little grave-yard, over which the first snow lay soft and warm like a blanket. The day after the funeral, Mr. Rogers, driving over from the post-office (the bridge having been repaired), paused at the dreary home of the Lynnes with a registered letter addressed to its late master.

"I took the liberty of signing for it," he said, as he placed the letter in Mrs. Lynne's outstretched hand. And then, with a kindly inquiry for Keith Kenyon, and a cheerful good-morning, he took his departure. Without a moment's delay, Mrs. Lynne tore open the letter with eager haste. A crisp five-hundred dollar bill dropped from between the folded pages. She picked it up with a gasp of delight, and just at that moment Beatrix entered the room. There was no help for it. Mrs. Lynne knew that the letter and its inclosure must be at once turned over to the girl. She placed it in her hand.

"There! That is yours, I suppose," she said, ungraciously.

With dilated eyes Beatrix read the words addressed to Frederick Lynne:

"DOCTOR LYNNE," so ran the letter,—*"I send inclosed five hundred dollars per registered mail, the most convenient way of forwarding remittances, since you are residing in a place destitute of banks and other conveniences. Send Beatrix Dane to New Orleans immediately—to No. — St. Charles Avenue, and oblige,*

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"Yours respectfully,

"BERNARD DANE."

Beatrix lifted her eyes, and they met the cold gaze of Mrs. Lynne.

"How much will my ticket cost?" she asked, abruptly.

Mrs. Lynne made no reply.

"Will you please get the money changed?" persisted Beatrix, gently, laying the bill in the woman's hand. "I will take one hundred dollars; the rest is yours."

A swift gleam passed over the hard countenance.

"Do you mean it?" she cried.

Beatrix's red lip curled scornfully.

"Certainly. I have been an expense to you ever since the remittances failed to come. And now, Mrs. Lynne, I suppose I had better prepare at once for my journey."

Mrs. Lynne did not attempt to dissuade her. The simple preparations were soon completed, and it was arranged that Beatrix should start on the early train the next morning.

Late in the day, as Beatrix was passing the open door of the sick-room, she heard her name called in a low, eager tone. She paused hesitatingly.

"Come in, will you not?" Keith Kenyon asked, softly. She came swiftly to the bedside.

"I hope you are feeling better," she ventured, timidly; for this was the first time she had seen him since the accident. His beautiful eyes lighted up with a tender light. He took her hand in his.

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"Why have you not come to see me?" he asked in a low tone. "I have begged Serena and Aunt Lynne to ask you to come for a moment. I have something to say to you—such a strange thing to tell you, Miss Dane; it seems like a romance, this that I have to say. But first let me thank you for saving my life."

Her face flushed, and then grew pale.

"I have done nothing," she faltered. "I only wish—"

She paused, and for a brief moment their eyes met. A sweet, nameless thrill passed from heart to heart. He laid her little hand against his lips.

"My darling!" he was beginning, passionately. But the words died upon his lips, checked abruptly; for there in the open door stood Mrs. Lynne, pale with wrath, her eyes blazing.

"*Beatrix!*" she panted, wrathfully. "Good gracious girl, what are you doing here? This is no place for you. How improper! how *very* improper and unmaidenly!"

Blushing like a rose with mortification, poor Beatrix fled swiftly from the room. And little did she dream of the strange announcement which had been upon the lips of Keith Kenyon.

Mrs. Lynne followed the girl to her own room, and once there, closed its door behind her.

"You bold-faced creature!" she panted, angrily, "How dared you enter Keith Kenyon's room alone? You are utterly shameless!"

The beautiful eyes met the fiery orbs before her with brave frankness.

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"Mr. Kenyon called me; he had something to tell me, he said," she returned, quietly, "and I could not refuse to see him. I have not seen him before since the accident."

"And I will take care that you shall not see him again!" hissed the woman, fiercely. "Such conduct is terrible! It is positively shocking for an unmarried woman—a mere girl—to enter a man's sick-room!"

The girl's eyes flashed ominously.

"If it is improper for me, Mrs. Lynne," she returned coldly, "it must be the same for Serena. She is not married, although she is rather an old girl," she added, naïvely.

"You wretch!"

Mrs. Lynne was almost speechless with wrath.

"How *dare* you?" she hissed, bringing her hand down upon the girl's shrinking shoulder with savage emphasis—"how *dare* you call Serena old?"

"She is nearly twenty-seven," returned Beatrix, coolly. "Not old, to be sure, but certainly old enough to know how to behave herself. I think that—"

"*Hush!* Not another word, or I will strike you!"

"You shall not!"

Beatrix faced the termagant before her with a white, resolute face, and a look in the depths of her dark eyes which made Mrs. Lynne quail.

"As I intend going over to the village tonight," said Beatrix, quietly, "that I may be in time for the train in the morning, I may as well bid you good-bye. I think that you will be sorry some day for the way that you have treated me, Mrs. Lynne."

She closed the door behind the retreating figure of her tormentor, and made ready for the journey. A little later she came down the stairs, attired in a traveling-dress, her only baggage a small hand-bag. Everything was as still as death. She stole softly to the door of the room where Keith Kenyon lay upon his sick-bed. The door was closed; she paused and laid her hot cheek

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against the cold, hard panel of the door, her sore heart swelling with bitter resentment.

"Good-bye!" she whispered, softly. "I shall never see you again—my friend that might have been. Good-bye!"

Never see him again? Yet how can Beatrix Dane know that? In the long, dark days before her, how can she tell what the strange chances in life's lottery may bring her? It is well that she does not know. How many of us, knowing the future, would shrink from the ordeal before us, and pray for the boon of death!

CHAPTER VI.

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HER OATH.

In a spacious chamber of a great, gloomy mansion, an old man sat alone, his gray head bowed upon his trembling hands, which rested upon a cane. A few blocks away the hum and traffic of the Crescent City filled the air; but here all was still and quiet. An up-town mansion, embowered in huge live-oaks—a shady, silent place, the sight of which made one feel gloomy, and caused a slight chill to pass involuntarily over the frame. The great house looked like an enchanted palace, with old Bernard Dane the presiding genii, all alone and lonely like the last leaf upon the tree.

The moments came and went, and still he sat there silent and alone; once in awhile a few muttered words would pass his grim lips, and the wrinkled hands upon the cane-head would clinch each other savagely. At last he lifted his head, and turning slowly in his arm-chair, pressed the electric button in the wall at his side. A moment later, an obsequious servant entered—a black servitor in the Dane family for years.

"Any news, Simons?" asked Bernard Dane, eagerly.

The man shook his head.

"No, sah; nothing—nothing 'tall, sah—not yet. We only got de tellygram from Marse Ken sayin' dat he done arrive safe—dat's all, sah. Kin I do anything for you, Marse Bernard?"

"No—no; nothing. Of course not. I want nothing in the wide world but to see that boy back again, with his errand done as I directed him. It was a wise thought of mine—a wise thought to send him. Ha! ha! Throw two young fools together, under the circumstances, and they'll fall in love with each other as sure as they live! *Love?* Bah! if I had my way, that word should be stricken from the lexicon. It is the cause of all the trouble, all the sin, all the sorrow in the world—*Confound* it, Simons! are you there yet? Do I employ you to stand listening to me in this way? Do I? Answer me, sir!"

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"No, sah—no, sah; in course not," stammered Simons, in confusion. "I beg pardon, sah; but, you see, Marse Bernard, I—I thought—"

"*Thought!* Never think, Simons. Don't let me ever hear again that you indulge in the pernicious habit of *thinking!* Great Heaven! what would I not give to drown thought—to bury it out of sight—deep, deep—so deep that nothing on earth would ever have the power to resurrect it! *Thought—memory!* Bah! a regular Old Man of the Sea—like that story of Anstey's, 'The Fallen Idol.' (Deuced clever fellow is Anstey!) Some artist fellow owned the idol, and he could not get rid of the thing, no matter what he did. He hid it—gave it away—lost it—drowned it—buried it—left no stone unturned to be rid of its cursed presence. It was ruining his life, and making him contemplate suicide. But all his efforts were in vain. Even theosophy itself was of no avail—and, to my way of thinking, theosophy can do much. And so the poor fellow was cursed by the presence of this idol—a black, evil shadow upon his life—until a bolt of thunder and a flash of lightning shivered the thing to fragments. Direct interposition of Providence! Ah, yes; to be sure—Simons!"—flashing about swiftly, as his eyes fell upon the unfortunate darcy—"what on earth are you doing here? Didn't I tell you to go?"

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"No, sah; I never heard you, sah!"

"Then hear me now—*Go!*"

And the heavy cane came down upon the floor with emphasis.

Outside, a night of storm and tempest. The roar of the wind, the beating rain, or roar of the elements, which, after all, is no more fierce and bitter than that which often rages within a human breast. The wind shrieked shrilly down the chimney, the trees swayed in the blast, and tapped upon the crystal window-panes with bare, ghostly fingers. Old Bernard Dane drew a little nearer the fire, and wrapped his silken dressing-gown about his gaunt frame.

"What o'clock is it?" he demanded, as Simons was about to withdraw.

"Jes' nine, sah. De church clock jes' struck."

"Humph! Very well; do go. No—stop! was not that the gate bell? Can it be Ken at last? Wish to mercy it may be. Go and see who has come, Simons, and make haste!"

The negro obeyed in silence, and the door closed behind him.

Bernard Dane's head drooped once more upon his clasped hands, and save for his slow, labored breathing, there was no sound to break the dreary silence of the room. The moments came and

went until five—twice five—three times five—were ticked away. Then the chamber door opened noiselessly, so noiselessly that Bernard Dane did not hear it, and a slight, black-robed figure stole softly into the room and stood beside the hearth. A forlorn little figure in an old-fashioned, dingy black gown, with a dowdyish hat pushed back from the pale little face, with its tired, drooping mouth, and great, glorious dark eyes full of a weary light.

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"I am Beatrix Dane," said a soft voice, timidly.

The old man lifted his head, and his eyes fell upon the face before him. A strange change passed over his stern features, a look of slow horror froze his face down like an icy mask. He arose to his feet, tall, gaunt, grim; but in the presence of this slip of a girl, he was trembling as though he was afraid.

"Powers above!" he panted, brokenly. "When did you arrive? Where is—is—Surely you did not travel all this distance alone!"—his voice trembling with an inflection of surprise which was almost terror.

"Yes, sir; I came alone. There was no help for it. Oh, Mr. Dane, I have such dreadful news to tell you! Papa is dead; he died of heart disease while he was reading your last letters to him!"

"Papa!"—the scornful intonation in Bernard Dane's voice was a revelation. "Papa, indeed! Ha! ha! *You* have no father. No, I do not mean that you are not legitimate, but it is worse than that. *You*, upon whom the curse of God has fallen, can have no claim of near kinship with any one. It would be a fine thing to be the father of a creature like—like—Girl, do you know that you are accursed? That you have a destiny to fulfill, the very thought of which makes my heart stand still with horror? You have a dark inheritance in store, and may Heaven give you strength to bear your burden, for 'vain is the help of men.'

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"No, I am not insane; there is no insanity in the Dane family. I am not idiotic; I am as sane and sound as you are, and more than you will be when you learn the truth concerning yourself. Don't shrink away and cower out of sight like that. Be a woman. Do you know what that means? It means to bear the burden of another's sin; to carry its consequences about in your heart—your tender, guiltless, woman's heart—until your life is darkened and ruined forever. It means to suffer in secret and silence, and to lie down and die, sooner than see the one punished for whom you suffer. *This* is to be a woman. There! I have no more to say tonight—No—wait a moment before you go to your own room which I have had prepared for you. Come here, and let me look at you. Yes, to be sure, you are fair. I thought that you would be. You are beautiful, indeed. Oh, heavens! what a fate—what a fate for one so young and fair! Now, Beatrix Dane, answer me: have you come here prepared to render strict obedience to my wishes? You do not know what right I have to direct you? Ah! so I thought. Well, you may call me uncle—Uncle Bernard. The first relative you have ever known? *Humph*. Well, pray Heaven it may be the last. Now, listen while I tell you why I have sent for you at this late day."

She came a little nearer and lifted her piteous, pleading eyes to his stern face.

"Uncle—Uncle Bernard," she faltered, timidly, "please don't speak such wild, harsh words to me tonight. Let me hear you say something kind. Remember, I have no one in the wide world but you. I promise to be good and obedient. I promise to obey you like a slave; to do anything you say. No one has ever loved me. Won't you try to love me a little—only a little? I promise to do whatever you may wish me to do."

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"You promise?"

His wrinkled face lighted up with a swift gleam of triumph.

"*Swear* to do as I wish!" he panted, desperately. "I demand that you do so. Swear to obey me implicitly, Beatrix Dane."

The beautiful eyes drooped for an instant. Surely he would exact no promise of her beyond her power to fulfill? Could a man—an old man—be so hard upon a poor, weak, timid creature—utterly defenseless—like herself? For she had yet to learn, poor ignorant child, that with some men "*might* makes right."

"I swear it, Uncle Bernard!" she said, slowly. "Now, kiss me, and say that you will love me a little!"

And she ventured to lay one small hand timidly upon his arm. With a hoarse, inarticulate cry he struck the little hand aside and started to his feet.

"Don't touch me!" he panted, wildly; "don't *dare* to touch me! *Kiss* you? I would sooner cut my own throat. Get away—away—out of my sight! Do you hear? No! Wait until I have told you what I wish you to do, and remember, Beatrix Dane, you have *sworn* to obey me. I have sent for you for a particular object; for that object I have had you reared and educated. The time has come to carry out my plan; it is this: I have sent for you, Beatrix Dane, to marry the man whom I have chosen for you—the son of my adoption. You must become his wife at the time I have appointed, or—you will wish that you had never been born!"

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CHAPTER VII.

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BETROTHED.

The days came and went with slow, monotonous round in the old brown, weather-beaten house where Keith Kenyon lay ill unto death. Mrs. Lynne scarcely left his bedside. She was a skillful nurse, and in this case she felt more than an ordinary interest, for she had come to look upon Keith as a prospective son-in-law. When he was a child—a little fatherless, motherless babe—he had been placed in care of Mrs. Lynne's sister to be reared. It was after he had grown to be a youth of fifteen that he had been formally adopted by an old man in New Orleans, of whose name Mrs. Lynne and Serena were both ignorant; they had only heard of the mere fact of his adoption. The years had come and gone, and although he wrote occasionally to Mrs. Lynne, and always inclosed a kindly message and sometimes a few written lines to Serena, he had never confided absolutely in them, and they had refrained from asking questions. Year after year he had written that he hoped to find an opportunity to visit his old friends; but heretofore he had found it impossible to keep his promise.

There is a certain place, unmentionable to ears polite, which is popularly believed to be paved with good intentions. Keith Kenyon had evidently laid a block or two of this pavement; at all events, his intentions, though good, had come to naught. And now, just when the mother and daughter had given up all hope of ever seeing him again, he had suddenly appeared at their home. For all these years—the long, long time since their last meeting—years during which Keith Kenyon had not given many thoughts to Serena, and even then only thinking of her as his childish playmate, she had thought of him with a steady and unwavering interest and a fixed intention to some day become his wife.

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The news of his adoption by a wealthy old man had not lessened her interest in Keith or her resolution to marry him. He would be rich some day. She was tired of the weary battle with poverty, and longed, with all her mercenary heart and narrow soul, to enjoy the advantages of wealth and position. And as the years went by, her purpose grew with them; she had but one object in life—to marry Keith Kenyon and share his fortune. Yet now that she had met him at last, her love for him had grown to such great proportions, that, even had he not been the rich man's heir in prospective, she would have been willing to marry him had he chosen her to be his wife. But fate had decreed that he should choose otherwise.

After Doctor Lynne's burial, Keith grew rapidly worse, and was soon in a raging fever, with small hopes of recovery.

Doctor Stone, the village physician, called every day to see the patient, and his wrinkled face grew graver and graver as he marked the alarming symptoms.

"I fear for the worst," he said to Mrs. Lynne at last.

And then into that astute lady's heart a swift inspiration rushed like a flood. Her eyes wore a look of resolution, and she shut her thin lips grimly together as she hissed, sharply:

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"He shall make Serena his wife before he dies! She shall be his wife; and then she will be able to claim a portion of the fortune. It shall be so!"

She was passing the open door of the sick-room one day, when she was startled by hearing Keith's voice, weak and tremulous, calling her name.

She came to a halt, her face pale with surprise, for he had not spoken for several days, only the wild ravings of delirium.

"What is it, Keith?" she asked, going swiftly to the bedside.

His great dark eyes were lifted to her face with a wistful look in their depths.

"Beatrix!" he faltered, feebly. "I want Beatrix. Where is she?"

A look of fiendish hatred flashed into Mrs. Lynne's pale eyes, and the bony hands clutched each other fiercely.

"Beatrix is not here," she replied.

He started up wildly; then fell back upon the pillows, faint and exhausted.

"Not here?" he repeated, brokenly. "Oh, Mrs. Lynne! don't tell me that she is gone! Why, she could not go all alone; and he—he sent me here for her."

"Sent you for her? Who sent you?" demanded Mrs. Lynne sharply.

"Uncle Bernard. That was my business here in this place. He said that Beatrix was to come home to New Orleans to him, and so he sent me to escort her there. Tell me—where is she? Tell her to come to me. I want Beatrix—I want Beatrix!"

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"You will never get her!"

Mrs. Lynne's breath was coming thick and fast; her pale eyes scintillated; her hands were clinching each other convulsively.

"You will never see Beatrix Dane again," she panted. "Shall I tell you why? She has left us forever—gone away to be married. She is married by this time. She went away, leaving you lying here upon this sick-bed. In vain I begged her to remain for a time with poor Serena and myself and help nurse you. But she only laughed and said that she could not alter her plans and postpone her marriage for the sake of a stranger. I tell you she is gone—gone forever, Keith; and she is married to a wealthy man, who is able to take good care of her. Put her out of your mind at once; she is not worthy a kindly thought from you."

But he only moaned over and over again, weakly, brokenly: "I want Beatrix—Beatrix, my beautiful

Beatrix!" until Mrs. Lynne felt that she should go mad.

He had relapsed into delirium again, and the worst was before them.

Days went by; and it was a hand-to-hand fight with death. And away in that distant Southern city, old Bernard Dane waited impatiently for his recovery and return, the only news received by him being the telegrams which Mrs. Lynne sent him almost daily. Their import was always the same: "No better." But the day came at last when, weak and feeble as a newborn babe, Keith Kenyon struggled back to existence once more; and the first person upon whom his eyes rested was Serena Lynne. Constant watching and the cares of the sick-room had not improved her appearance; she was more sallow, and gaunt, and unlovely than ever. His eyes wandered slowly over the grim figure and smileless face, and he strove to speak.

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"Mrs. Lynne," he said, softly, firmly, believing that the woman seated at his bedside was the mother instead of the daughter.

Serena started, and an ugly frown disfigured her face.

"Mrs. Lynne is not here," she returned, curtly. "It is I—Serena. You do not see well, Keith!"

A slow smile stole over his lips; he held out one feeble hand.

"I—I beg your pardon, I am sure," he said, the smile lighting up his wasted face like a ray of sunlight. "I am so grateful to you, Serena," he said, softly. "Under God, I owe my life to you."

She fell upon her knees at the bedside.

"I would not have cared to live if you had died," she sobbed, bitterly. "Oh, Keith—Keith! You are the very light of my life! Say that you care a little—even a little—for me!"

His face grew pallid, and an awful faintness crept over him.

"Of course I care, Serena," he faltered, brokenly. "You are like a—a sister to me."

"But I do not want to be your sister," she cried, boldly. "Let me be something nearer and dearer, Keith. Let me—"

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She stopped short with a cry of horror. He had fainted dead away, and lay back upon the pillow as white as a corpse. With a wild shriek, and crying out madly that he was dead, she summoned her mother, and together they finally resuscitated him. But he was as weak and feeble as a living man could be. Should there be a second relapse, no human power could save him. When at last he had fallen into a refreshing slumber, Mrs. Lynne beckoned Serena out into the hall.

"If you have any hope of ever becoming Mrs. Keith Kenyon," she began in a dry, hard tone, "I advise you to secure him as soon as possible. Marry him as he lies upon that sick-bed, or, if that be inexpedient, make him enter into an engagement to marry you. I know Keith Kenyon. An engagement would be as sacred in his eyes as marriage itself. Do your best, Serena. If you fail to grasp this opportunity, you are lost. How can you ever content yourself to drag out your days here in this dead-and-alive place, with only a pittance to live on, with no pleasures, no society—nothing in the whole world but an endless and wearisome round of distasteful duties, no happiness, no love. And you *do* love Keith Kenyon, do you not, Serena?"

"Love him! Oh, my God!"

She sank into a seat and covered her face with her trembling hands, while a torrent of sobs shook her angular frame.

"Love him!"

Her hands fell helplessly to her side, and the tear-stained face and eyes swollen and dim with weeping met her mother's sympathetic gaze.

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Mrs. Lynne had little sympathy with such weakness; but Serena was her daughter—her only child—and the mother's heart, jealous over her offspring, was sore for her daughter's sorrow.

"Love him!" repeated Serena, wildly. "I only live for him! I could not exist without him! Believe me, mother, this is no exaggeration. If I could not see Keith Kenyon and be with him sometimes I should die."

Her mother's thin lip curled contemptuously; but a glance into the tear-wet eyes and face full of keenest suffering, and the mother-love and mother-pity—which are almost divine—were in the ascendent once more.

"Bah! Love is only madness. But since you *do* love him in this mad way, Serena, *you shall marry him!*"

The words were low and fervent. It was as though that plain-faced, harsh-voiced woman had been suddenly and mysteriously endowed with the gift of prophecy. Would the prophecy come to pass? Time alone would tell.

The days went slowly by, and Keith grew daily stronger and better. One evening, when Serena was sitting beside the sofa, to which he had at last been promoted, he heard the sound of a stifled sob, and turning his head, found that she was weeping bitterly. He was still very weak and feeble, and the sight of her emotion fairly unmanned him.

"Serena! Serena!" he cried, frantically, "for Heaven's sake, tell me what is the matter! Are you in trouble?"

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She lifted her pale face and tear-wet eyes.

"I am in the worst trouble that could happen to a woman," she faltered. "It sounds shameful and unwomanly to confess it to you, Keith; but—but I have come to dread the time like death when you will go away from us—go away from me forever, and leave me here to a dreadful fate. My heart is breaking with its sorrow; for I have loved you all my life, and I love you now so dearly that the thought of not seeing you gives me the greatest pain that I have ever known. I did not know that a human heart *could* suffer so and yet beat on. Keith, must I give you up? Will you not try to love me a little, and some time in the future let me be your wife? I would be such a good wife, Keith—such a good, kind, devoted wife! I would be willing to lay my life down to give you a moment's happiness. I would live for you, die for you, Keith! Believe me, I would make you happy, for I would sacrifice my every hope here and hereafter to that end, and you would never regret marrying me."

His eyes, dark and dilated, were fixed upon her eager face with a slow wonder in their dusky depths. He had never thought of such a thing as Serena Lynne lavishing such a wealth of affection upon himself. It did not make his heart thrill with ecstasy to think of it now.

"I—I do not understand you," he faltered, brokenly, manlike, trying to gain time by evasion. "I—I—It is quite impossible, Serena—quite!"

Her eyes flashed with an ominous light.

"If you are thinking of Beatrix Dane," she cried, angrily, "you are only wasting your time and committing a sin. She is another man's wife, Keith Kenyon. You can never be anything to her." [Pg 59]

And Serena never dreamed that the "Uncle Bernard" with whom Keith Kenyon lived—his uncle only by adoption—was the Bernard Dane who had sent for Beatrix to come to his home.

Mrs. Lynne and her daughter both had placed no credence in Keith's assertion that he had been sent thither to escort the girl to her new home. They looked upon that as a vagary of delirium.

Serena urged her own cause until the poor young man's brain, weakened by his long and dangerous illness, grew too confused to grasp the situation or to realize what he was doing; and the day came at length when Keith Kenyon, worn out and weakened in mind and body until he was as feeble in judgment as a child, gave an unwilling consent to make Serena Lynne his wife.

That very day a telegram arrived for him from New Orleans, short and concise, as telegrams usually are.

It bade him return home at once, if he was able to travel; for his "uncle" had been stricken down, and lay at the point of death.

CHAPTER VIII.

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A STRANGE COMMAND.

Life had seemed strange to Beatrix in that gloomy mansion in the Crescent City. From the night of her arrival she had scarcely seen old Bernard Dane—a circumstance which she could not regret; for, try as she might to shut her eyes to the truth, there was nothing pleasant or lovable about the old man. He was, indeed, everything repulsive; and his strange, wild outbursts of rage and malice against some evil which he could not prevent or forget—something hidden away in his own past—made Beatrix tremble with terror. She shrank from the gaze of his shifting dark eyes, preternaturally bright with some hidden fire which made them appear like fierce flames ready to burst forth and devour her. Since the evening of her arrival she had never again attempted any familiar or affectionate demonstrations. She had kept at a respectful distance, and comprehended fully that there was no possibility of any friendliness between them.

Why had he sent for her to come to his home, only to treat her with chilling coldness or outbursts of ungovernable rage? When she thought of the oath that he had extorted from her—her solemn promise to wed the man whom he had selected as her husband—Beatrix's heart grew faint and chill with horror. How did she know but that she had pledged herself to a fearful fate—a dark, an awful future, bound to a man whom she might hate at first sight? And then she thought of Keith Kenyon, and her heart grew warm and tender. Could she ever forget him, even though she might never see him again? Was it possible for her to shut her heart against the sweet thoughts which would intrude—the few tender words that he had spoken, and, above all, the light in his beautiful dark eyes, which had thrilled her to the heart?

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"I can not forget him," she would say over and over, when the unpleasant recollection of the oath that she had so blindly taken would come back to her memory—"I can not forget him, and there will be no use in trying. Uncle Bernard may force me into a dreadful marriage if he sees fit—I suppose I shall have to obey him, the old tyrant!—but I shall never forget Keith Kenyon as long as I live—never!"

The great, gloomy old mansion was well worth exploring, for it was like the houses of which one reads in romances, where some dark mystery seems to be hidden away secure from the light of day and prying, curious eyes. There was one room called the tower-room. Beatrix went there every day, impelled by a strange and unaccountable fascination, to sit alone and wonder over and over again for what use the room had been originally intended. It was reached by a long spiral staircase, and was built in a circular shape, and known as the "round room." There was only one window, and that was merely a small square hole in the wall, and was covered with a strong iron

grating.

For what purpose had this room been intended? In vain did Beatrix puzzle her brain over the vexed question. Mrs. Graves, the old housekeeper, looked cold and non-committal when Beatrix at last ventured to propound the question.

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"I really can not tell you, Miss Dane," she said, shaking her gray head slowly and solemnly. "It has never been used for anything since I have been in the Dane family, and that is nearly thirty years now—just once!"

The thin lips closed down tightly together, and she turned resolutely away, as though to give Beatrix to understand that the tortures of the Inquisition could draw forth no more information from her.

Left to herself, Beatrix speculated continually upon the romance which she felt certain must be connected with the round room in the western wing. She reflected so much upon the subject, and it grew to be so all-absorbing a source of wonder to her lonely girlish heart, that one day she made up her mind quite bravely to seek for information at headquarters. That very day, accidentally encountering old Bernard Dane in the great entrance hall, she ventured to put the question to him.

"Uncle Bernard," she began in a rather shaky voice—for, to tell the truth, she was horribly afraid of the old man—"you gave me permission to go all over the house when I first came here, and I have done so. I have so little to occupy my time," she added, half apologetically. "It has interested me very much to go into all those beautiful rooms. But I would like to ask you a question. Why was that round room built in the tower? For what purpose was it intended? I am greatly interested, and would like to know."

She stopped short, awed by the awful look in his eyes and the strange gray shadow which had settled down upon his face. Not a word was spoken for some minutes; he stood as still as a statue, one hand clutching at the carved back of a Gothic hall chair with such force that one of the elaborate ornaments snapped off in his grasp.

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"The round room, eh?" he cried in a harsh, croaking voice—"the round room in the tower? Ha! ha! you have been there, then? I ought to have known that you would have found your way there before you had been under this roof four-and-twenty hours! So you wish to know for what purpose the round room was designed? Ah, Miss Beatrix Dane, you may find that out sooner than you wish, and the knowledge of the truth will drive you mad! In the long black nights and the dreary darksome days, when you will pray for death and find it not, then you will learn the secret which is mercifully hidden from you now. Mercifully—ay, but why should I show mercy to you or yours? Mercy! Who has ever been merciful to me? Do I not owe it to your accursed race that I am what I am? Ah, Miss Beatrix Dane, ask no idle questions. You are fated to know for what purpose that room was built, to know in good time. Don't touch me, girl!"—for she had ventured to lay her hand upon his trembling arm—"don't dare to touch me, or I will strike you down at my feet! The very touch of your hands is pollution!"

She drew back, faint and shivering, as though he had indeed dealt her a blow; her face was as white as marble, her dark eyes dilated with unutterable horror—horror too deep for expression. What was this fearful secret which Bernard Dane held over her head, continually like a two-edged sword? What effect was it destined to have upon her future life? She turned away, faint and trembling. It crept into her mind then—dawning upon her with a strange feeling of uneasiness—that ever since her arrival at the old mansion she had been treated in a strangely formal way, a sort of stand-off-and-don't-touch-me way, which was remarkable, to say the least.

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Her room was in a remote wing of the building. Everything there was solely for her own use, set apart for her.

She remembered now, with a faint sickness creeping over her heart, how strangely Mrs. Graves had watched her every movement. Did they suspect that she was going mad? No; it could not be that; for madness is not contagious, and the precautions with which she was surrounded looked greatly as though some contagion was feared and must be guarded against.

The very dishes upon which she ate were used by no one else. She had seen Mrs. Graves actually strike the little maid-servant who one day was about to raise to her lips the half-empty goblet of milk from which Beatrix had been drinking.

It was strange and mysterious.

The girl turned away from the sight of the wild, distorted face of the old man before her with a hopeless feeling tearing at her heart-strings. She went slowly back to her own room and sat down at the window.

"There must be some awful curse hanging over me!" she murmured, brokenly. "I can not imagine what this strange mystery means. I wish I could find out. I wish I might know. Anything is better than suspense!"

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Alas! poor Beatrix! ignorance was certainly bliss in her case, if only she could have known it. The day would come when she would look back upon this blissful ignorance and curse the hour when first she had heard the mystery explained.

That very night old Bernard Dane sent for Beatrix to come to his room. She obeyed the summons, and found him crouching over the fire, looking like some weird priest of old performing an incantation.

"Come here!" he commanded, harshly, lifting his head and transfixing her with wild eyes as the girl entered the room—"come here, Beatrix Dane! Put your hand into that fire—right into the flame, I say. Yes; you must do it. You swore to be obedient to me, and it is for a good reason that I wish to put you to a test. I wish to prove the truth. Of course you think me mad for desiring this, but I am as sane as you are. This is a test, I tell you. The day may come when you will see the wisdom of my words. Come; you must obey me. Don't stand staring at me in that helpless way. I mean what I say, and I will be obeyed. Put your hand in the fire, and hold it there quietly for a moment!"

CHAPTER IX.

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JUST IN TIME.

Beatrix stood staring blankly into the old man's excited face, with a strange feeling of sickening terror creeping over her heart. Was he mad? In Heaven's name, what did he mean? Was she shut up alone in this dreary old house with a raving madman? She stood there, trembling like a leaf, quailing before the steady stare of his wild, dark eyes burning into hers with a look of awful meaning.

"Oh, Uncle Bernard!" she faltered at length, striving hard to steady her tremulous voice, "surely you do not mean that? You are only jesting, of course. You surely could not mean for me to do such a thing—such an unheard-of thing? Why, think of the suffering I would endure—the pain and torture, and don't ask me to do such a mad thing, Uncle Bernard! And—for what purpose?"

His bloodshot eyes gleamed with a curious light.

"For what purpose? That is for me to know, Miss Beatrix Dane. I have already told you that this is a test. A test of *what*, you will ask, with all a woman's curiosity. But that question I shall not now answer. Should the test *fail*, then I shall be at liberty to tell you all, and you will have cause to be grateful, Beatrix. But there is no other way to prove the truth only by this, which seems so absurd to you. You must try and be brave, and obey me, Beatrix. You must thrust your right hand into the flames; that was the advice of the physician whom I consulted. 'If you can induce the young lady to put her hand in the fire,' so Doctor De Trobriand informed me, 'you will soon know the worst. If the thing you suspect should prove to be true, then—' But there, Beatrix, I must not reveal to you the rest of the doctor's opinion. That is a professional secret. Do you still refuse?"

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"I do."

Beatrix's voice was stern, and her eyes full of a resolute light. Surely the man before her was a lunatic, and she must not allow him to intimidate her.

"I *do* refuse—absolutely!" she repeated, bravely. "Your command is not reasonable, and I shall not obey it. You must be mad, Uncle Bernard, to expect obedience to such a command!"

"You refuse, eh?"

He started to his feet, white with anger.

"Remember that *I* know best, and this is best for you, a necessary test, I say. But since you refuse, I shall be compelled to use force."

He seized her hands and dragged her forcibly to the fireside, the poor girl writhing and struggling in his grasp.

"Uncle Bernard—for the love of Heaven, stop!" she pleaded; "stop and think what you are doing! You are about to inflict the most terrible torture upon me; you will doubtless maim me for life. Uncle Bernard—Uncle Bernard, for the love of Heaven—I beg of you to stop—to spare me! Please—please—*please!*"

The sweet voice grew weaker and fainter as the old man forced her nearer the burning coals within the grate; in his eyes the fire of a fiendish purpose, his face as white as marble.

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"I am obliged to do it, Beatrix," he said in a low, ominous voice. "If the result proves satisfactory, I shall be at liberty to explain the mystery to you, and then you will know the unutterable horror that you have escaped. If the fire burns you—*pray* that the fire will burn you, Beatrix," he broke off, wildly—"pray that your little hand may be scarred for all time, rather than have that awful curse to fall upon you. Oh, yes, I know you think me a madman! but listen to me, child"—his voice softening a little: "You think me a madman—a brute—a fiend; but when you have heard the truth you will think differently. I have sought vengeance all my life, but somehow your piteous eyes and helpless loneliness have made me feel a little kinder, and if it were not for Keith Kenyon, and the debt of vengeance that I owe—" He stopped short, checking himself with a strange, half-angry gesture, as though he regretted having spoken so freely. "This much I can tell you, Beatrix"—his voice had fallen almost to a whisper. There was no sound to break the awful silence of the room, save old Bernard Dane's heavy breathing and the dropping of a coal in the grate. Beatrix stood there, her hands crushed in his iron grasp—one would never have dreamed that the old man was so strong—and listened eagerly, breathlessly, to his next words.

"This much I will tell you," he went on, slowly; "and after you have heard it, I think you will agree with me. Yours is a fearful heritage, Beatrix—an heritage of woe. I will not put it into words, for if you were to know it—to know the secret of your own dark inheritance—it would kill you as you

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stand there before me. Beatrix, there is poison in your very life-blood—an awful taint suspected, which can only be proved by this crucial test. Beatrix, obey me; place your hand in yonder fire, as I bid you. If it comes forth burned and disfigured—a mass of horrible burns and unsightly scars, your body racked with suffering, then thank your God upon bended knee that you have escaped the doom of your race. If, on the other hand, contact with the fire should have no effect upon you, I advise you, young and fair though you are, *to take your own life!* Will you place your hand in the flame?"

She shrank back, paling and shivering.

"I—can not!" she faltered. "I—"

"Hush! *You shall—you must!*"

With a swift movement he dragged her close to the fire, and bending her slight form forward, was about to lay the little white hand upon the bed of live coals, when all at once there was a loud peal at the gate-bell. A moment later, before old Dane could carry out his horrible intention, the door of the room was thrown open, and a tall form bounded over the threshold.

One swift glance, and the newcomer sprang to the fireside, and seizing the old man by the shoulder, forced him into the nearest seat; then, before Bernard Dane could recover from the shock of the surprise, the intruder turned and faced the half-fainting girl.

"Beatrix!"

"Keith!"

Keith Kenyon's face was pale and stern, and his dark eyes flashed fire.

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"So!" he cried, indignantly. "I come home in answer to a telegram which declares you to be at the point of death, Bernard Dane, and I find you in usual health, and in the very midst of an act of inhuman torture. Simons told me what was going on as soon as he opened the door to me. I rushed up here at once—just in time, it seems. Bernard Dane, I demand to know what you mean by such inhuman conduct? Understand me: if ever I find you attempting a repetition of this torture, I shall leave you forever, and I shall take Beatrix with me. She shall not remain here to be murdered. Keep your money, Bernard Dane; I do not want it. I will have nothing to do with a wicked wretch like you!"

"But—Keith"—the old man quavered the name forth in a broken voice—"you do not know. It is for her good—for your good. If she escapes the awful doom of her race, she—No, no, Keith; I must not tell you."

The old man broke down and buried his face in his shaking hands—a pitiable sight.

"Keith!" starting up suddenly and gazing into the handsome face with horror-dilated eyes, "I had planned a marriage between you two; but—but it must never be. It would be sacrilege—a crime!"

Keith Kenyon turned, and his dark eyes met the frightened gaze of Beatrix.

What was that which he read in those timid, trusting eyes lifted to his face with a shy look? Was it love?

With a low cry of rapture, he sprang to her side and caught the girl's slight form in his arms.

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"Beatrix! Beatrix!" he whispered, passionately, "we have not long known each other, but I love you! I think I have loved you ever since our first meeting, when you risked your precious life to save mine—long before I suspected the truth—that you were the young girl whom I was sent to escort to this place—this cursed place where I wish you had never come. I love you, darling—love you with all my heart. Be my wife at once, Beatrix, and we will leave this place. Let Bernard Dane keep his money; we do not want it. I am strong, and can work for us both. Say yes, Beatrix, darling—say yes! For surely no man ever loved a woman as I love you."

And then he stopped short, and his heart grew faint and cold within his breast.

He had forgotten that he was Serena Lynne's promised husband, that he was bound in honor to make Serena Lynne his wife.

CHAPTER X.

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AN OLD MAN'S SECRET.

Yes, he was Serena Lynne's betrothed husband, and bound in honor to make her his wife. The sharp remembrance cut him to the heart like a sword. He fell back with a cry of anguish, and the love-words died upon his lips.

"May Heaven have pity!" he groaned. "I had forgotten—forgotten. Don't look at me with such piteous eyes. Beatrix! oh, Beatrix, my love, I have done wrong! I have made a mistake, and my happiness is wrecked. All my life is ruined and darkened forever!"

Old Bernard Dane hobbled over to Keith's side and laid a trembling hand upon his arm.

"Keith, my boy, I—I can't explain this to you," he mumbled, brokenly.

He had not observed the scene which had just taken place between Keith and the shrinking, trembling girl who stood there, pale as a lily, before them. He had not listened to Keith's

impassioned avowal; he had been deaf and unseeing to all that had taken place. Keith's dark eyes flashed with an angry light.

"I wish no explanation," he returned, harshly; "there is no excuse, no palliation of your conduct possible. You have acted the part of an inhuman monster—a madman! Yes, let us hope that temporary aberration is responsible for your strange conduct. Uncle Bernard, I warn you that if your attempt to torture this poor girl should be repeated, I will appeal to the authorities. You shall be confined in a retreat for the insane. You are a dangerous person to go at large."

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The old man seemed strangely weakened and unmanned. He uttered no word; no sound escaped his dry, parched lips; but upon his wrinkled face there was a look of abject terror.

Trembling like a leaf, he turned, and leaning heavily upon his cane, passed from the room and closed the door behind him. He went straight to the library—a great solemn-looking apartment filled with well-laden book-shelves, and with a huge escritoire standing beside a window. The old man hobbled over to the desk, and taking a bunch of keys from his pocket, he unlocked the desk and turned to a small drawer at the right. From this drawer he removed a small package of old letters tied with a narrow black ribbon. Removing the ribbon, he began to examine the letters, reading them over hastily, one by one, the frown upon his brow growing deeper, his dark, deep-set eyes flashing with an angry light. When he had read the last of the letters he replaced the somber ribbon and returned the package to the drawer. Then bowing his head upon his hand, Bernard Dane sat buried in profound thought.

Whatever the subject that engrossed his thoughts, it was not a pleasant one. That could be easily seen by the lines of care upon his brow, the furrows of anxiety—the evidence of a great trouble—that were plainly written upon his face. A look of intense anger settled down upon it. He clinched his white hands fiercely, and the deep, dark eyes gleamed like fire.

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"To think of it all!" he muttered, harshly—"all that I have borne for long years! The horror—the agony of it! To think of *her*—the woman I loved, who duped me, deceived me, made a mock of me! But I canceled the account between us and wiped out the score!" he went on, with a fiendish chuckle, rubbing his hands together as he spoke. "I paid her back, word for word, blow for blow! When I remember *all*—when I think of that death-scene—I—I feel amply satisfied. For all the suffering she caused me, she suffered fourfold. And was it not almost miraculous that the man who won her away from me—the man who had been my best friend, who had deceived me and fooled me to the top of my bent—in short, Guy Kenyon himself—should have been placed in my hands—at my mercy! He never realized the bliss that would have been his. His cup of happiness was snatched from his grasp before he could raise it to his lips, for she—she *died*—ha! ha!—*died*! and no one knows—no one but old Bernard Dane will ever know—how and where she died. Poor child! After all these long years, can it be that *pity* has come to life within this hardened old heart of mine? But I can not help it, when I remember how they forced her into an unholy marriage with that old man. But still there were compensations, for when her babe was six months old he departed this life, leaving all his worldly possessions to his beautiful young widow and her infant child. Then Guy Kenyon, a widower with one son, came to the fore with his handsome face and winning ways. She had known him and cared for him previous to her ill-starred marriage with old Godfrey Dane, and it did not take long to revive old feeling, to warm over the ashes of the old love, from which the new arose like a phenix.

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"Married or single, bound or free, it was all the same, she never cared for me. And Guy Kenyon would have wedded her if fate had not interfered—fate in the person of old Bernard Dane. Ha! ha! Bernard Dane—but not so old and ugly then as he is now. *He* appeared, and in his possession proof positive of the awful curse which rested upon her—upon Mildred Dane. He loved her—there was no doubt upon that score—he loved her, and the knowledge of this fearful curse which rested upon the woman he loved *killed* him. He did not long survive the fearful knowledge of her secret. Then came the grand *finale*. I placed his child Keith, then a boy of ten or eleven, in the care of respectable people, after which I turned my attention to *her*—to Mildred. I had sworn that she should be my wife or nobody's. But even I, with all my great love for her, could not, dared not, make her my wife with the knowledge of that fearful, that hideous curse hanging over her like a pall. I do not like to recall that time," the old man went on, wearily, pushing back the scanty locks from his wrinkled brow. "She was like a mad creature when she learned the truth, when I told her all. Poor, heartbroken Mildred! She swore that she would take her own life, and—she kept her oath. Ah, well!"—a fearful shudder convulsing his frame—"it is an awful thing to reflect upon. But I could not blame any living creature, and, above all, a young and beautiful woman, for committing suicide under those circumstances. I risked my own life in keeping near her as I did; but my heart was heavy for her sake, and I could not leave her to meet her awful doom alone. And in return for my self-sacrifices, she hated me, defied me, died without one word of kindness to me. *His* name—Guy Kenyon's—was the last upon her lips. Was it not enough to harden a man's heart against a woman to whom he had given all, to whom he had dedicated his whole life? Her cruelty to me hardened my heart against her, living and dead. Ay, I even grew to hate her memory. I fell upon my knees and swore by every thing holy that I would be avenged.

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"After that, as the years rolled by, and I hated Mildred Dane's very memory—even as I had long hated Guy Kenyon; hated him living, hated him dead—I finally planned this marriage between the two descendants of the man and the woman whom I hated. It is a fiendish plot. I look upon *him* in his noble, manly beauty, his true, warm heart and honorable nature; I look upon *her* with her beautiful face, so like that other face once loved, but now in death *hated*, and something in the girl's piteous eyes makes my heart quail. I am not altogether a demon, and I am sick—sick of the whole plot. That girl's eyes! They are Mildred's own—just as she used to look when she was a sweet young girl, before they sold her to Godfrey Dane for money. I can not shut out the look of

appeal in Beatrix's eyes; it makes my heart ache, hard, and cruel, and bitter though it is. I pity her, I pity him! I see my own error now, when, oh, God! it is too late; for they love each other. I would do anything in my power to prevent the marriage between them now; but they are young, headstrong, and I shall fail in my attempt. Then, oh, heavens above! the very thought of what must come, of what looms up before them in the dark future, makes me sick and faint. I have sought the best medical advice in the country. Doctor De Trobriand, whose specialty is this particular horror that threatens poor Beatrix's life, has told me that the fire test is the only possible test of which he knows. He advised me to attempt it, but the girl refused. I could not explain to her and tell her why I made so seemingly absurd and cruel a request of her. I dared not tell her my suspicions—my reasons for making this request; the knowledge would drive her mad. And I have failed in the attempt, as I have failed in everything else all my life long. Curses upon it!"

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He rose slowly to his feet and relocked the *escritoire*, and then, with slow, unsteady steps, he returned to his own room. Beatrix had gone, but Keith was sitting alone before the fire, his face pale and stern, his eyes full of sadness. The old man crept to his side like a penitent.

"Keith, my boy, you will forgive me?" he quavered. "What I did was for your good—and hers. Listen to me, Keith. You will give up this marriage—this mad marriage? I—I had always intended you two to wed each other. For that purpose I have brought you together; but since—since I have lived under the same roof with that child, my heart is melted somehow, and I can not consent to the awful sacrifice. You don't know—Keith, you don't know—what a fearful fate is in store for you if you persist in this mad marriage. Forget that I had ever planned it—forget Beatrix Dane!"

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"I can not—I will not! I love her. Your warning comes too late, Uncle Bernard."

The old man bowed his head upon his clasped hands, and a fearful shudder crept over his gaunt frame. It was all his own fault—all the result of his own mad folly. His own hands would now overthrow the fabric which he had patiently reared; but it was too late, and only desolation remained. Surely Bernard Dane was undergoing a strange transformation—the result of contact with a pure young being like Beatrix Dane; the great, sad, dark eyes which gazed so pleadingly into his face had made the old sinner ashamed of himself. He saw for the first time in the clear light of reason his own wickedness, and his soul shrank back ashamed. How could he ever have formed so vile a plot—such a diabolical scheme to entrap two innocent people—to wreck and destroy two young lives? Keith Kenyon felt no pity for him. He never dreamed the full iniquity of that which Bernard Dane had plotted to do; but the fact that he had plotted in some way—that he had thrown Keith himself and Beatrix together only to sever the ties between them now, seemingly to gratify a foolish whim of his own, made the young man's heart grow hard as steel within his breast, and a cold chill of horror crept over him. He felt disgusted with the whole world, and with old Bernard Dane in particular. Had he known the worst—the full extent of Bernard Dane's crime—he would have fled from the house that very night in horror, and would never willingly have looked upon the old man's face again. He rose and stood leaning against the carved marble mantel.

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"I am very sorry, Uncle Bernard," he said in a low, resolute tone; "but I *love* Beatrix, and I intend to make her my wife. I will surmount every obstacle in the way; but she shall be my wife! Good-night, sir."

He turned swiftly and left the room in haste, as though determined to prevent any further remonstrance. Up in his own chamber, he walked straight over to his writing-desk.

He had made up his mind what to do, and the sooner the disagreeable task was performed—was over and done with—the better.

"I will do it at once," he muttered, resolutely. "Delays are dangerous; and, besides, I shall be in a fever of impatience for the answer. How terrible it will be to wait for it! Two whole weeks—fourteen endless days—before I can hope to hear from her in reply! I will write to her at once—write to Serena Lynne—and confess all, and beg her to release me. It was an absurd engagement at best—a wrong—a wicked engagement, for I do not love her; I have never cared for her! I shall never care for her, though I live to be one hundred. *Love!* Good heavens! the very idea in connection with *her* is ridiculous, grotesque! Once broken off, the engagement will soon fade from her memory, and she will turn her attention to some more suitable and worthy object than your humble servant. She will not—dare not—refuse to release me!" he cried, softly, an awful thought crossing his heart like a cold, slimy serpent. "She would not be a woman, with a woman's heart, if she refuses to grant it."

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Alas, poor Keith! He did not know—he did not realize—that when a woman like Serena Lynne loves, her heart hardens against all other women—the very love in her heart crystallizes. She will fight for that love, sin for it, die for it, but she will never give it up—never—while she lives.

CHAPTER XI.

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SERENA'S FIRST LOVE LETTER.

For the first time in her life Serena Lynne was triumphant with the knowledge of a victory won. She had begun to despair; the prospect of ever winning Keith Kenyon had been growing "small by degrees and beautifully less," now flickering up in a wild spasmodic hope of success, then sinking

down below zero once more.

When she had discovered his evident—too evident—interest in Beatrix, the woman's heart had swelled with bitter indignation and resentment, and for a time it had seemed to Serena Lynne that there was no alternative but to die and escape it all. The anguish was unendurable; for with all the strength of her selfish nature she loved Keith Kenyon, and the very thought of giving up all hope of winning him was more bitter than death.

But at last she had succeeded—not in winning his love—but himself. There was a vast difference; but Serena did not pause to reflect upon that point. She had made up her mind to marry Keith Kenyon; the sooner the marriage was over with, and he was hers until death should part them, the better for her. She sought her mother after the momentous interview with Keith, a look of excitement and delight upon her face, her pale eyes flashing with rapture. Mrs. Lynne glanced up from the work upon which she was engaged, and a look of inquiry flashed into her eyes.

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"Well, Serena, has anything remarkable occurred?" she asked tersely.

Serena threw herself down upon the faded sofa and clasped her thin hands in an affected attitude.

"Mamma"—in a low, awe-stricken tone, as though she feared that some one would overhear the wonderful news which she was just dying to tell—"Keith Kenyon has asked me—has—has promised to—marry me!"

A look of incredulous surprise flashed into Mrs. Lynne's pale blue eyes; the swift blood dyed her cheek a sullen crimson for a moment, then faded slowly away, leaving her as sallow and uninteresting as before.

"Serena!" she exclaimed in a tremulous voice, "don't be a goose! Don't allow yourself to be misled by your own wishes, or to overestimate trifles, polite fibs or foolish nothings, in which some men indulge, and which mean less than nothing. What foolishness can Keith have been saying to you that you should imagine that he wants to marry you, Serena? Why, it is as plain *as anything* that he is in love with Beatrix. He will never propose to you, Serena—never in the world—while Beatrix Dane lives, and if he finds out that she is still single."

Serena tossed her head.

"All the same, he has done so!" she cried; "at least, he—I—led him on, you know, mamma; it was the only way. And so he said at last, 'Well, Serena, if you are willing to accept me without any question of love, I ask you to be my wife!' And you had better believe that I did not wait long before I clinched the matter with a *yes*," she added, coarsely. "So, mamma, you need not trouble your head any more in regard to my future; I shall be all right when I am Mrs. Keith Kenyon and in my handsome home in New Orleans. I will just *shine* in Southern society, and make these New Orleans women turn green with envy. To think that he should pass by all the young ladies of the South, to find a wife in old Massachusetts, will seem a strange thing to the Southern people. I shall put on a great deal of style, and just overawe them. I am as good as the best of them. Am I not Miss Lynne, only daughter of the late illustrious and eminent physician, Doctor Frederick Lynne, of Chester, Massachusetts? And as Mrs. Keith Kenyon, I imagine my position in the fashionable world will be assured. Oh, mamma, I am perfectly happy!"

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Poor Serena! her happiness was very much like the house of which the New Testament tells us, which was founded upon the sand. And when "the rains descended and the floods came, it fell, and great was the fall thereof."

Mrs. Lynne said very little upon the subject; there seemed a sort of insecurity in this projected marriage, which rendered her uncertain in regard to it. She shut her thin lips tightly together and went on with her work, and no more was said for the present.

Then came the telegram for Keith which old Bernard Dane had sent himself. He had come to the conclusion that Keith was not half as ill as he had believed himself, and that if something was not done to rouse him to a sense of his duty he might linger on in that northern clime indefinitely. But perhaps the strangest point in this game of cross-purposes was this: Mrs. Lynne and Serena never once dreamed or suspected that Beatrix was under the same roof where Keith was going—that the same house sheltered her which was home to him. They had paid no heed to the address in the letter which had been found in Doctor Lynne's dead hand; and the remittances for Beatrix had always been forwarded from New Orleans by Mr. Dane's lawyer. And, owing to Keith's illness ever since he had been under the roof of the Lynnes, they had never known or inquired in regard to the old man who had adopted him—not even his name or address. Even the telegrams which reported Keith's condition were sent to the housekeeper, Mrs. Graves. It was a strange complication, and out of this misunderstanding all the future evil was fated to come.

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Old Bernard Dane had begun to feel strangely uneasy in regard to Keith's long absence; so at last the sham telegram was sent, and brought about the desired result in Keith's sudden return. But the long journey following so close upon his severe illness proved almost too much for his strength, and the selfish old man was compelled to acknowledge that he had made an imprudent move. For the day after his arrival home Keith was unable to leave his bed, and for a week was quite an invalid. But at the expiration of that time he was able to come down-stairs, and began at once to look for an answer to his letter to Serena, which he had written the night of his arrival home.

In the meantime, in the old brown house in the Massachusetts wilderness, Serena Lynne had been publishing far and near the news of her engagement—the great and glorious news of her engagement to the rich young Southerner. All the neighbors for miles around were regaled with

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accounts of his splendid home in New Orleans; of his vast wealth, and high social position; the rich old uncle—she forgot to explain that Keith was an adopted heir—who would bequeath his immense fortune to Keith when he died; and, in short, Serena painted her own future prospects in glowing colors, until the country girls with whom Serena affiliated were half wild with envious jealousy, and wondered openly among themselves what any man in his sober senses could see in that ugly Serena Lynne to admire, and, more than all, to marry. And the verdict was rendered unanimously that Keith Kenyon's lady acquaintances must be few in number.

"I shall have a grand wedding, mamma," Serena announced confidently at breakfast one morning—a breakfast served in slovenly fashion, and partaken of by the two ladies attired in slatternly morning costumes.

"Of course, so soon after papa's death," went on the irrepressible Serena, "I can not make a very grand display; but I mean to be married in April, and I shall go as far with my wedding festivities as I dare venture to, under the circumstances. I mean to have a wedding that will eclipse any other that has ever been heard of here. All our old acquaintances—in fact, everybody in the whole country of any importance—shall be invited. We will have the church decorated with flowers and ferns and spare no expense. I shall send to Boston for my wedding-gown. Really, I could not wear anything from this little place, you know, mamma; and besides, we owe old Grey such a fearful bill. I will have white brocade, silk embroidered, with silver flowers; and I must secure a wreath of real orange-flowers, out of compliment to Keith. You know he comes from the land of orange-blossoms. We will order a wedding-breakfast from Boston—and—and—"

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"When do you expect to hear from Keith?" interposed Mrs. Lynne, dryly. She had had a few hurried words with the young man before his departure—just enough to rivet the chains securely.

Serena's sallow face flushed.

"I—I don't know; soon, though, I suppose. And by the way, mamma, there is Mr. Rogers now—at the gate. I believe—actually believe—that he has mail for us. Perhaps it is a letter from Keith!"

She pushed back her chair, and without waiting for a wrap, rushed eagerly out into the cold, wintry air—out to the gate outside of which kindly old Mr. Rogers had halted.

"Letters, Miss Serena? Yes, to be sure. One for your ma, and one for you. That's from your sweetheart down in New Orleans, I see."

Serena tried her very best to call up a blush, but the sallow skin did not warm, and only the frost-laden air bit the end of the long, sharp nose until it was purple.

She seized the letters, and with a shower of voluble thanks hastened back to the house like a mad creature—back to her seat at the breakfast-table.

"One for you, ma," she announced, tossing a large yellow envelope into her mother's lap, "and a letter for me—from Keith, of course."

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Her chilly fingers hurriedly tore open the envelope. The letter was not very long, but it seemed to Mrs. Lynne, watching her daughter with ferret-like eyes, that it took Serena an endless time to decipher its contents.

All at once, with a low groan, crumpling the letter fiercely in her hand, Serena slipped from her chair and lay upon the floor in a dead faint.

CHAPTER XII.

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AN UNPLEASANT SURPRISE.

Keith Kenyon was able to leave his room once more and rejoin the small household.

During his illness Beatrix had kept to her own room as much as possible, never voluntarily entering the presence of the old man, whom she feared as a madman. His wild dark eyes would follow her with furtive glances. He seemed secretly watching her, and more than once she surprised a gleam of wild intensity, as he seemed to devour her with his eyes.

She grew pale and thin and nervous, and all the time her heart longed for Keith—Keith with his tender dark eyes, and sweet, low voice, and caressing ways—Keith who would stand between her and all ill.

She kept herself as much as possible in the vicinity of the sick-room, and waylaid Mrs. Graves upon any and every available occasion with eager, anxious inquiries as to his condition, to all of which Mrs. Graves made reluctant replies.

It was evident that she did not at all approve of any ties of interest between her handsome young master and this girl with the sad, unfortunate history—her unguessed secret—the dark inheritance which hung over her like a deadly curse.

But the day came at last when Keith was able to make his way slowly and wearily down-stairs and into the drawing-room, where he sank upon a comfortable sofa before the fire and uttered a sigh of relief. Then his eyes wandered swiftly around the room, as though seeking some one.

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"Where is Miss Dane?" he asked.

Mrs. Graves frowned.

"Up in her own room, to be sure!" she made answer; "and if you please, Mr. Keith, I rather think that Mr. Dane prefers that she should remain there."

"Remain there, indeed!" indignantly. "And pray what right has Mr. Dane or anybody else to attempt to imprison Miss Beatrix Dane, I should like to know?"

"Imprison? Oh, no, Mr. Keith!" The housekeeper's voice was full of eager protest. "But then, you see, there is something unusual about Miss Beatrix; there is something in her history—something, I do not really know what, but I can guess—and Mr. Dane thinks that she ought to be kept to herself somewhat, you see—not to make too free with the rest of the family."

"Bah! Nonsense! You are talking like an idiot, Graves. I—I beg your pardon, but I can't help it. A woman of your good, sound common sense ought to know better than to repeat such rubbish as that. Go tell Miss Dane that I am here, in the drawing-room, and ask her to please come to me, since I am not able to call upon her. I wish to speak with her as soon as possible. Do, that's a good soul. I know that you will not find it in your heart to refuse my request, Graves. You were young yourself once—not so very long ago."

Mrs. Graves turned away, shaking her gray head dubiously.

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"Very well. The consequences be upon your own head, Mr. Keith," she said, solemnly.

Then she left the room, and he was alone with his own thoughts—half angry, half amused.

"The idea!" he exclaimed, his anger getting the upper hand. "To attempt to keep Beatrix and me apart! What does old Graves mean, anyway? I shall ask Uncle Bernard. But then, he, too, certainly appears to be off his base, as well as the housekeeper. What a curious old house this is, to be sure! But, come what may, I mean to know the truth; I mean to know what Mrs. Lynne and Serena meant when they said that Beatrix left them to be married. Ah! she's coming—my own, my sweet! I hear her light footsteps. Heaven bless her!"

A pause at the door, then a faint, timid rap upon it.

"Come in!" cried Keith, eagerly.

The door opened slowly, and Beatrix Dane stood before him. She looked very fair and sweet in her plain black gown with white crape at throat and wrists, her golden hair in a loose coil fastened with a jet arrow.

"You sent for me, Mr. Kenyon?" she began slowly, hesitatingly.

"I did. I wish to speak with you on a matter of the greatest importance. Come here, Beatrix. You will pardon me, for I am still something of an invalid."

She came swiftly to his side and extended her hand.

"Oh, I am so glad to see you again and to know that you are better!" she cried, gladly.

"Beatrix, sit down here by me; I want to ask you a question. Mrs. Lynne and her daughter both declared that you had left them to be married."

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"Married! I?" Beatrix opened her dark eyes. "Why, it is simply ridiculous! Mr. Kenyon, you are the only single gentleman of my acquaintance. The story is absurd and utterly false."

Keith breathed freely.

"So I thought. Beatrix, listen to me. I want you for my wife—my very own—and"—he thinks of Serena Lynne, and a desperate impulse prompts him to add—"the sooner the better."

Keith Kenyon is not a dishonorable man; but he does not love the woman who has forced him into a distasteful engagement, and he firmly believes that, when once she learns the truth, she will free him from the irksome bonds.

Clang! clang! goes the gate-bell. Beatrix starts to her feet.

"Who in the world can that be?" cried Keith, impatiently. "Don't go, darling—do not leave me alone. It is no one coming in here. Come back, Beatrix, and tell me when you are going to make me the happiest of men?"

Tramp! tramp!—the sound of footsteps coming down the hall to the drawing-room door.

Beatrix makes a hasty exit from the room by means of another door just as the voice of Simons, loud and pompous, announces:

"A lady to see Mr. Keith. She would come in here, Mr. Keith." The last in a low tone.

And before the astonished Keith can collect his scattered senses—before he has time to recover from the effects of this crushing blow—there is the rustle of a black silk skirt, and a tall, angular, ungraceful figure bounds over the threshold and flings herself into his arms. He catches his breath with a cry of astonishment not unmingled with horror.

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It is Serena Lynne!

CHAPTER XIII.

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For a moment Keith Kenyon was so astonished, so utterly overwhelmed with amazement, that he could not find words to utter. Could it be true? Was it not an optical delusion? Surely it was a hideous nightmare—an ugly dream—it could not be real. Yet the tall, angular figure clad in stiff black silk was only too painfully real to his unwilling eyes; and the voice which called his name in gushing tones was really and truly the voice of Serena Lynne, his betrothed wife. A shiver crept over him; he half rose, then sank back into the easy-chair, and then at last he found voice.

"Serena! Good heavens! It is really you! What has happened? Is your mother dead, or—"

"Dead? No, thank Heaven—we are both living and well. The fact is, Keith, we—mamma and I—closed up the house the very day after you left us, and decided upon a little trip. We have been for some two weeks traveling about now—and that explains our unexpected appearance here, our trip being partly on business, partly for pleasure. Mamma received news from some of her relatives which made it advisable for us to come South—news which may prove of pecuniary benefit to us. So we placed our house in charge of Mrs. Rogers and started at once."

She told her falsehood glibly, her sallow cheek flushing, her pale eyes scintillating. It sounded very reasonable; and how could Keith Kenyon know that it was false, or detect the ring of untruth in her story? One of the most unsuspecting of natures, it was hard to believe that this woman had deliberately followed him, ignoring the letter that he had written her—that letter in which he had begged her to release him from a galling bond—because he loved another woman, and had never loved Serena Lynne, but had been led into an engagement while he was too sick and feeble to realize his own actions.

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It was a bold stroke, but Serena Lynne was capable of this, and much more. At first she had found it somewhat difficult to induce her mother to co-operate with her in the scheme which she had concocted; but one part of her story to Keith was true—Mrs. Lynne had received a letter from her sister, the woman who had once been Keith's nurse when he was a child. She lived in an obscure town in Louisiana, and had not met Mrs. Lynne for years. She had to send for her sister, and Mrs. Lynne could not well refuse to aid her daughter in her scheme when her own private affairs called her into the vicinity of Keith Kenyon's home. And Serena was in dead earnest. She had sworn to marry this man—sworn upon bended knee that she would never give him up—this man whom she so madly, insanely loved. She had made this bold move—risked her all upon one cast of the die—and it would go hard with her before she would willingly resign all hope and give up the man who was bound to her in honor, though his chains were of iron, and galled and clanked so fearfully.

His eyes sought her face; the sallow, unlovely features looked more repulsive to him than ever before.

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"But, Serena"—his voice trembling a little with sudden fear—"did you not receive my letter?"

"Your letter?" arching her pale brows with assumed surprise. "Why, how could I, when we left home the very day after you did? And so you did write to me, Keith? Thank you. I shall have my mail forwarded here, and will be pleased to read your first love letter to me, even though it is a little behind time."

She laughed, but the laugh had a disagreeable tone, and was a failure.

"Better late than never," she added.

She had seated herself at his side, in the very chair that Beatrix had vacated. Keith felt a strange feeling of aversion creep over his heart at sight of her in Beatrix's place. It was the sort of feeling that one would experience to see a net closing slowly around one's head, and know that in a short time one will be securely imprisoned, with no way of making an escape.

"The servant informed me that you had been ill ever since your arrival," Serena observed, breaking the silence between them. "I am so glad to be here. I shall remain and nurse you."

Keith's face grew paler than before.

"Of course you are only jesting?" he returned. "I have the best of care, and, in fact, am all right now, except that I need rest and freedom from excitement. But first I must ease my mind. Serena, listen to me. Circumstances have rendered it absolutely imperative that I—that you—My letter contained the information—"

He stopped short, frozen into silence by the curious look in her gleaming eyes. She knew perfectly well what information that letter contained, but she would have bitten her tongue off before she would help him in the matter. And he, poor fellow, was so confused and embarrassed under the freezing gaze of her pale blue eyes, that he found himself unable to frame an intelligible sentence. But as this was just what Serena wished, she did not offer a helping hand, but allowed him to flounder among a sea of words only to come to grief.

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He must not make an explanation. He must not refer to that fatal letter, and acquaint her with its contents. Her role was ignorance of the contents of the letter which he had written to her, asking her to release him from the undesired marriage engagement. And if he found opportunity to enlighten her in regard to what that letter contained, Serena knew that her game would be up.

"Don't speak of anything that may be annoying to you, Keith," she suggested. "I insist upon your having perfect rest and quiet. Mamma is at the St. Charles Hotel," she added, swiftly, as though to change the subject. "I suppose you will send for her to come here?"

"Serena, do not think me inhospitable, but you must remember that—"

"Oh, yes!—your uncle—the old gentleman. I will see him and explain my intrusion. By the way,

what is his name? It is the funniest thing, Keith, but I do not know the name of your adopted uncle."

"His name is Dane—Bernard Dane," returned Keith.

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The name acted like magic upon Serena. She started with a suppressed exclamation, and her eyes dilated with wild surprise which was almost terror. Why, that was the name—the very same name—of the old man who had sent for Beatrix; and was she not Beatrix Dane? A slow horror, an unspoken, scarcely tangible suspicion began to creep through her heart. Good heavens! was not fate leading her through devious ways? She shut her thin lips closely together in a straight, narrow line, and her pale eyes gleamed with an unpleasant light.

"I fancy that I am just in time," she muttered, fiercely. "Not a minute too soon, if my suspicions are correct."

Then turning to Keith, she said, imploringly:

"You will surely allow me to stay here for a time, Keith? If Mr. Dane will permit me, you will not object?"

He shook his head slowly. Under the peculiar circumstances what could he say? He could not turn her away, and the great old house was amply provided with accommodations.

"You will be welcome, I am sure," he returned; "and of course your mother will join you here at once. I think you need not ask Mr. Dane's permission to remain, for this is my home, and I am at liberty to invite my friends here. Only, of course, you will understand, Serena, that this is a very quiet old house. No company, no going out to places of amusement. You will have to be satisfied with an exceedingly quiet life."

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"I shall be with you," she made answer, as though that argument covered all defects.

Keith sighed.

"I will send the carriage for your mother at once," he said.

Even as he spoke, something—a strange foreboding of some nameless evil—something which he could neither define nor understand, crept over his heart and made it cold and heavy as a stone. Had he dreamed the truth, and accepted the warning, and shaped his future conduct accordingly, Keith Kenyon might have been spared much suffering, and my story would be minus a plot. But he could not read the future or understand Serena Lynne's motives, and he was like a puppet in her hands. And an honorable, upright man, wholly in the power of an artful, designing woman, has a very poor chance of escape from her toils.

Keith rang the bell and dispatched Simons for his master. Old Bernard Dane soon put in an appearance. As he entered the drawing-room leaning on his cane, Keith rose.

"I beg your pardon, Uncle Bernard," he began, "for sending for you; but I knew you would not mind it, and I wish to present a lady friend—a lady from Massachusetts, Miss Serena Lynne—who with her mother will be our guest for a few days."

At sound of those last words Serena frowned and bit her lip. Low under her breath, she muttered firmly:

"A few days, indeed! I have made up my mind to stay here. I will give up my grand wedding festivities, and I will be Keith Kenyon's wife before many days."

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Old Bernard Dane received Serena with old-fashioned courtesy, politely concealing his surprise at the unexpected addition to his family. The carriage was sent at once for Mrs. Lynne, and Serena was conducted to a room where she could arrange her dress.

"What a grand old house!" she murmured, covetously, as she followed Mrs. Graves upstairs to a luxurious sleeping apartment. "How I shall queen it here! It will not be long now."

As the thought flitted through her brain, there was the sound of light footsteps coming down the hall. Serena raised her eyes and paused aghast with wordless horror.

Coming down the long corridor, straight toward her, she saw Beatrix Dane!

CHAPTER XIV.

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COMPLICATIONS.

For a moment Serena Lynne stood glaring down upon Beatrix with eyes full of blank astonishment, which Beatrix returned with interest. It was so strange, so sudden, so unexpected, that for the time they could only stand and stare into each other's faces. At last:

"Serena Lynne!"

The name fell from Beatrix's astonished lips like a groan. Serena's pale eyes flashed with the light of a wicked triumph.

"You!" she hissed vengefully. "So you are destined to cross my path wherever I go. How came you here?"

Beatrix's eyes met her wrathful gaze with a glance of cool disdain.

"I might ask you the same question!" she retorted. "I am here, Miss Serena Lynne, because this is my home now. Old Bernard Dane is my uncle, and I have a right beneath his roof. May I ask—what brought you here?"

Serena's eyes snapped.

"Yes; you may ask, if you like," she said, acidly. "I came here because my mother and I were taking a trip through the South, and I had a right to see my betrothed husband."

"Your—betrothed husband?" faltered Beatrix, too overcome with emotion to realize what she was saying. "What do you mean, Serena? You must be out of your senses!" [Pg 101]

"Not at all!" returned Serena, curtly. "I should think you would understand the situation by this time, without any further explanation from me. I am engaged to be married to Keith Kenyon. Surely I have a right to come here with my mother when he is ill and anxious to see me. At all events, we are here, and I do not intend to leave. This is my room, Miss Beatrix Dane"—as Beatrix paused upon the threshold of the room which Mrs. Graves had assigned to Serena—"and I would thank you to leave it!"

Without a word, Beatrix turned and left Miss Lynne alone.

She flew like a wounded creature back to her own apartment, and closed and locked its door behind her.

For a time she stood in the center of the room, staring vacantly before her, not knowing what to think, her senses were in such a whirl.

What did this mean? Was Serena telling the truth? If so, then Keith had deceived her—Beatrix—in the most heartless manner; and there was nothing for her to hope for upon earth. She fell upon her knees beside the bed and burying her face in the pillows, wept bitterly. She realized that there was trouble—more trouble—great, black clouds of trouble, growing dark around her pathway. The very sight of Serena Lynne was enough to warn Beatrix of fresh cause for grief.

She arose from her knees at last and bathed her face and arranged her hair.

"I will go to Keith at once," she said, "and ask him frankly and openly why Serena is here, and what is she to him?" [Pg 102]

But when Beatrix entered the drawing-room a little later for an interview with Keith, she found Bernard Dane there, and, of course, private conversation was impossible. The old man glanced up with a scowl as Beatrix entered the room.

"Who sent for you?" he demanded, brusquely.

The color arose to the girl's pale cheeks.

"No one, sir," she returned with spirit. "I was not aware that you intend to cut me off from communication with the rest of the household."

"That will come soon enough," chuckled the old man, half audibly; but Beatrix overheard the muttered words, and her heart sank with a bitter pang. What did he mean?

"I will ask him when I see him alone," she decided. "He shall tell me what this strange treatment of me signifies."

Aloud she said:

"Uncle Bernard, may I ask you what brings Serena Lynne to this house? She is my bitter enemy, my persecutor. I prefer to go to some other place while that woman is here!"

Old Bernard Dane's sunken eyes flashed.

"You've got the Dane grit and the Dane temper, my dear," he snarled. "But I advise you to keep it well in hand when you are with me. The ladies who are here—yes"—as he marked the sudden start with which Beatrix heard his words—"Mrs. Lynne is with her daughter, of course. Eminently proper, to be sure; you surely did not think that Miss Serena Lynne would come clear from the North all alone to visit Keith?" [Pg 103]

"I don't know, I am sure. She is capable of a great deal," intervened Beatrix. Then she added softly: "Oh, forgive me, Uncle Bernard. I do not mean to be harsh, and ill-tempered, and spiteful; but the sight of that woman just stirs up every uncomfortable attribute of my nature. Uncle Bernard, did you ever know any one who affected you in that way—the very sight of whom would stir up all the worst dregs of your nature and tempt you to do deeds for which you were afterward sorry?"

A dull crimson dyed the old man's wrinkled cheeks for an instant.

"Did I? Humph! Yes; 'in my salad days, when I was green in judgment'—when I had good reason to shrink from the sight of my evil genius, Guy Kenyon."

"Guy Kenyon—my father!" interrupted Keith, excitedly. "Now, Uncle Bernard, you must tell me something about him; for you have never told me anything and I know so little of him."

"You will never learn any more from me," returned the old man, harshly, arising to his feet. "And now I must go and interview Simons. That rascally nigger is getting unmanageable. One would think that he was the master here from the way that he conducts himself lately."

He left the room and closed the door behind him. Out in the hall he came to a pause, clinching his shaking hands upon the head of his cane, his face pale and agitated, a look in the depths of his

sunken dark eyes which was not pleasant to see.

"Guy Kenyon," he muttered, harshly, his bent form shaking visibly; "I would sooner cut off my right hand than tell Guy Kenyon's son what he once was to me. I had never thought of such a thing as learning to care for Guy Kenyon's boy. But somehow my heart is melting. I must be in my dotage, for I find my long-cherished hatred growing less bitter, and revenge does not seem one half so sweet and desirable as it once did. The time was when revenge was the only object for which I existed. Can that time be passing now? Am I growing weak and foolish as I grow old? There! Some one is ringing the door-bell. I wonder who it is?"

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Simons made haste to admit the visitor, while Bernard Dane went slowly into the library. A woman closely veiled entered, and was shown into the reception-room—a woman dressed in black, and who spoke in a low, hurried tone to the servant. She inquired for Mrs. Lynne.

"Tell her that her sister, Mrs. Ray, wishes to see her," she said.

The words reached old Bernard Dane's ears, and a frown knit his brows.

"It is Celia!" he muttered, his face growing deathly pale; and he grasped the arm of a chair which stood near. "Celia Ray! After all those years she ventures to come here! I wish I could unravel the mystery which lies hidden in the past, for that there is something hidden—something wrong—I am certain."

He left the library and made his way straight to the reception-room. The woman was standing at a window, gazing out upon the green lawn, starred with gorgeous flower-beds even at this season of the year.

At sound of the closing of the door, she turned swiftly, but as her eyes fell upon Bernard Dane's face she uttered an exclamation of surprise.

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"Bernard!" she cried, and her voice trembled perceptibly. "I did not expect to see you."

He bowed low, extending his hand.

"No? Well, I am here, you see. I have not met you in a long time, Celia, and I thought possibly you might be glad to see me once more."

"Glad?"

A swift light flashed into her pale eyes and illumined her features, and made her almost pretty. A younger edition of her sister, Mrs. Lynne; but her face was more refined, and she had a winning way, which contrasted strongly with Mrs. Lynne's awkward abruptness.

"Glad?" she repeated once more, softly. "You do not know how glad, Bernard!"

And in those few words one could read a whole volume of affection—affection for this cross-grained, unpleasant old man—that was truly wonderful. Celia Ray was the only woman who had ever loved Bernard Dane. And her love for him had been the bane of her life, the ruin of her happiness. For his sake she had lost everything on earth—all that the human heart prizes; all ties of home and friends; and all for naught. For Bernard Dane had not returned her affection; he had never loved any woman in all his long, hard life but Mildred Dane, who had not loved him.

Celia Ray stood gazing into the old man's face with an eager, rapt expression. To her he was young and handsome.

"You do not look well," she exclaimed. "I can see that you have been ill. And you would not let me know it! Oh, Bernard! why do you treat me with such hardness? Why have you doomed me to a lonely life? And yet you, too, are alone."

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She sank into a seat and covered her face with her hands, while under her breath she murmured brokenly:

"Dare I tell him all at this late day? Would he not kill me if he knew what I have done?"

But at that moment Mrs. Lynne made her appearance, and then Bernard Dane withdrew. There was a perplexed expression upon his face, and as he went slowly back to the library he muttered to himself:

"I wonder if she played me false in that affair? Poor little fool! She did not dream that I could hear her whispered words just now. What idiots people are who indulge in soliloquy! I never was guilty of it in my life"—forgetting that at that very moment he was soliloquizing. "Oh, woman, lovely woman," with a satirical smile, "how exceedingly transparent you are after all!"

In the meantime, Beatrix was left alone with Keith; but once alone with him, she found, as is very often the case, that she could not introduce the subject upon which she wished to speak.

Keith broke the silence himself.

"Beatrix,"—in a wistful tone—"no doubt you are surprised that Serena has come here. You are no more surprised and annoyed than I am."

"Yes,"—her face full of wonder—"I thought that you were delighted."

Keith colored.

"Beatrix, darling, I ask you to trust me, and ask no questions for the present. I will explain all as soon as possible. Will you try to trust me, darling?"

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His eyes were upon her face with a look of entreaty. What could she say but—yes?

CHAPTER XV.

[Pg 108]

BETROTHED.

The promise was readily given, for with Keith's dark eyes gazing into her own with that eager, earnest gaze, Beatrix could not have refused, even if she had so desired. And she longed to trust this handsome young lover, who had won her girlish heart completely. What one earnestly wishes to do is usually accomplished, when there is no reason why the obstacles should not be vanquished; and Beatrix was only too glad to place confidence in Keith. She sank into the seat at his side and laid her hand upon his arm.

"Keith,"—her voice low and eager—"you would not deceive me, would you? Remember, I am at your mercy, and I am compelled to believe in you. I must trust you, Keith; I could not live without you now—I could not!"

His eyes lighted up with a rapturous light; he stooped and kissed her white brow.

"Beatrix, darling," he was beginning; but just then the door opened and Serena sailed into the room.

"Well, I must say, Miss Beatrix Dane," she began, taking possession of Keith with an air of proprietorship, "you are a bold creature! I intend to speak to Mr. Dane in regard to your shameless conduct, here all alone with Mr. Kenyon. Go up to your own room and stay there, or I will go to Mr. Dane at once, and he will see that you keep in future your proper place in this house."

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Beatrix's eyes blazed; her slight form trembled; she stood trembling, hesitating. But Keith whispered softly:

"Go, dear; I have something to say to this woman. I will explain all when I see you again. Beatrix, you will trust me? You have promised to do so."

"I will."

She left the room with hasty steps. As soon as the drawing-room door had closed behind her, Keith turned to Serena.

"I am glad that you have come back to this room," he began, slowly. "I have something to say to you. Serena, I wrote you a letter which I am very sorry to find you did not receive. In that letter I told you—"

"Oh, Keith! Keith! do not break my heart with unkindness and cruelty now!" she cried, clasping his hand in both her bony ones. "I suppose in your letter you scolded me for some deficiency. I ask you to forgive me for whatever I may have done that has offended or in any way annoyed you. I beg your pardon—I beg your pardon, and I ask you to have pity and say no more. I acknowledge that I was rude to that girl Beatrix Dane; but, oh, Keith! remember that I have had a hard time with her, and much to bear on her account. She left our humble home after my mother had cared for her and acted a mother's part to her for nearly seventeen long years. She left us with the intention of marrying—"

"Hush! That is false—false, Serena, and you know it!" stormed Keith, angrily, losing command of his temper at last. "This poor girl has been wronged. I wonder you dare tell me such tales in regard to her, Serena!"

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Serena shook her head slowly, mournfully.

"Truly, you are 'in the snare of the fowler'," she quoted, sagely. "That wicked girl has woven her net about you, and 'you are forever lost'."

"Nonsense!" he cried, angrily. "Serena, I thought you possessed more common sense. Forgive me—I am very rude; but you are driving me wild with your insinuations in regard to Beatrix. However, I wish to speak of something else; I wish to say, Serena, that I have written you in regard to our engagement—the foolish, ill-advised engagement existing between you and me. It has been a mistake from the start, Serena, a great and unwise mistake; we must rectify it now."

"How? Oh, Keith! Keith! don't you care for me at all?"

"I told you, when I asked you to be my wife, that I had no love for you, and yet you were willing to accept me without love. Pardon me, Serena, but when a woman accepts an offer of marriage from a man who openly acknowledges that he does not love her, she must be prepared to accept all the consequences of her own rash and ill-advised act—all the shame, the grief, and humiliation. Serena, I have never loved you—I never shall; and I love another woman with all my heart, and soul, and strength! It is my desire that this foolish engagement be broken off at once—at once. You will thank me some day that I had the courage to put an end to it before it was too late."

Silence, awful silence, settled down upon the room. You could hear distinctly the beating of Serena Lynne's heart, as she sat staring straight before her into space with a numbed, awful look upon her face which might have touched a heart of stone. Keith felt his own heart grow sore with sorrow for her suffering, but he felt that he was doing right, like the surgeon who pities and sympathizes inwardly with the sufferer before him, yet must not hesitate to plunge the sharp, keen knife into the wound, or the sufferer will die. He felt that he must end all this unpleasant complication with Serena before another day had passed, or he could not tell into what trouble

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his own mad act might lead him.

"I have done wrong," he muttered to himself, "in asking her to marry me. I must have been mad—mad! But it is not too late to rectify the mistake, and I must end this affair at once and forever."

But still Serena sat like a statue and did not speak or move. Keith began to feel uneasy.

"Serena," he said, gently, "I do not wish to wound you, but there must be a final understanding between us now."

"There shall be," she cried, angrily, starting up. "I consider the engagement at an end. I release you! Now, go and marry Beatrix Dane; but my opinion is, that you will rue the day that you were guilty of such mad folly! Good-bye, Keith Kenyon, may you be as happy as you deserve!"

But as she left the room, her face working convulsively, her breath coming in broken gasps, she was whispering softly to herself:

"He shall never marry her—never! I swear that, come what may, Keith Kenyon shall be mine! It is the one object of my life. I shall not give it up without a struggle!" [Pg 112]

But slowly and surely the hour was coming when Serena Lynne would be forced to say that all hope was vain.

That very day Keith made up his mind to take a decisive step. He would make Beatrix his wife at once—privately—and then no matter what might happen, she would have him to defend and protect her. And nothing should ever part them, nothing could ever come between them save death. The more he thought of it the more determined did he grow. At last he rose and made his way slowly out into the grounds, lying fair and green in the wintry sunshine as though it were spring. Still weak, Keith felt the balmy air revive him and strengthen him, and found that after a little he was able to walk quite well.

Down in a pretty honeysuckle bower he found Beatrix sitting on a rustic seat, pale and silent. She looked as if she had been crying.

"Beatrix!"

The sound of his voice made an electric thrill run over her. She started to her feet.

"Is it really you—out at last?" she cried. "Oh, Keith! I am so glad!"

He took her hands in his and drew her head down so that he could look into her eyes.

"Sweetheart," he whispered, tenderly, "I want you to be my wife at once—without any delay. Listen. There is nothing between Serena Lynne and me—absolutely nothing—believe me, darling. Now this is my plan: I will send today and procure the license; tomorrow we will drive in the carriage to a clergyman's house—the drive will do me good—and you shall come back my little wife. Then no one can part us—never, while we live. Will you consent, Beatrix?" [Pg 113]

The beautiful dark eyes wavered from before his eager, passionate gaze; she trembled like a leaf.

"Say yes, Beatrix. There is no one to object. We have no one to consult. Remember, Uncle Bernard wished us to marry. Say yes, dear, and make me perfectly happy. No one ever loved a woman as I love you, my beautiful brown-eyed darling!"

And so the answer was given—that one little word of three letters which was large enough to cover a whole life-time of future woe. The secret marriage was arranged to take place on the following day. Keith felt a strange dislike to revealing the truth to old Bernard Dane, after what the old man had said concerning a marriage with Beatrix—the very marriage which he had himself first planned. Keith felt certain that Bernard Dane would now bitterly oppose the marriage, and Keith determined that he would not give the old man a chance to do so. So the fatal plot was formed, the secret marriage arranged, and they parted that night with the understanding that on the morrow Beatrix would become Keith Kenyon's wife.

At that very moment, up in her own room, Serena Lynne was hurriedly turning over the contents of her trunk, her face pale as death, her eyes full of hatred. All at once she snatched up from the depths of the trunk a small tin box.

"Ah, Miss Beatrix Dane!" she hissed, revengefully, "if I am not mistaken, I have you in my power at last!"

CHAPTER XVI.

[Pg 114]

A MIDNIGHT INTERVIEW.

Alone in her room that night, Beatrix sat down at the open window to think over the new life so soon to be unfolded to her. Keith Kenyon's wife! No position in the world could be so desirable; no girl was ever so happy as she.

"He is so noble, so good, so grand!" she thought to herself, her fair cheek flushing with rapture at thought of her lover's perfections. How noble he appeared in her eyes! How handsome, how manly! To her there was but one man worth looking at in the world—handsome Keith Kenyon.

The moments glided by, still the girl sat there wrapped up in her own thoughts. Only think, tomorrow at this time she would be his wife—his wife! Surely there could be nothing more to be

desired on earth.

"How hard I will try to please him and to make him happy!" she whispered softly to herself, her eyes fixed upon the calm, starlit sky above her head, her heart beating fast with rapture. "Oh, Keith!" she murmured half aloud, "I pray the good God to make me worthy of your great love. I will be a true and faithful wife, and all the rest of my life shall be dedicated to making you happy—my Keith! my king!"

As the words passed her lips some subtle instinct warned her that she was no longer alone. She turned her head, and her face grew pale as death as her eyes fell upon the form of Serena—Serena Lynne watching her with intense hatred in the depths of her evil eyes. With a stifled cry Beatrix started to her feet. Serena glided swiftly, softly to her side. [Pg 115]

"What are you doing in my room at this hour?" demanded Beatrix, sternly. "How dare you intrude upon my privacy without an invitation? What evil errand brings you here?"

Serena's eyes snapped; she set her teeth down hard upon her thin under lip, and clenched her hands as though she would like to clasp them around the girl's white throat.

"Upon what errand do I intrude here at this late hour?" she repeated, hissing the words sibilantly forth from between her clenched teeth. "I will very soon enlighten you, Miss Beatrix Dane. I have come here to ask you a question. Is it your intention to marry Keith Kenyon? Ah, yes! I know—I suspect—a great deal. I have released him from the engagement between us; but I have only done so for a purpose. I wished to bring him to his senses in regard to you, and I think that I shall be able to do so. I have laid a plan, and the first step was to sever all ties between Keith Kenyon and myself, and then—then I come to you as an auxiliary in the next move in the game—a game played for the welfare of Keith Kenyon—his future happiness! Beatrix Dane, I demand of you, is it your intention to marry this man—this man who belongs to me in the sight of God? Answer me! I demand it! I will have the truth!"

But Beatrix did not reply. She sat gazing out into the misty night, her eyes full of bitter sorrow. [Pg 116]

She was conscious of nothing—she heard nothing, saw nothing—only over and over in her ears those words hard and cruel repeated themselves: "This man who belongs to me in the sight of God!"

"Will you answer me?"

Serena's voice cut across the silence like a knife.

Beatrix started, and a shudder ran over her slender frame.

"Yes; I will answer you," she returned, bravely. "I am going to do as I think best in this matter, Serena; and I certainly shall not consult your wishes. Keith Kenyon is nothing to you—nothing—less than nothing!"

Serena's face was pale to ghastliness; her form shook perceptibly, her eyes scintillated. She was a very unlovely picture of anger—impotent, restrained rage—as she stood there.

"Be careful!" she hissed; "be careful, Beatrix Dane! I give you fair warning; you are treading upon dangerous ground; you are making a grave mistake. It would be better for you if you had died when you were born rather than to cross my wishes. Now, answer me one question. You think that you love Keith Kenyon—would your love change or alter if you were to learn that he is no longer wealthy; that old Bernard Dane has altered his will, and intends leaving his fortune elsewhere? How would you like to be Mrs. Keith Kenyon and live in a cot, and do your own housework, and be compelled to see him toil like a slave from day to day, because he had taken upon him the burden of a wife? Answer me that, Beatrix Dane! Is your love unselfish enough to give him up rather than see him reduced to that?" [Pg 117]

"My love is great enough and unselfish enough to make any sacrifice for his welfare," returned Beatrix, her sweet voice trembling audibly; "but it would not make him happy to give me up. I am willing to share poverty with him. Does not the marriage service bind us 'for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer'? Oh, Serena! you must have a strange opinion of my love if you think that I would turn away from him because he had lost his inheritance."

"His inheritance!" cried Serena, scornfully; "and, pray, what is yours? Do you suspect? Ah! my young friend, if you knew, if you held in your possession the fatal truth which I have good reason to believe is connected with your life, you would commit suicide rather than marry Keith Kenyon."

"Serena, I have heard enough of this," retorted Beatrix, her temper getting beyond her control. "Be good enough to retire; for it is very late, and I am tired and sleepy."

"Ah, yes, to be sure!" sneered Serena. "You long to be asleep that you may dream of your handsome, dark-eyed lover! But wait a moment, Beatrix Dane. This is the last time that I shall trouble you. Will you heed me when I say that I have reason to believe that you are destined to wreck and ruin Keith Kenyon's life? There is something that you have yet to learn concerning yourself; and when you do learn it, you will curse the hour that you promised to become his wife—something which will ruin and curse his whole existence as well as your own, and make life a scene of horror to you both! Will you believe me when I say—" [Pg 118]

But Beatrix could bear no more. She moved swiftly to Serena's side, and laying her hand upon her arm, led her to the door and opened it.

"Now, go!" she commanded.

And Serena was so overwhelmed with astonishment that she silently obeyed.

Beatrix closed the door sharply and turned the key in the lock, and, left alone at last, she prepared to retire.

She was soon asleep, and her last thoughts were of Keith Kenyon and how dear he was to her. She thought, too, of Serena's strange words and hidden threats; but she could see too plainly that Serena was half insane with jealous hatred, and Beatrix shut her heart upon her vile insinuations. And so at length she sank away in peaceful slumber, unconscious of the dark clouds slowly but surely gathering about her, and soon to break in awful ruin upon her defenseless head.

A strange future—a strange fate—lay spread out before her—a thorny path for her little feet to tread.

Had she known the bitter truth, Beatrix would not have wished to awaken again in this world. But she did not know, and it was well that she did not; for the knowledge of her awful fate—her dark inheritance—would have driven her mad. And yet, some day she must know—she must know! Poor child! let her dream on now in innocent unconsciousness of what the future has in store for her. Soon enough the day will come when Beatrix Dane will pray for the boon of death, the peace and quiet of the grave!

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In the meantime, alone in her own room, Serena sat before a table upon which she had placed the tin box. She looked like a fiend gloating over the possession of another human soul as her long fingers touched carefully the scorched and blackened fragments of that fatal letter which Doctor Lynne's last act on earth was to destroy, hoping to hide forever the secret which it contained.

"I will do it!" muttered Serena, hoarsely, her eyes sparkling with hatred and malice. "I will take these papers tomorrow to an expert—I know just where to find one—and I think they can be deciphered. And—then"—arising to her feet and clinching her cold hands fiercely together—"Miss Beatrix Dane, I shall hold you in the hollow of my hand!"

CHAPTER XVII.

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SERENA SUCCEEDS.

That night Beatrix dreamed a strange dream. She thought that she was alone in the mysterious round room in the western tower, gazing upon a portrait which hung upon the wall—the portrait of a woman—a beautiful, dark-eyed, sad-faced woman, the sweet lips parted with a smile—surely the saddest smile that ever touched human lips. And as Beatrix gazed, spell-bound, upon the portrait, the painted lips seemed to open and breathe softly the one word:

"Beware!"

Under the spell of a weird fascination, Beatrix stood before the portrait in her dream, her heart beating fast with a strange terror, her limbs trembling, a cold chill creeping slowly over her. She seemed on the verge of suffocation; her breath came in fitful gasps.

She awoke. Good heavens! where was she? She found herself alone in the round room in the western tower, in her long white night-robe, with a lighted lamp in one hand, gazing about her with wild, dilated eyes. How had she reached that room, traversed the long corridors, ascended the spiral staircase in her sleep?

With a shivering terror creeping slowly over her, the girl was about to turn away and retrace her steps to her own room; but at that moment her eyes fell upon a small knob, like an electric button, in one of the panels of the wall. She had never seen it before, notwithstanding her frequent visits to the room. It was at the very spot where in her dream she had seen the portrait. Impelled by a strange impulse, Beatrix pressed her finger lightly upon the knob. It moved, and the wooden panel slowly revolved, turned outward, and revealed the portrait of a woman's face—the very face of her dream. She stood before it pale and trembling, full of a strange terror for which she could not find a name. Would the painted lips open and speak even as in her dream?

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Who was the woman before her? She drew nearer and peered curiously into the painted face. There was a look of piteous sadness in the large, dark eyes, as though an awful doom was resting upon her. As she gazed spell-bound, her sharp eyes caught a glimpse of a name affixed to the portrait. She bent her head to read it, and her heart gave a great bound and then stood still, for the name was Mildred Dane. So this was her mother, her own dear mother, whom she had never seen, whom she could not remember. Why was the picture hidden away in this room—this mysterious room—in the deserted and unfrequented tower? What strange mystery enshrouded the fate of Mildred Dane? How had she suffered? For that some tragedy was connected with her life Beatrix had long been convinced, and it needed only a look into that beautiful, heart-broken, hopeless face to confirm her suspicions. Why was the portrait hidden here, and what was the secret of Mildred Dane's life? In vain did Mildred Dane's daughter turn the question over in her mind; there was no answer. But as she stood staring blankly into the pictured face before her she caught a glimpse of a folded paper lying in the embrasure where the picture stood. When it swung around and disclosed itself there was a narrow space left behind, and there the paper lay. Beatrix snatched it up.

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"I will see what it is!" she exclaimed. "This is my mother's portrait, and I have a right. Tomorrow I

will demand of Bernard Dane why her portrait is hidden here, its face to the wall, alone in this dreary room which was used in times past for God only knows what dreadful purposes. I must know the meaning of this mystery!"

Grasping the folded paper in one cold hand, Beatrix made her way back to her own chamber, locked herself in, and sat down to examine the paper so strangely come into her possession.

It was a letter addressed to Bernard Dane in a delicate hand, the ink faded, but still legible.

"You have loved me, Bernard Dane"—so ran the written lines—"and I am grateful for your love, though I can not return it. But since you have told me all—all the bad, black secret of my doomed life, which has been concealed from me until now—I feel that with love or ties of friendship I have nothing to do. For me there can be no earthly affection, no love-lit future, no tender care. The ties of home, the love of little, innocent children are not for me. Oh, Bernard, surely, in this bitter knowledge that has come upon me at last, you are amply avenged! for I am accursed—accursed! The heritage into which I have come—descended to me straight from my South American ancestors—has wrought the ruin of my whole life. Yet I never knew it, never suspected it, until it was too late, and they had forced me to marry old Godfrey Dane. Upon my little child—my little, innocent Beatrix—the curse will descend—the awful curse which has desolated my life. Her dark inheritance will come upon her, and she will long for death, and curse the mother who gave her birth. Oh, Bernard, Bernard! pity me and help me to escape. Kill me, Bernard, will you not? It will be such a grand relief to be free from this horrible burden—to be done with this curse, and get out of the world—anywhere—anywhere—"

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Here the writing ceased abruptly, and the letter ended with its grewsome secret still untold. Beatrix crumpled the letter in her shaking hand, and rising to her feet, began to pace to and fro, her face as white as the face of the dead, her eyes wild with horror—the madness of despair.

"In the name of God," she groaned, desperately, "what is this secret—this maddening, tantalizing secret—the curse which has ruined my mother's life, and which I firmly believe brought her to her death? Oh, God, have pity, and deliver me from this awful curse! But if I must suffer—if I can not get free—let me know—in pity and mercy let me know the nature of the awful blight which hangs over my life like a curse!"

Alas! poor Beatrix—poor, unhappy child—she is destined to learn soon enough; and when that hour of darkness comes, prone upon her face in the dust, she will cry aloud in bitter anguish, "Oh, God!—my God!—why hast Thou forsaken me?"

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But at last, worn out with her bitter thoughts, and faint and exhausted, the girl crept into bed once more; and her last thoughts, as her head rested upon the pillow, were of Keith Kenyon, and the morrow, which was to be her wedding-day, and, although she dreamed it not, a day of doom.

Morning dawned fair and clear, with the sunshine glinting over the smooth lawn, where even in this wintry season the grass was green, and with birds chirping in the branches of the trees—quite a holiday time. Beatrix arose early, and the first object upon which her eyes fell was the letter which she had so strangely discovered the night before.

At least that was no dream.

She dressed herself and made her way at once to the round room in the western tower; she wished to restore the portrait to its former position. But when she entered the round room there was no trace of a portrait to be seen; even the brass knob had disappeared. Dazed and bewildered, the girl left the room and went down-stairs and out into the grounds. She felt restless and uneasy; her heart was weighed down with a strange foreboding. Yet today was to be her wedding-day.

Directly after breakfast Serena announced her intention of going out. She and Mrs. Lynne were to take their departure in a day or two, and Serena declared that she had important business to attend to which might occupy her all day. There was an unnatural glitter in her pale eyes as they rested upon Beatrix's face; and Beatrix fancied that there was something like concealed triumph in the tones of her shrill voice. The girl's heart sank like lead in spite of her efforts to be brave, for well she knew that that look upon Serena Lynne's face boded evil to somebody.

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"No matter," she whispered softly under her breath; "after today they can not harm me. I shall be Keith's wife—Keith's own beloved wife. He will protect me from all ill."

Serena donned a street dress and set forth, her veil drawn closely over her face, as though to conceal her features, one gloved hand holding tightly, as though it was precious, a small tin box. Her pale eyes glittered with exultation behind the folds of her tissue veil; she seemed eager and anxious.

So she was. Just as eager and impatient to begin her dreadful work as the vulture which waits greedily for the corpse to putrefy upon which it expects to make its horrid feast.

She made her way down-town to the very outskirts of the business quarter of the city.

Pausing before a long row of offices in a dingy-looking building, she drew a card from her pocket and glanced at an address upon it. Her face lighted up with satisfaction.

"I believe I am right," she said, half aloud. "This is the place."

She entered a doorway and ascended a flight of bare stairs.

A little later she was standing in an office, in the presence of a pale, grave-looking, elderly man

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who was seated at a long table covered with papers.

Serena advanced and laid the box upon the table.

"You are Mr. Demorest, are you not?" she began, abruptly.

The man bowed and rose to offer her a seat. She checked him with a slight gesture.

"No thanks; I will not detain you. I have here the fragments of a letter supposed to be important, and which has been exposed to fire. I ask if you can decipher its contents. Please examine and let me know."

Ten minutes later he lifted his head from the small heap of smoke-scorched paper before him.

"Yes, madame," he returned, gravely; "I have reason to believe that it can be deciphered. I promise you in a few hours' time to restore to you the contents of the letter."

"Very well." Her eyes were blazing. "I will leave them now and call later in the day. Restore the contents of that letter so that it can be easily read, and I will pay you handsomely."

And drawing her veil closely over her face, she left the office, her evil work well done.

CHAPTER XVIII.

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HOW THE SECRET IS TOLD.

When Serena had left the house, Beatrix went straight to old Bernard Dane's room and rapped at the door.

"Come in!" cried a harsh voice; and Beatrix pushed the door open and entered the room. Bernard Dane was standing before a window, gazing out into the grounds, his wrinkled face looking grave and thoughtful. At sound of the girl's footsteps he turned slowly, and as his eyes fell upon her pale, troubled face, something like pity flashed into his own—but only for a moment.

"Well?" he demanded, sharply, as she paused before him.

"Uncle Bernard!"—Beatrix's voice was low and hurried. She shrank from the interview, yet she felt that she must go through with it—"I have intruded upon you to ask you a question. I am here to demand of you the secret of my mother's life and death. Why is her portrait hidden away in the round room, with its face turned to the wall? What is this secret which *killed* her, and which her own handwriting declares is destined to descend, like a curse, upon the head of her child? Uncle Bernard, I must have an answer! This silence is unjust; it is cruel; it is maddening! Tell me, what is this secret connected with my mother? I *will* know!"

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The old man's face was a study as he stood listening to her eager outburst, his keen, dark eyes fixed upon her face with a penetrating look in their depths. He shook his gray head.

"My dear, I will not. Now, that is all, and it is quite useless to ask me any more questions. And there is no one else in the world who can enlighten you; so it will be useless to seek information elsewhere. Beatrix, my child, why torture yourself in this way? Be content as you are, and do not seek to look back upon the past, or trouble yourself in regard to the future. See here, child!"—the old man's voice softened insensibly—"you must believe that I am acting for your good. When you first came here I resolved upon a step, the very thought of which now fills my heart with horror. I had wished to see you and Keith married, but now—Oh, my God! I would sooner see you both in your graves."

"*Uncle!*"

"It is true—too true, Beatrix. I am going to send you away from this place. If you remain here, you and Keith will marry, even against my wishes—I feel it. And it would be better—much better for you to be dead and buried than to take such a step. Do you hear me, Beatrix?"

"Yes, sir," the sweet voice trembling, but in the great dark eyes a look of determination. Ah, Bernard Dane, your warning comes too late! You have sowed and you must reap. If a man sows tares he can not harvest wheat. She turned and left him alone without another word. Give up Keith Kenyon? Not if she knew it; on the contrary, the girl felt more determined than ever to become Keith's wife.

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"He is the only creature in the wide world who loves me, and I love him with all my heart. My darling! I *will* be his wife, and we can not help being happy, even though Uncle Bernard should disinherit him."

She went to her own room and sat down to think over the situation. She did not wish to disobey her uncle; but Bernard Dane had no right to dispose of her as though she were a toy, a puppet in his hands. She would not endure it.

"Good heavens! how unjust!" she exclaimed, indignantly. "He did all in his power to make us care for each other, and now, when it is too late, he wants to separate us. He must be mad!"

As she sat there absorbed in reverie, a message came from Keith asking her to come out into the grounds. She made haste to obey the summons, and once out in the grounds together, they discussed the coming event.

"It is all arranged, my darling," he said, as he kissed the sweet red lips, "and in a few short hours

you will belong to me, never to part on earth—never any more."

She had meant to tell him of her interview with Bernard Dane, and the old man's stern command that they should forget each other; but it seemed a pity to trouble him or cast a cloud upon his happiness. And, after all, Keith was his own master. So she held her peace and said nothing of her interview with her uncle; and thus she made a fatal mistake. Had she confided all to her lover, he would have demanded an explanation from Bernard Dane, and much unhappiness and suffering might have been prevented.

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But what lover ever listened to reason? A vague uneasiness had stolen into Keith's heart; but he accounted for it by the peculiar circumstances in which they were placed, and resolved to say nothing that would trouble her.

He was happy—very happy—in the prospect of making Beatrix his wife so soon.

"Darling," he said softly, pressing the light form to his heart, "everything is arranged. We will drive out at three in the pony-carriage. We will go direct to Mr. Darrell's house—the clergyman who is a friend of mine—the license is already procured; nothing to wait for—not even the ring."

Drawing a tiny velvet case from his pocket he displayed a heavy gold band, and with it a glittering diamond.

"Here, sweetheart, let me put on the badge of your slavery," holding up the diamond as he spoke. Then with a swift glance into the lovely, downcast face he slipped the ring upon the third finger of her left hand. But Beatrix did not need a ring to remind her of her love for Keith.

"We broke no gold—or sign
Of stronger faith to be;
But I wear his last look in my heart,
Which said, 'I love but thee!'"

Three o'clock found the two lovers seated in the carriage on their way to the clergyman's house. A little later Beatrix Dane came forth, Beatrix Dane no longer, but Mrs. Kenyon. How different everything seemed! the whole world was metamorphosed to her eyes. She glanced into Keith's face with a look of wordless love.

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"Oh, Keith," she whispered, softly, "I am so happy!"

It was the last time that such words were destined to pass her lips for many a dark and dreadful day. They reached home, and Beatrix went straight to her room. She wanted to be alone and think over her new-found happiness. She gazed upon the wedding-ring on her finger as she hid the marriage-certificate away safely in her desk.

"My husband!" she whispered, softly. "Nothing can part us now—nothing but death! No one can come between us now—never while we live!"

Hark! what is that? The sound of voices—women's voices—fell upon her ears.

It was Serena and her mother in an empty room adjoining Beatrix's chamber. They had gone there for a private conference, and did not dream that she would overhear.

"Mamma,"—Beatrix heard Serena's sibilant voice, and a shudder passed over her—"I know all the whole fearful secret at last, and Beatrix Dane will never marry Keith Kenyon now. I know the nature of the awful curse which descends from Mildred Dane upon her child, which was originally transmitted from Mildred Dane's South American ancestors, and I no longer envy Beatrix her beauty. Better be the ugliest woman in the land than the thing she is! I would not exchange my plain face, were it ten times plainer, for Beatrix Dane's glorious beauty. Mother, listen, and do not faint or cry out. This is the bad, black secret: Mildred Dane inherited the awful plague of leprosy, and from her it descends to her child, Beatrix Dane!"

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CHAPTER XIX.

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BEATRIX HEARS THE SECRET.

Silence—awful silence! Beatrix could hear her own heart beat as she stood there alone in the silence and darkness of her own chamber, the hand that wears Keith Kenyon's wedding-ring pressed against her madly throbbing heart.

The full significance of the words to which she has just listened does not reach her understanding. She does not fully realize their awful meaning. Not now; time enough for that later, when the numbness is gone from her brain and she has the courage to stand face to face with the bitter—the awful truth.

She stands staring straight before her into the darkness, her hand pressing against her heart convulsively, holding her breath to hear what may come next.

Serena's voice breaks the awful silence, low and hissing like some venomous serpent.

"It is true—all true—true as gospel, mamma!" she cried, exultantly. "There is no reason to doubt it—no possibility of a mistake. It was the shock of discovering the horrible truth that killed my father. You know he just idolized Beatrix; and to find out that for all these years he had been harboring an accursed creature like that, whose very touch may be pollution—for no one can tell

when the disease may break out in the system—simply killed him. Mamma, the story is true; there is no doubt of it. This frightful disease is transmitted from generation to generation, and is incurable. But perhaps I had better read you the letter. Mr. Demorest says that it is a terrible revelation, which ought to be placed in the hands of the authorities, for no leper should be allowed to go at large in the streets of a city."

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There was a ring of satisfaction in Serena's cold voice. Truly, if "love is as strong as death," "jealousy is as hard as hell," and knows no pity.

"But, Serena," Mrs. Lynne interposes, feebly, "there is nothing to prove that this terrible disease has developed in Beatrix. Her skin is as fair as a lily—a wonderful complexion—"

Serena groaned. Complexion was her *bete noire*. Hers was the color of a weak solution of coffee. Mrs. Lynne went on:

"There is, in fact, as yet, nothing in the world to make one put faith in the statement concerning Beatrix. Don't let your jealous hatred of the girl lead you astray. It will merely precipitate matters; and you will have to prove all these things, you know, Serena."

"Mamma you must think me an idiot. Of course, I expect to prove all that I assert—at least, as much as any one possibly can. We can only prove that Mildred Dane—this girl's mother—was a victim of the plague of leprosy; and any physician will tell you that no child of a leper—especially when the leper is a woman—can possibly escape the dark inheritance. Sit down there in that arm-chair, mamma, and let me read you the letter, the very letter that killed my father. When he tossed it upon the fire, fate decreed that it should not be consumed. Fortunately, the fire was low, and papa must have been nearly dead when he attempted to destroy the letter, and with it all evidence of the awful curse which is Beatrix Dane's inheritance. But I found the scorched fragments of the letter—it was only torn in four pieces—and I put them safely away in a little tin box. When we came down here to New Orleans some impulse prompted me to bring the box and contents with me. I had heard papa speak of a Mr. Demorest in this city who was wonderfully ingenious and successful in deciphering and restoring old papers. I found his address upon a card among papa's private papers, and I brought the card with me when we came to this city. I had no difficulty in finding the man. I knew that it would cost me a pretty penny; so it did. It has taken every dollar that I had in the world, but it is well invested. I am more than repaid for the outlay; for, oh, mamma, Keith Kenyon will never make Beatrix Dane his wife now—never! Listen to me while I read you the letter. It is from old Bernard Dane to my father, and this is what it says."

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Silence once more, broken by the rustling of paper as Serena unfolds the fresh sheet upon which Mr. Demorest has transcribed the contents of the mutilated letter—the silence of the very grave reigns throughout the old house. The girl in the other room has thrown herself into a low seat, and crouches there like some hunted creature brought to bay, her heart overflowing with awful and bitter anguish—a suffering so intense that no words have ever been framed in any language capable of expressing it. A cloud of horrible darkness and despair envelopes her; she can see no ray of light; she is groping in the gloom, still unable to fully comprehend the nature of this wondrous horror that has come into her life. She will realize it to its full extent by and by.

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Loud and clear, and with a ring of triumph in it, Serena's voice falls upon the silence once more as she reads that fatal letter aloud—reads to the bitter end.

"DOCTOR FREDERICK LYNNE,—I feel it is my duty, now that Beatrix is grown and the time is coming for me to remove her from your care, to reveal to you the nature of the terrible future in store for her—the dark inheritance which must inevitably descend upon her sooner or later. You are a physician and a scientific scholar, and you will comprehend and no doubt feel intense interest in this strange and peculiar case. Let me go back a generation or two. Mildred Dane, the mother of Beatrix, was a Miss Baretta; her parents were South Americans, and very strange and eccentric people. They reared Mildred, who was an only child, in the strictest privacy, and the girl grew up in ignorance of the blight which was destined to be cast upon her life. She was very beautiful, and very sweet-tempered—too easily yielding to others. She was forced by her parents into a distasteful marriage with Godfrey Dane, an old man, but very wealthy. One child was born, and Godfrey Dane died when it was a few months old. That child was Beatrix—little Beatrix who has lived with you all her life.

"I pass over Mildred's tragic death, and all other events which do not bear directly upon the fate of this child; it is with her alone I wish to deal. Dr. Lynne, I am going to tell you all in as few words as possible. Before her death, poor Mildred became a victim of leprosy, and while her child was drawing from its mother's breast the awful, incurable plague into its system. That Beatrix will escape the scourge is simply impossible.

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"But it seldom makes its appearance before the age of eighteen—it may be a little later or a little earlier, but somewhere in the neighborhood of that age.

"So until she reaches eighteen there is no reason to fear contagion to your family. I wish you to send Beatrix to me at once; I would place her under the care of an eminent physician, but all efforts will prove unavailing; there is no hope for her; it is only a question of time before the dread disease will develop in her system. Send her to me at once. You will find a letter accompanying this which will be explanation enough for your family; but keep this letter as secret as the grave. Never let Beatrix Dane catch a glimpse of its contents, or the knowledge of what this letter contains may kill her outright. And now I have made a full explanation, I have no more to say. Send the girl

to me, and your responsibility ceases forever.

"Yours respectfully,

"BERNARD DANE."

Serena's voice rang out clear and distinct to the very last. Then silence settled down, broken by Mrs. Lynne.

"Good heavens!"—in an awe-stricken voice—"Serena, this is horrible! Do you think there was any danger while she was with us? Oh! what if we have been exposed to this dreadful thing! I wish that girl was dead—dead and buried and forgotten. I hate to think of her." [Pg 138]

And not a word of pity for the hopeless wretch who was doomed to suffer from this awful curse; the heart-broken, wild-eyed creature in the adjoining room, who crouched in the depths of the arm-chair and listened—listened eagerly, intently, to every word that Serena had read in the fatal letter. Not a word, or a cry, or a groan, passed Beatrix Dane's lips as she crouched there, and over her a great darkness settled; life drifted away from her grasp; the graceful head fell forward, and she lost consciousness. It was merciful oblivion; but it was destined not to last.

She lifted her head at length, and gazed wildly about her in the darkness. No sound reached her ears; the next room was as silent as the grave. Mrs. Lynne and Serena had gone to their own apartments to talk over the horrible story which had come into their possession. Beatrix was left alone—alone!

Alas! she felt that she was fated to be alone henceforth and forever—to grope among dead men's bones—to live like the lepers of old in deserted tombs—to be an outcast forever—accursed, shunned!

In olden times the leper was compelled to announce his own approach, veiling his face from the gaze of those not like himself accursed, and to cry aloud, "Unclean! Unclean!"

Some faint fragments of history strayed through the girl's brain as she sat there, unable to realize as yet the full depths of her own woe. [Pg 139]

She had read of leprosy—the most horrible of all known diseases, and which can never be cured. When once the plague had appeared in her system, even her very touch would be pollution.

Good God! she had kissed Keith's lips over and over. What if—what if she had transmitted the curse to him? Better for her to die than to bring this horrible curse upon the man she loved!

She knew now, at last, the reason for her own isolation in Bernard Dane's house. She must not mix too intimately with other uncursed people, or they, too, would become accursed.

Slowly, wearily, she arose to her feet and lighted the lamp in her room. Then she went over to the mirror and stood gazing upon her own face, her eyes full of bitter woe. She could see no change there as yet. The pearly skin was as fair and lovely as ever, the beautiful dark eyes just as bright. She held up one little hand and let the lamp-light gleam across it. It was fair, and soft, and untainted. Yet all the same the evil might lurk unseen, like a poisonous serpent, in her blood, and when it became known it would be too late—too late! And—oh, God in Heaven! was there ever such a fate?—she was Keith Kenyon's wedded wife. She had cursed his life; she had brought ruin black and sure upon him; all his future happiness was wrecked and destroyed.

"God pity me, I am lost—lost!" she moaned, bleakly. And then with a low cry of anguish, the slight form tottering weakly, she fell to the floor like one dead.

CHAPTER XX.

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WORSE THAN DEATH.

Hours passed before Beatrix Dane returned to consciousness and a realization of the truth. She lifted her head and sat staring into the darkness, trying to comprehend this awful thing that had come upon her with all the force and harshness of a blow.

"Oh, my God! what am I?" she groaned, in her bitter anguish; "accursed! accursed!"

She arose and went over to the window and stood there, with her burning cheek pressed against the pane, her eyes fixed upon the darkness without. A dreary scene. The wind had arisen, and went moaning around the old mansion with a shrill, complaining cry which sounded like some human creature in distress and made the blood run cold in the poor girl's veins as she listened. It sounded like a death-knell—the death-knell of all hope for her. It seemed to say over and over in a voice of dreary, mournful melody:

"Gone! hope, happiness, all gone! There is nothing in life for you, poor wretch!"

She was Keith Kenyon's wife, and she had brought a curse upon him—a curse which could never be lightened or lifted. She was dead to him henceforth and forever, even as she must now be dead to all hope in life. One thought was ever before her, one duty was plain to her: she must go away—go away out of his life forever—even though it should kill her to give him up. [Pg 141]

Where could she go? She thought of the cold world to which she was comparatively a stranger, and a shudder passed over her slender frame.

"I cannot stay here," she said, resolutely, trying to be very brave and calm. "I must not expose other people to possible contagion. I will go away and leave Keith, and he will be free once more. But, oh, if I had only learned this hideous secret before our marriage, how much suffering we might have been spared!"

She thought it all over—thought until her brain reeled and her heart beat with great suffocating throbs which nearly strangled her. Where could she go? What door was open to receive such as she? Had the awful plague really appeared, and declared itself in her system, then she could find shelter in the hospital where such poor wretches take refuge. She had heard of such a place; the very thought of it was enough to make her feel faint. But as yet there was no trace of the terrible disease—no proof that she had really become a victim to its horrors—there was only the fact that her mother had transmitted to her offspring the hideous plague which must sooner or later manifest itself; and then horrible suffering, and at last inevitable death. She wrung her hands with a moan of bitter anguish.

"Was any one ever so accursed as I?" she cried, desperately. "Oh, pitying Heaven! it is more than I can bear!"

At last she made up her mind what to do. She would leave Bernard Dane's house early in the morning. She must not remain another day beneath this roof. She would go direct to the hospital where that hideous plague was treated—to the old physician who had it in charge—and tell her pitiful story. Then she would ask permission to remain there, and wait upon the unfortunate creatures whose companionship she must one day share. She would shut herself up in this living tomb and wait for death to release her, because there was no other shelter for such as she. No one would dare to give her a home or extend a helping hand to a wretch like Beatrix Dane. I suppose that there never was another case like this in the world. Young, beautiful, and accursed, wedded to the man she idolized, and who in turn worshiped her as the devotee worships the saint upon a shrine; all the world before her, yet she must be set aside as a pariah, a horrible thing to be shunned. Truly, "the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children." The world would be better and cleaner if that truth would be remembered and taken to heart.

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All night long the poor girl crouched in the darkness, thinking, brooding over her unhappy fate. All night long! What a night it was! It will never be forgotten while poor Beatrix lives. How could she go away like that, without a word of good-bye or a farewell kiss to the husband so dearly loved? Oh, it was horrible, horrible! Yet she must not risk his life by touching his lips with hers. Perchance her own were already polluted with the fiery wrath of the coming plague, that curse which might be even now about to declare itself, which must be, according to the theory of all authority upon that subject, even now dormant in her system. She must not give way to woman's weakness. She must go—go without a word or a look or a touch. She must go out of Keith's life forever; and in the days to come, perhaps when she was dead, he would learn the hideous truth and pity her a little. No matter though it killed her, she must not risk his safety by a kiss. She must go—go alone; it was all that was left for her to do.

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She gathered together a few necessary garments and packed them in a small hand-bag. Then she wrote a few lines to Keith—to Keith, her love—this man for whose dear sake she would gladly have laid down her life, yet whom she was leaving forever—leaving him, never again expecting to see him on earth. She was as dead to him as though the coffin-lid had closed over her and shut her out from the light of day—as though she lay at rest under the sod. Surely no woman ever had a harder task—an almost impossible task like this to go through with!

When the first faint streaks of day began to appear in the eastern sky, Beatrix took her small baggage and stole from the room. On the table she left the letter for Keith, sealed, and addressed to his name.

She stole noiselessly down-stairs and softly unfastened the outer door. She passed forth, and Beatrix Dane was homeless!

She glanced up at the old house lying hushed and still under the shadow of the magnolias.

"Good-bye, my husband," she moaned; "good-bye forever! It is worse than death, the parting that divides us; but it must be borne. I am accursed—accursed!"

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She pressed her lips against the hard oaken panel of the door in a mute farewell. She had not dared to go to the door of Keith's chamber, for fear that he would hear her and all would be discovered. How could she bear to tell him all just yet? How could she tell him her sad, heart-breaking story, and see the light die out of his eyes and the handsome face grow pallid with suffering? No, she was not strong enough yet to bear the ordeal. Better for her to go away without seeing his face, perhaps never to see it again while she lived. Yet she would have given her life willingly for just one kiss from his dear lips. But that can never be now. Never again can she look into his dear eyes and hear him speak sweet, loving words to her. Life was over and done with now, and nothing was left but the darkness of the grave. And she was so young to have all hope killed in her heart like that!

She hastened away without another backward glance, making a brave effort to be calm and face the ordeal before her. The hospital was a long distance away. She could not wait for the hour when the cars would begin to run. She must walk it.

So she did. Faint and weary, not having eaten anything since dinner the previous day, she walked all that distance, and when at last she reached the hospital, at its very door she fell to the ground in a dead swoon.

THE NEXT DAY.

Keith awoke the next morning with a strange feeling of peace and quiet in his heart—a sensation as though he had anchored at last, and all his life would henceforth lie through pleasant ways.

"My little wife!" he murmured, fondly. "I shall go to Uncle Bernard this morning and tell him of the step I have taken. I shall break the news of my marriage to him at once and have it all over. Surely he can not in his heart object, since that was once his dearest wish—his pet scheme. I wonder why he changed his mind in regard to the projected marriage between Beatrix and myself," the young man went on thoughtfully as he performed his toilet. "It is a mystery to me. Yet Uncle Bernard is very eccentric, and I need not be surprised at anything that he may do or say. Oh! how happy we shall be—my darling and I! And if Uncle Bernard is really displeased, I will take her away, and we will find some pretty little cottage down-town, and I will get a position somewhere and work for my darling—my little wife!"

As the last words passed his lips his eyes fell upon an object, the sight of which made him frown. He was standing near the window, and the object which had attracted his attention was Serena Lynne walking in the grounds outside. She was dressed in black—all in deep black—and her face was very pale, and wore upon it a look which Keith Kenyon had never seen there before. [Pg 146]

"I wonder when those women are going to leave?" he exclaimed, half aloud. "I am tired of the sight of them, and Serena is a bitter enemy of my darling; I feel sure of that. Dear little Beatrix, how can any one dislike her? She is the sweetest-tempered, gentlest little girl in the whole round world!"

At breakfast he looked anxiously for Beatrix; but there was no sign of her; she did not make her appearance. Old Bernard Dane looked uneasy. He rang the bell, and Mrs. Graves appeared.

"Send to Miss Dane's room," he commanded, "and see if she is ill, or why she does not come to breakfast. Beatrix is an early riser," he added, glancing at Keith.

"A very good trait," observed that young man, promptly.

"Oh, yes, to be sure," intervened Serena, with a sneer in her voice which she could not repress to save her life. "Everything Beatrix does is perfection. She has not a single fault!"

"Very true," responded Keith, gravely, looking the irate lady directly in the face. "She certainly has never been guilty of sneering over the absent or traducing people behind their backs!"

Serena's face grew crimson over the reproof, which was certainly well merited. She turned to Bernard Dane.

"My mother and I expect to start for the North to-morrow," she announced. "You have been very kind to us, Mr. Dane, and we are very grateful. Our business here is ended, and—" [Pg 147]

She did not finish. The door of the breakfast-room was thrown open, and Mrs. Graves crossed the threshold, looking as pale as if she had just seen a ghost.

"Mr. Dane, oh, Mr. Dane, Miss Beatrix is not here and her bed was not slept in last night! Everything in the room is as usual, only a small hand-bag and some of her plainer clothing are missing. And, if you please, sir, I found this upon the dressing-table."

This was the letter which poor Beatrix had left there addressed to Keith Kenyon.

Pale and trembling with indefinable horror, Keith broke the seal and read these words:

"KEITH,—My own, I am going to leave you. With all my heart and soul I love you, but I am going to leave you forever. There is a reason—a bad, black, bitter reason. I can not—dare not write or speak of that now. You will know all too soon, and when you know, your heart will break, as mine has. Do not seek me; I shall be in the very last place that you will think of searching for me. You would as soon think of looking for me alive in the dark and dreary tomb as in the place that is to be my hiding-place hereafter. I have done no wrong, my darling, only in becoming your wife. If I could I would devote all my life, every moment of it, to you, and to making you happy; but fate, cruel and relentless fate, has decreed otherwise, and we must part, never to meet again on earth. I love you with all my heart, but—good-bye. Yours,

"BEATRIX."

He read the letter over and over until he knew it by heart, his face as white as the face of a dead man, his eyes full of piteous suffering. Then he arose from the table, the letter clinched in one cold hand, his form shaking like a leaf. [Pg 148]

"Uncle Bernard,"—in a low, tremulous voice—"may I see you alone in the library?"

Old Bernard Dane went straight over to the buffet and poured a wine-glassful of brandy from a cut-glass decanter which stood there. He held it to Keith's lips.

"Drink that, my boy," he said, in a kindly tone. "You look done up. Now come to the library. I am at your service."

As the door of the breakfast-room closed behind the two, Serena's eyes met her mother's gaze, and a smile of triumph coiled her thin lips.

"He leaves us out of the private conference," she said in a cold, metallic voice, "and the foolish boy does not dream that we know more about this mysterious flitting than he does. Mamma, you look surprised. Why, did you not know that when I read that letter aloud to you last night, Beatrix Dane was in the next room and heard every word? It is her sleeping-room, and she was there, and heard every word that I read. I meant that she should."

"Serena!"

Even Mrs. Lynne was horrified at this heartless announcement.

"It is true, mamma—as true as gospel!" she returned, harshly. "It was the best way to let her know; and it is quite time that she should know. I have been sharp and shrewd, for I have nipped this affair between her and Keith in the bud. The day will come when Keith will be grateful to me that he found out everything before it was too late. He is awfully cut up now, but he is a man, and men get over such things in the course of time—some of them in an exceedingly short time—and then he will come back to me—back to the woman who has sympathized with him through all his sorrows. One thing troubles me, however. I would like to know what she wrote him, how much she has told him, and all about it. I must know!"

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An hour later Serena encountered Keith Kenyon in the entrance hall. At sight of his face she fell back with a cry of horror. It was awfully ghastly, white, and drawn and convulsed with suffering; his eyes were dark and dilated; he shook like a decrepit old man.

"Oh, Keith!" she cried, pausing and laying her hand on his arm, "what, in Heaven's name, is the matter? Are you grieving over poor Beatrix? Well, she has gone away, and it was all that she could do, poor child! One can not help pitying her from the depths of one's heart. Tell me, Keith, have you heard all? Has Mr. Dane told you all the awful truth concerning poor Beatrix?"

Keith bowed his head slowly, and a look of heart-break crept into his eyes.

"He has told me all," he moaned, "and I—Oh, I can not speak of it now!"

"But, Keith,"—her voice full of triumph which she can not restrain—"you should be glad that you found it out in time to prevent future sorrow to you both."

His eyes rested upon the woman's hard, cold face, and he covered his own with his hands.

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"You are mistaken," he said in a voice which did not sound like his own, "the warning came too late. Beatrix and I were married yesterday, Serena; she is my own dear wife."

CHAPTER XXII.

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SISTER ANGELA.

The moments came and went, and still that slight figure lay upon the hospital steps, the small face as white and rigid as though she were dead. It was very early, and the old physician in charge had not yet made his appearance at the hospital, and the wretched inmates dared not venture forth into the street where Beatrix Dane had fallen in that death-like swoon.

Six o'clock chimed forth from a distant steeple, and the sun was lying warm and bright across the girl's pallid face, when a light footstep sounded upon the path, and a woman bent over the girl's prostrate figure—a Sister of Charity—one of those good and holy women who spend their lives in working for others in His holy name, and who alone of all others keep themselves "unspotted from the world."

The sister passing by, on her way to a certain charitable institution, had caught sight of the girl lying upon the hospital steps, and her gentle heart had prompted her to stop and inquire what was the matter. She stooped and peered eagerly into the girl's beautiful white face. The great dark eyes were closed, and she was, to all appearances, dead.

But Sister Angela had seen too much suffering in her life—too many cases similar in some respects to Beatrix Dane's, but not exactly like hers, for surely there was never another such experience in the world.

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Sister Angela uttered a cry of dismay.

"The poor child! She is young and fair. She has fainted from exhaustion, or what is more likely, she is in deep trouble. Oh, yes, it is trouble that breaks us down sooner than anything else! It is far worse and more fatal in its effects than the most severe illness. Sickness of the heart—ah, that is incurable!"

Sister Angela lifted the girl's head upon her breast, and pushed aside the veil from the white face to give her air. A faint sigh passed the poor girl's lips, and consciousness seemed slowly struggling back to her. She opened her sad, dark eyes, and they met the pitying gaze of Sister Angela's blue ones.

"Where am I?" moaned the girl, lifting her head. "Uncle Bernard—Keith—oh, my God!"

And the dreadful truth rushed over her memory like a flood, and the golden head drooped once more, and an awful pallor overspread the girlish face. Sister Angela thought she was going to faint again.

"My dear," she said in her soft, persuasive voice, "you are ill and in trouble. Tell me where to take

you. I will see you safely to your home and friends."

"Home?"—her voice full of bitterness—"I have no home. Friends? Is there such a thing as a friend—a real friend—in the whole world?"

"If we find none here on earth, there is always One above us, my child," the sister answered, softly. "We must turn to Him for comfort in our sorrow. Nobody else can help us, believe me, dear."

"Who are you?"

"I am Sister Angela; a Sister of Mercy, you know."

"Mercy?" The girl's voice rang out in a bitter cry. "There is no mercy, none, for such as I. Oh, sister—sister, tell me what to do. I am a lost wretch, lost forever. Not in the sense that you think," she added, swiftly, noticing the expression which dawned upon the calm face of the sister. "I have done no intentional wrong, committed no crime; but I have married a good man, and have brought ruin upon his whole life. Listen to my story. It is brief. I married him, and then afterward, when it was too late, I learned that a dreadful fate is in store for me; that I am by inheritance—a dark inheritance, indeed—tainted with leprosy."

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"My child!"

The sister's voice trembled perceptibly.

"Surely you do not realize what you are saying!"

"It is true—all true," Beatrix went on swiftly. "I heard the truth, the awful truth, under such circumstances that I can not doubt it. And all the surroundings of my daily life prove that my only relative knew all the time the evil that threatened me, but for some reason—perhaps through mistaken kindness, he failed to let me know the worst. Sister, I am accursed!"

Sister Angela shook her head slowly.

"My dear, nobody is so accursed that the love and pity of the Father of all can not reach them. But I have had experience with this loathsome disease, and I see no indications of it in you as yet. Suppose that you come with me? My child, I do not advise you to enter this hospital, if that was your intention. And Doctor Davis will probably refuse to receive you, since there are no signs of the disease visible upon you. He would refuse you admittance; and, besides, the daily sight of these poor wretches in this pest-house would drive you mad. My dear, be advised by me. I am used to suffering of all kinds, and I say come with me, under my protection. I am attached to an institution for the sick and suffering. You are far from well; I will have you cared for, and when you feel better you may assist me in the sick wards. There is always work for willing hands and a strong young body. And all the time we will watch you narrowly, and when the dark day comes—if God sees fit that it should come to you—and we discover that this awful affliction has really befallen you, we will help you to bear it. And then—not until then, you shall be sent to this refuge. Will you take my advice?"

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Beatrix lifted her tear-filled eyes to the saint-like face.

"God must have sent you to me, sister," she sobbed. "I will go with you, and may God forever bless you!"

She arose with some difficulty, for she was very weak. The sister put her strong arm about the slender waist, and taking Beatrix's hand-bag in the other hand, led the girl away. As they turned their backs upon the gloomy old building, Beatrix shuddered.

"I think it is no sin to pray that God will take me away before I am doomed to enter there," she said, softly.

Sister Angela sighed.

"We will hope for the best," she returned, "and—"

The words died on her lips.

Beatrix had come to a sudden pause, grasping the sister's arm in a fierce grip, her eyes dilated with horror.

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"See!" she panted, brokenly. "Must I—oh, pitying Father!—must I ever be like that?"

They were passing the grounds that surrounded the lepers' hospital, unkempt and straggling, with a mournful air of melancholy pervading them. Of what use to furnish pleasing sights to attract these doomed wretches?

Accursed, accursed, with nothing to live for, and small hope in the afterward! Peering at them with curious eyes from behind a ragged clump of shrubbery, a wild-looking creature stood, not many feet away from them. It was a sight to be remembered while Beatrix Dane had life. Good heavens! was that horrible caricature of a human being alive? And yet, this woman—for the creature resembled a woman—might have been pretty some day, even as she had once been young.

For a moment Beatrix stood like one petrified, an awful horror in her eyes, which were riveted upon the dreadful sight, her limbs shaking like an old person with the palsy.

Sister Angela spoke at last in a low, trembling voice.

"My dear, I would not look at—at it," she said, gently. "Do not fear. You will never be like that; I am sure of it. That woman is old, and you, my poor child! will not live to be old, I am sure of it,

after that affliction comes upon you. And, dear, only think, God may have pity and take you away before that time comes."

Beatrix started, and a little hope flashed into her eyes.

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"Sister, do you think that it would be very, very wrong, under my peculiar circumstances, to—to take my own life? I have nothing to live for."

"My dear!" Sister Angela's voice rang out in wild distress. "Never think of such a thing again," she cried. "Oh, believe me, my dear, you had better suffer all the sorrows of this life, and bear all its burdens in patience, knowing that, after the cross, the crown. But suicide is an unpardonable sin in the eyes of God. Never think of it again, my dear, I beg of you. Now, lean on me and I will take you to the car; we will go straight to the home to which I am taking you—a home that God has provided for you. There you will find rest for the present and work for the future, and God will help you to bear your burden, my poor child."

CHAPTER XXIII.

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SERENA'S NEW SCHEME.

If ever a man lived in the world with a broken heart, Keith Kenyon was the man. He was utterly prostrated; life seemed at an end to him; he had no hope, no ambition. The woman he loved—his own dear wife—was gone from him forever, and with an awful curse resting upon her life, an inheritance of woe which was liable to descend upon her head at any moment. And she had gone from him, gone in all the bitterness of her awful anguish out into the cold world—where? He could not, dared not think. Suppose that she had taken her life into her own hands? That she was even now lying at the bottom of the Mississippi, that great and mighty stream which has borne away upon its ceaseless current so many of the heart-broken creatures of this world, who, weary of life, and tired of its heavy burdens, cast themselves into the murky waters of the river, and their souls are hurried before their Maker, there to account for the wrong-doing of their lives.

At first Keith was in a sort of lethargy of despair. He sat for hours in his room, never moving, never looking up—sitting with his head upon his hand, buried in deep thought, awful, anguish-stricken. To all appearances he was dead to the things of this world, and oblivious of all that was taking place.

In his own room old Bernard Dane lay upon a sick-bed; he had given up and taken to his bed when the news of Beatrix's disappearance was first announced, and he seemed likely never to arise. The days went by, and Mrs. Lynne and Serena still lingered at the Dane mansion, which was in reality a house of mourning now.

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Poor Mrs. Graves was quite at her wits' end in all this trouble, and she had begged the Lynnes to remain. As this was just what Serena fully intended doing, it was, of course, easily arranged.

On the morning of the day after Beatrix's flight from the Dane mansion, Keith came into his uncle's room, and sat down beside the bed.

"Uncle Bernard," he began, "I must try to find her. The shock of her disappearance has been so great—so overwhelming—that I have been benumbed. I feel like one groping in the dark, but now I am awake, and I see that the child may be in great danger. I must search for her, and find her, if she is living; if not—if she is dead—I will go away—away from Louisiana forever."

The old man uttered a cry of distress.

"Keith! Keith, my boy!" he moaned. "You will surely not do that? You would not go, and leave the old man to die alone? Oh, Heaven! what have I done that I should be punished so, and deserted in my old age?"

The words touched Keith's heart, and made it ache. He seized the old man's wrinkled hand and pressed it warmly.

"No, Uncle Bernard," he said, slowly, "I will not go and leave you—I will never leave you while you live. But I must search for Beatrix—I must know whether she is living or dead. If she is still alive, I must know where she is, and she must be provided for. You will help me, Uncle Bernard?"

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"I will, my boy—I will, indeed. We will devote our lives to that end. We have wasted precious time already. Go at once, Keith. Ah, if I were well, and able to accompany you!"

Keith left the house, his mind absorbed with the one hope of finding his lost darling, poor, heart-broken child! His first step was to insert advertisements in all the daily papers—a few words.

"Beatrix, come home. No matter what may come, I will protect you.

K."

But, alas! poor Beatrix was destined never to see the advertisements; and even had she seen them she would not have obeyed the request, for she dared not risk the lives of other people in that reckless fashion. Keith's next step was to place the matter in the hands of a skilled detective. Then, impelled by a strange intuition, he visited the lepers' hospital. For well he knew Beatrix Dane and her high-strung, sensitive nature; and the conviction had crept into his heart that she would fly to this refuge, believing herself accursed, and intuition, as is apt to be the case, was

correct in this instance. Yet, as we already know, Keith was destined to fail in his search.

The old physician in attendance at the hospital was, of course, in perfect ignorance of the existence of Beatrix, and so relieved Keith's anxiety upon that score, for it seemed to him that the knowledge that Beatrix was incarcerated in that horrible place would kill him outright.

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He returned home heartsick and despairing, yet conscious of a feeling of gratitude and relief that he had not found her there. He repeated to old Bernard Dane the result of his search, and the old man wept bitter tears. He was very weak and childish now; all the old harshness had disappeared forever, and he was not at all like the hard-hearted old man he had been so short a time ago.

"We must find her, Keith," he sobbed; "and I will devote my life, what is left of it, to her care. I am old, and my days will soon be ended here on earth; but I can devote the remnant of my life to no higher or better object than the care of this unfortunate child. And when that awful affliction falls upon her, I will be with her to help her to bear it. Oh, how wicked, how cruel, how sinful I have been to her—my Mildred's little child! Oh, will God ever forgive me?"

He wept like a weak woman, overcome with the full weight of his sorrow and remorse. And in the midst of his grief he found an unexpected comforter.

Keith having been summoned from his side, Serena slipped softly into the room, and came to the old man's bedside.

"Mr. Dane," she began, in a sympathetic tone, "let me try to cheer you a little. Do not grieve over poor lost Beatrix, poor child. We will find her and restore her to her home; or—or—if the awful curse must come upon her, we will do all in our power to alleviate her sufferings. Do not grieve so, Mr. Dane. Let me bathe your head with cologne water, and do try and sleep a little, will you not?"

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The old man smiled grimly.

"You may do as you like," he made answer, "I am completely prostrated."

So Serena went to work and bathed the old man's throbbing temples, and made him comfortable. At last his eyes closed, and his slow, regular breathing announced that he was asleep. Serena's face wore a look of triumph, and her pale blue eyes flashed with exultation.

"Why not?" she muttered, low under her breath, "why not? He is very rich and very old, and—I must have money. And Keith will never care for me, and he is married to that wretched girl who will be a mill-stone about his neck while she lives, and she may live many years. I am not sure but that I have solved the problem for myself, and found a way—an unexpected way—out of my difficulties. Keith's love—the love of the only man on earth worth having—can never be mine—never! It is useless to aspire, to hope. But why should I spoil all my life for the sake of a love that can never be mine? I will not do it! I will put forth all efforts now to a special end, and live henceforth for that one purpose. I must have money. I will marry old Bernard Dane, and be rich, and"—her pale eyes shining like glass—"I will thus control the fortune which Keith Kenyon expects to inherit. Oh, it will be a game worth playing; and I will play it, even though I am destined to be beaten at the game!"

It was an idea worthy of the brain from which it emanated, and a scheme which would not have occurred to any one else. Serena was desperate. She had lost her game; but money she must have, and she had devised a scheme by which to secure it. It was not an original idea, but there was no reason why it should not succeed; for old Bernard Dane was completely broken down now—a perfect wreck—a mere ghost of the aggressive old man who had been guilty of plotting, as he had done, against the life and happiness of the two who, after all, he held most dear. Sorely he was being punished—severely, fearfully punished—for his wicked scheme to marry those two young people, when he believed that only ruin could come of the marriage. Ah! believe me, we who sin must suffer for our sins. I think that old Bernard Dane realized this truth at last.

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And so Serena laid her plot, and went to work with a will. She must have money, for her funds were nearly exhausted, and her mother was not much better off. Real poverty stared them in the face. And here, right before her, was the possibility of retrieving her fallen fortunes and securing a grand home for herself and her mother.

And better than all else—to a narrow nature like hers—it would be opening a road to the ruin of Keith Kenyon, and to wreak upon him a dire and speedy vengeance. He would not love her; he would not make her his wife; he had discarded her for the pretty face of another woman; had cast her off coldly. Well, she would marry old Bernard Dane and possess the great Dane fortune. Then Mr. Keith Kenyon might look out for himself. To a nature like Serena Lynne's, this was a glorious triumph.

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She little dreamed how, in the dark days to come, she would bitterly regret having ever made this decision.

CHAPTER XXIV.

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AN UNEXPECTED DECLARATION.

In a white bed in a darkened room at the institution to which Sister Angela belonged, poor Beatrix lay moaning and tossing in pain. For she was stricken down with brain fever, and there

seemed to be small hope of her recovery.

She had not told Sister Angela her name, therefore no one at the institution was able to identify her; and although the physician in charge of Beatrix saw the advertisement which Keith had inserted in the newspapers, how could he guess that the Beatrix who was implored to return to K was the very patient in whom the physician was becoming strangely interested? All that he did know concerning her history was what Sister Angela had repeated to him; and of course the information was meager enough; for in her misery poor Beatrix had not felt inclined to confide absolutely. But the physician saw for himself how beautiful the girl was, and that she was a refined and delicate lady, and his interest grew and flourished.

Sister Angela confided in Doctor Darrow the outlines of the girl's case as far as she herself knew, that is, in regard to her strange inheritance. Doctor Darrow's face grew pale as death, and his gray eyes dilated with horror until they were as dark as night.

"It can not be possible!" he exclaimed. "It seems incredible! We will keep her secluded from every one else here, and I will study her case in my spare moments. You are aware that I am devoting myself to the study of this horrible disease, and this will be a grand opportunity to test some of my theories in regard to the matter. Heaven help her, poor child! And she is so young and beautiful. I wonder where her home is, and who she is?"

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But Beatrix, in her delirium, raved in such incoherent phrases that no one could find a clew to her identity, her name, or former home. It was all about the sorrow of a parting—a parting from some loved one—which she expressed in her wild ravings; and although Douglas Darrow passed nearly all his time at her bedside, he could find nothing tangible to guide him in a search for the friends of the unfortunate girl. Douglas Darrow was young and handsome—an enthusiast in his profession; he was all alone in the world, and the possessor of a fair fortune. He grew deeply interested in his mysterious patient, and ere he had realized the truth he found himself crossing the boundary that separates friendly interest from the fatal passion of love. But poor Beatrix, tossing in wild delirium upon her white bed, was deaf and blind to everything around her. To human eyes it seemed better for her to pass away now, and drift down the dark river of death into the great unknown. But the Father, who guides and directs us, had His own plans for her future, and so poor Beatrix did not die.

She struggled back to consciousness one day, and as the great dark eyes opened slowly they fell upon the face of Doctor Darrow, who was seated at her bedside.

"Keith!" she faltered, trying to arise, but the effort was too much, and her head fell back upon the pillow and she fainted away. Her constitution seemed entirely broken down, and her long illness, preceded by that awful shock which had ruined her whole life, had left her weak to bear the heavy burden. Douglas Darrow soon restored her to consciousness, and administered a sleeping potion. She sank, at last, into a refreshing slumber, and the young physician began to hope that she might be saved.

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"If she awakens in her senses, with her reason unclouded," he said to Sister Angela, who stood gazing sadly down upon the weak little sufferer, "she will recover, I think—I am positive. But she must not have the least excitement; no questions must be asked her; she must not be annoyed in any way, or we will not be able to save her. Yet, after all," he went on tremulously, "it seems better that she should go now. Only think of the future in store for her!"

"Our Father in Heaven knows best," returned Sister Angela, softly; "we can afford to leave it all in His hands."

The young man turned aside with something like a sob.

"You are an angel!" he cried. "The world would be purer and better if there were more women like you."

When one looks about and sees the women of the world—the fashion-plates and simpering dolls of society—then turns to the pure white lives of those like Sister Angela, one can not fail to echo Douglas Darrow's words: "To visit the fatherless and the widow in their affliction, and to keep ourselves unspotted from the world." This was Sister Angela.

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But with all her prudence and forethought, Sister Angela had forgotten to mention to the young physician the fact of Beatrix's marriage. And looking at the girl so young and childish, no one would be surprised that the fact had escaped her memory. And Sister Angela never once, in her unworldliness, remembered the proneness of young men to fall in love, and that love comes when least expected, and is as speedy of growth, oftentimes, as was Jonah's gourd, and, alas! sometimes withers as soon.

Beautiful, ephemeral love! Well, without it, life would be dreary enough, and surely it is given to mortals as a foretaste of Paradise, only there love will live without "the immeasurable sadness which it too often has on earth."

Slowly Beatrix recovered. She felt no desire to live, for what was there to live for on earth? But as is so often the case when a sick person cares little for life, she grew daily stronger and better. Sister Angela was a devoted nurse, and Doctor Darrow seemed only to exist in Beatrix's presence, yet all that he knew of her history was that her name was Beatrix.

When at last she was able to sit up and amuse herself, one of the attendants brought her some magazines, wrapped in a copy of one of the daily papers—now a month old. Beatrix turned the paper over with listless fingers, and was about to lay it aside when her eyes fell upon a notice—the very advertisement which Keith had inserted. With wild, dilated eyes Beatrix read the

advertisement to the end; then, with a low cry, she bowed her head upon her hands and burst into tears. There was the sound of a firm footstep; a moment later Douglas Darrow bent over her and took her wasted form in his arms. [Pg 168]

"Beatrix, Beatrix!" he whispered, "look up and hear what I have to say. You must not shed tears, my beautiful darling! Oh, Beatrix, I love you so! Come to me, and be my wife. I can not live without you! I will shield you from all ill, and if suffering must come upon you, I will devote my life trying to alleviate your suffering. Tell me, Beatrix, will you try to care for me? I am twenty-eight years old, but I have never really loved any woman before; and I would lay down my life to call you mine. Answer me, darling; will you try to love me a little?"

CHAPTER XXV.

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HOW THE GAME IS PLAYED.

For a moment it seemed to Beatrix that she could not have heard aright. Her brain was giddy, her breath came fluttering feebly—she looked as if she was going to swoon.

Doctor Darrow's practiced eye marked the change in his patient at once, and he started with a low cry of alarm.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, wildly, "what have I done? Oh, Beatrix! Beatrix! do not mind me. I was mad to speak to you of such things now when you are so weak and ill! Forgive me, darling. I will not err in that way again. I promise not to refer to the subject again until you are strong enough to listen."

A faint shudder passed over the sick girl's wasted frame, her eyes shone like stars; but she had made up her mind in a moment that, no matter how it might excite her and retard her recovery, she must speak out now and tell him all—this good, kind heart, this truly noble man who was willing to devote his life to her service, yet knew all her dread secret! And yet how little could he do—could any human being do—to help her!

"Doctor Darrow," she said, laying her little wasted hand upon his arm, "I must speak now. I must tell you the truth and prevent any further misunderstanding. You must not speak to me of love or marriage. Even—even if I were not the afflicted creature that I am, it is wrong, it is sinful to do so; for—I am the wife of another man!" [Pg 170]

He started with a low cry, biting his lip until the blood came. All the color faded from his face, and his gray eyes grew black as night with anguish. He turned aside, as though to leave the room; then he came back to the window near which Beatrix was sitting, and sank upon a sofa that stood near. The room was as still as death. He could not collect his thoughts enough to speak. He sat trembling like a leaf. At last:

"I beg you to forgive me," he said, in a shaking voice. "I had no right to speak of such things to you until I had first learned you were free. Of course, no one looking at a child like you would imagine that you were a married woman. I never thought of such a thing. You know that I meant no insult, Beatrix?"

Her great, dark eyes met his gaze with a look of earnest gratitude.

"You? Why, you have saved my life, though that life is not, perhaps, worth saving," she added, sadly. "Oh, Doctor Darrow, you have been so good and kind to me! I can never thank you enough! But, of course, this of which you speak can never be. If you wish, I will tell you my sad story."

"I would be grateful for your confidence," he returned, "and will guard it as sacred. I wish I could help you in this awful trouble. I can only watch you well and study your case, to which I promise to devote all my faculties. I have devoted much of my time to the study of this strange disease and the tests by which its existence in the system is first detected and proven. Ah, well!"—he rose as he spoke, stifling a weary sigh—"at least I shall have that one object left in life. It is something worth living for." [Pg 171]

He left the room, and Beatrix was alone with her own dreary thoughts.

All the future looked dark and dismal enough, and it seemed to the poor girl that there could never again be a ray of light to shine upon her darkened pathway—never any more.

She bowed her head and wept bitter tears; but somehow they seemed to relieve her, and after a time she felt stronger and better.

Here Sister Angela found her, and sat down to converse with the sick girl upon the affairs of the institution, speaking to her of cases where the patients suffered more in mind than body, and trying her best to interest Beatrix in these poor creatures.

"As soon as you are strong enough, my dear," the good sister said, gently, "we will take you into the different wards and let you see how people suffer and still live. There is nothing better to cure one of mourning and repining over one's own sad fate—the sorrow which is inevitable—than to witness the sorrow of others, and to help the helpless to bear their heavy burdens. Oh, Beatrix! truly that is worth living for—a comforter! Blessed are the comforters!"

Beatrix lifted her head and taking the sister's hand, pressed it warmly. Her sad heart was somehow strengthened, and she made up her mind to try and bear her burden bravely, and in [Pg 172]

helping others, and comforting and caring for those who were sick and in distress, she would find her life work.

A few weeks later Beatrix was pronounced able to go into the sick wards as assistant to the trained nurses, waiting upon them and obeying their instructions.

Once accustomed to the routine, to the strange, sad sights and sounds, Beatrix gave her whole attention to it. She threw all her heart and strength and energy into the task before her—the work which God had placed in her hands to stand between her and despair—and devoted herself to the noble work.

In the meantime, at the old Dane mansion, Serena was working hard to attain the desire of her heart. She had made up her mind to become Mrs. Bernard Dane, if it were within the power of a human being to accomplish it, and to that end she labored industriously and assiduously. She made herself so necessary to the sick man's comfort that old Bernard Dane soon began to think that he had judged her too harshly, and that there was some good in Serena after all. She was constantly at his bed-side. Of course, her mother and Mrs. Graves both shared her task, for the proprieties must be observed. But still Serena was the real head of the house, and to her the others began, after a time, to look for direction. And now the managing part of Serena's nature became manifest. She proved a splendid business and household directress, and Bernard Dane began to look up to her with a feeling of admiration, and to declare that she was a very superior woman.

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Poor Keith, never dreaming of the contingency which was looming up in the near future, went about the house with a listless, preoccupied air, his face pale and troubled, his eyes wearing a look of heart-break. He paid no heed to the palpable scheme which Serena had formed, and which was apparently on the road to success—the game which was being played before his very eyes—for he had too much else to think about, and his own sorrow occupied him to the exclusion of all else. But Mrs. Graves had her eyes opened suddenly one day. She entered the sick-room in haste on some necessary errand, and found Serena kneeling at the bedside, her eyes fixed upon the old man's ugly face with a rapt, eager look.

"I have thought a great deal of you ever since we first met," Serena was saying, and the old housekeeper caught the words as she crossed the threshold.

"Yes, yes," returned the old man, hastily, "but I am too old to think of marriage now. Serena, we will not discuss that at present."

"Very well."

Serena arose to her feet with an air of resignation, then turning sharply about, she encountered Mrs. Graves.

"What do you want?" demanded Serena, harshly.

The old woman's face wore a look of angry displeasure.

"I came here on business with Mr. Dane," she returned, coldly, "not with you. I beg your pardon, Miss Lynne, but I really do think that you are overreaching yourself somewhat, and playing a dangerous game. But it will be useless here," she added, freezingly, "for Mr. Dane is a man of good sense, although he is old and feeble."

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Serena made no reply. She did not wish to provoke a controversy right there, in the presence of the old man; for then, of course, her plot would miscarry—her well-laid scheme be doubtless brought to grief—and her case was growing more desperate day by day.

The old home in Massachusetts had finally been sold, and the small amount which remained over, after all the debts were settled, was meager enough to make Serena's heart contract with slow horror at the thought of a possible old age in some alms-house, and Mrs. Lynne lived in daily and hourly dread of the day that would see them utterly penniless.

Time went on, and Serena tried to keep up heart and courage, and worked hard at her well-formed scheme of besieging the old man's heart.

But it was a difficult task for her to hope to reach that heart, incrustated as it was with worldliness, selfishness, and hardness—a real Chinese puzzle to Serena—but, with a zeal worthy of a better cause, she kept on in the road which she had marked out for herself.

She had succeeded in making her presence indispensable to Bernard Dane. He had long since learned to rely upon her, and to look to her for advice and comfort, to soothe his sufferings and to cheer and console him in his dreary moments. In short, she had, with the greatest tact and skill, made herself a regular sunbeam in the darksome sick-chamber, a ray of sunlight to brighten the old man's gloom; and more than all—a sure road to the heart of a man—she had made herself a household necessity.

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Just when she had succeeded in making herself indispensable to Bernard Dane, just when he grew to expect her coming to cheer his dreary sick-room, when he began to rely upon her as a watcher, a gentle, tireless nurse—Serena was a born nurse—when he had begun to believe that there was no comfort in the whole world for him which Serena's hand could not bestow, when he had come to a stage where he would miss the caressing touch of her gentle hands bathing his brow and arranging his pillow, the voice which had lost its shrill tones and now spoke only in a

low, sweet way, when he, in short, had begun to look to Serena for every comfort, then—then came a blank, a dull, dreary blank, for Serena suddenly disappeared. And when the old man in querulous tones demanded of his housekeeper the cause of her absence, Mrs. Graves informed him that Serena, worn out with watching and nursing, was very ill and confined to her own room.

CHAPTER XXVI.

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A WELL LAID PLOT.

Two or three days dragged by. They seemed to poor old Bernard Dane, lying upon his bed of suffering, to really drag, they were so long and uneventful. Every morning the first question asked Mrs. Graves was: "How is Serena?" And Mrs. Graves would wisely stifle her righteous wrath and answer quietly:

"About the same, sir."

The old man's anxiety as well as loneliness grew and flourished. It would have retarded his recovery but that he became suddenly possessed with a determination to get well, and as his illness had really been more due to sorrow and remorse than to any bodily ailment, he was soon able to sit up and at last, wrapped in a dressing-gown, reclined upon a sofa in his large, cheerful room. He took care to send friendly messages to Serena every day, and eagerly waited for the time when she would be able to return to him. It was true, strange as it may appear, that old Bernard Dane, wise and astute, clever and shrewd, had actually fallen in love with shrewish, plain-faced Serena Lynne.

Wonders will never cease in this strange old world of ours, and the very last thing down on the cards had befallen old Bernard Dane. And yet it was not so wonderful, after all. Give any clever, designing woman the opportunities that Serena possessed, and my word for it, she will succeed though she be as ugly as original sin and as shrewish as a virago. And so Serena won the old man's heart, hard, ossified though it was—won it by her kindly attentions, and the way in which she posed before him as an ardent admirer of his many sterling qualities.

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The old man grew more impatient every day over her continued absence, but he was compelled to content himself with sending messages to Serena, and ordering all sorts of dainties to be carried to her room.

So the days went by, and Serena had been out of his sight for a whole week; and then, one morning, she made her appearance once more in Bernard Dane's sick-room. The old man, wrapped in his dressing-gown, was seated in an easy-chair at the window, his eyes fixed upon the scene without, a look of sadness resting upon his face—very pale and worn.

At sound of the closing door he turned, and as his eyes fell upon Serena, his wrinkled face lighted up with a flash of joy. He started as though to arise, but he was still quite weak, and he fell back upon the cushions once more.

"Serena!" he exclaimed, "is it really you?"

She had really been ill, but not enough to cause so long an exile from the sick-room; only that had been a part of the game—her game, which seemed destined to prove a grand success.

"I am so glad that you are able to be up!" she cried, as she laid her hands in his.

Her face was very pale, and its pallor was enhanced by a skillful application of pearl powder, while dark circles, artistically laid on beneath her eyes, increased the appearance of illness. She wore a flowing wrapper of pale blue cashmere, and altogether, Serena, who had studied the effect long and earnestly, was looking her best, and she knew it.

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She sank in a low rocker at his side, and began to question him as to the care that he had received during her enforced absence from the sick-room.

He answered all her inquiries with real tenderness in his voice, and really the old man was inexpressively touched at the thought that some one cared for him, and surely, lonely and old as he was, this could not be wondered at.

They conversed together for a time upon indifferent topics and then silence gradually settled down, broken in an unexpected way—Serena bowed her head upon her clasped hands and began to weep softly, to all appearance repressing her emotion by a great effort.

The old man caught the sound of her stifled sobs, and uttered an exclamation of dismay.

"Serena! Good heavens, child!" he exclaimed, in a tone of alarm, "what is the matter? Why are you crying? Lift your head, my dear, and look me in the eyes."

She obeyed him, dabbing her eyes with her lace-bordered handkerchief as she did so, as though in shame and confusion at being detected in such weakness as this.

"It is nothing," she faltered, brokenly. "I am going away—that is all. I ought to have gone long ago, but—I could not leave you so ill and uncared for; and then I was taken ill myself. And I—I think it best that I should leave here at once; for I have learned to—to care too much for you, Mr. Dane. This feeling must be conquered."

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"Serena, I did not believe that your expressed affection for me could be anything serious."

"Oh, Mr. Dane!"

She lifted her pale blue eyes to his face with a swift look of entreaty, then they drooped again.

"Serena, do you wish to leave me?" he asked, anxiously.

"No, no, I do not! I would not go if I could help it," she sobbed. "But I can not stay in this way, Mr. Dane. It is not proper. I am an unmarried woman, and you—you—"

"I am old enough to be your father!" he exclaimed; "but, Serena, old as I am, my heart is young. Life is a dreary waste to me—alone. Serena, will you marry me?"

It was said; the words for which Serena Lynne had listened and hoped for so long, the magic words which would change all her life for her; the question was asked at last for which she had schemed and plotted, and which she sometimes had despaired of ever hearing; the question whose answer would bring her wealth, a grand home, and an honored name. She caught her breath with a tremulous gasp, and one hand pressed her heart convulsively.

"Mr. Dane," she cried, "you do not mean it! You should not trifle with a lonely woman; it is cruel, unkind."

And she knew perfectly well, artful Serena, that this delicate flattery would be the very shortest cut to the old man's heart; that to imply his possession of the powers of attracting and winning the admiration of women would be the surest road to Bernard Dane's affections. In short, by appealing to his masculine vanity, guileless Serena hoped to gain her desire. She laid her hand upon his arm as she spoke, and pressed it gently. The old man's eyes rested upon her pale, sad face, which for once wore a look of gentle tenderness, which made her appear essentially womanly in the old man's eyes. He lifted her hand and pressed it to his lips.

"I mean it, of course," he returned, in a faltering voice. "I have not cared for any one in years, but your kindness has opened my heart and made me feel that there is something on earth worth living for. I ask you once more, Serena, in all honor, will you be my wife? Marry me at once, and we will go abroad for a time; for nothing can be done for poor Beatrix by staying here; and Keith's life, poor boy, is ruined. Will you be my wife, Serena?"

She bowed her head, and one little, potent word of three letters was spoken—a word which made Serena Lynne the promised wife of old Bernard Dane.

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CHAPTER XXVII.

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KEITH HEARS THE NEWS.

Once decided in his course, old Bernard Dane was not the man to turn back, or to express regret for what he had done. The die was cast. He had asked Serena Lynne to be his wife, and he would make her Mrs. Dane, no matter what obstacles stood in the way. Keith wandered about the house, looking like a ghost, his mind so absorbed in the disappearance of Beatrix that he had no thought for anything else, and did not, therefore, perceive the state of affairs between Bernard Dane and Serena. Mrs. Graves would have attempted to put him on the track of that which the good old lady saw was about to take place, for she alone had kept her eyes open and seen the true state of affairs, but she shrank from being the one to call Keith's attention to the fact, and so no one spoke, and Keith remained in utter ignorance.

Serena at once began preparations for the marriage. She had decided that it must be soon—at once.

Bernard Dane allowed himself to be persuaded; and so, all preliminaries having been gone through with, a clergyman was engaged to perform the ceremony one April eve. But first there remained the task of breaking the news to Keith.

"I can't do it, Serena," the old man declared, childishly. "He will be so surprised—so shocked! You must tell him yourself." [Pg 182]

Serena's pale eyes flashed. That was just what she wished to do. She felt a strange satisfaction in wounding this man who had scorned her, and whose fortune she was now about to usurp.

"Very well," she made answer, her pale face growing livid as she spoke; "I will break the news to Keith Kenyon."

She left the room at once, and went up to her own apartment, there to stand for a few moments before the mirror, while she scanned, with true feminine criticism, the details of her own toilet.

She was looking very well in pale lavender muslin—she had discarded mourning—with a bunch of pansies in the yellow lace which covered the corsage. Her dull flaxen hair was in a Psyche knot, and fell in a fringe upon her brow. There was a glitter of cruel triumph in her eyes, and she caught her breath with a low cry of exultation.

"Serena, you are a trump!" she exclaimed, apostrophizing her own reflection. "Beauty is well enough to possess, but a clever woman can overreach mere beauty any day. Well, I will go now to the library—Simons says that Keith is there—and break my important news to that gentleman. But—oh! Keith! Keith!"

She covered her face with her hands for a moment. Not another word passed her lips, but that

one wild, agonized cry revealed the bitter truth that, come what would, she had not forgotten Keith Kenyon, and had not ceased to love him. It was the one mad passion of her narrow, empty life.

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She left the room and went down-stairs straight to the library. The door was closed. She rapped lightly upon it.

"Come in!" called Keith's voice; and she turned the knob and entered the room.

It was nearly sunset; the slant rays of gold which marked the road taken by the departing god of day streamed in at the open window and across the bowed head of the young man seated at the desk, his eyes fixed upon the western sky with a hopeless look in their depths. At sight of Serena he started up and his face grew paler than before.

"Any news?" he asked, swiftly. "Serena, have you heard anything of—of Beatrix? Have you come to tell me that she is found?"

Serena stopped short, suppressing an exclamation of disgust. Always Beatrix—always Beatrix! Never any thought of her—and there never would be. She drew a little nearer the desk where he was sitting, and turned her face away, that he might not be able to read its expression.

"No,"—trying in vain to keep the harshness out of her voice—"I have no news of Beatrix. She has probably taken her own life; and if that be true, would it not be better, Keith?"

He started to his feet, then sank back wearily once more.

"No, no!" he panted, fiercely; "it would not! Nothing can ever make up to me for her loss—nothing! She is gone, and the light of my life has gone with her. I shall never be happy again. I am utterly and forever alone!"

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Serena laid her hand upon his arm and lifted her white, set face to his.

"Whose fault is it that you are all alone?" she demanded, madly. "I would have died to make you happy, Keith; but you would not. You scorned me—scorned my love, and I—I have given up all hope of ever winning a kindly feeling from you; so I have done the best for myself that I can. Keith, are you listening? I come here this evening—I have intruded upon your solitude to tell you a piece of news which concerns me alone, but in which you may be interested. Keith, I am going to be married."

He started and pushed back the heavy hair from his brow with an impatient touch; into his dark eyes a look of satisfaction stole. It was plain to be seen that he felt no regret for the fact of Miss Lynne's intended marriage.

"Indeed?" he returned, trying to show some interest. "Well, Serena, I am sure you have my best wishes. When is it to be?"

"Tonight."

"What? Is it possible? I thought, of course, that the happy bridegroom would be some one from the North. Perhaps he has come here to New Orleans to win his bride. Tell me all about it, Serena."

"Ah! you are interested at last. No, Keith, my intended husband does not come from the North; he lives here in New Orleans. In short,"—gazing full into the young man's pale, handsome face, with eyes full of exultation and a triumph which he could not fail to perceive—"I am going to marry Mr. Bernard Dane."

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"What!"

Keith sprang to his feet, with a cry of astonishment and dismay, his face pale as marble, his eyes full of a dawning terror, and something which for a moment made Serena afraid.

"Be good enough to explain," he said, at last, after a long silence.

"There is nothing more to say. I am going to marry Mr. Bernard Dane tonight at eight. He is old, but I must have a home and protector, and he has asked me to marry him. The marriage will be solemnized in two hours' time. That is all that I have to say. Good-night, Keith."

But before she could leave the room he had opened the door and strode over the threshold. Out to the stables he went, his face set and stern and white as death, his eyes full of darkness. He understood at last her plot of vengeance—knew it now when it was too late. It was the utter overthrow of all his hopes and ambitions. He would be homeless, friendless; for how could he expect Bernard Dane to make him his heir now, when he would have a wife and perhaps children to inherit his wealth?

Keith Kenyon had never been a money-worshiper; but he had fully realized the importance of wealth and position, and he had been reared to believe himself Bernard Dane's heir. It seemed to him now that the end of the world had come.

He entered the stables and ordered his horse saddled. It was a new purchase, a splendid thoroughbred, black as night, and well named Satan. In his mad desire for excitement, Keith believed that he could quench the fire which was burning in his brain. He sprang into the saddle when the groom led Satan forth, and whirled madly away, flying like the wind. On he went through the most unfrequented streets of the city. On, on, the horse growing wilder and more ungovernable every moment. In the lower part of the city it came to grief. Foam-flecked, wild-eyed, it dashed into a narrow, stone-paved street and threw its rider violently to the ground, upon the sharp paving-stones.

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CHAPTER XXVIII.

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BEATRIX SEES THE GAME.

They were very busy that day in the ward of hopeless cases. Beatrix had not had a moment to rest. All day long the tired little feet were running here and there in obedience to the nurse's call, the deft fingers rolled bandages, smoothed fever-scorched pillows, bathed throbbing temples, held cooling drinks to fever-parched lips; in short, accomplished the one thousand and one acts which soothe the sufferer and comfort even the dying. The office of nurse is truly a grand one. What more noble position can a woman fill than that of comforter and consoler, to help ease the pain of serious illness, and, if it can not be assuaged, to do all that human power can do to help the poor sufferer bear the awful suffering that is his doom! So Beatrix, feeling that she had found her life-work, found it in this strange way, and at the very crisis of her life, when she had been on the point of despairing, feeling that, at all events, she had found employment for the present, which would help to deaden her pain, worked away with a will, and was soon looked upon as one of the most efficient and willing assistants attached to the Home.

Today they had been overworked, for there had been an accident—a falling building had crushed and mangled several poor creatures a few blocks away; and a number of the sufferers had been carried to the Home, there to linger for a time in awful agony and then pass away. Beatrix grew heart-sick as she gazed upon the suffering around her, her gentle heart touched inexpressibly by the scenes and sounds, the groans, and cries, and moans; and in some cases—more touching than any other—there was quiet patience, brave heroism; there were those—real heroes—who set their teeth hard together over the groans that would try to force themselves through, and bore stoically the tortures of the lost.

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The sun set upon that busy day, a day never to be forgotten by Beatrix Dane, never while she lived. The sun had set and twilight was coming down, and all alone in the ward for hopeless cases, Beatrix bent over the haggard face of an old woman—a coarse-featured, hard-handed old creature—who while intoxicated, had fallen under the wheels of a passing cab, and had been carried to the Home, which chanced to be nearer than the charity hospital. Beatrix was bathing the woman's brow with Cologne water, speaking gentle, kindly words of sympathy all the time, when a voice spoke her name, a voice which always had an influence over Beatrix, and which she had learned to love dearly—Sister Angela's. Beatrix turned as the sister laid her hand upon her arm.

"My dear," the kind voice went on, gently, "you are overworked; you have done too much today for a novice; you must rest now. Go down to the little sitting-room and you will find some tea there. Yes, I insist upon it. I will take your place here."

"You?"

Beatrix's dark eyes rested lovingly upon the sister's pale face.

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"You are tired out already, sister; you were up all night."

"But I am accustomed to that, my dear," Sister Angela returned, firmly; "and I find that the very best way to be of use in this place is to husband your strength, and keep some always in reserve. Go now, my child. You do not know what may lie before you ere this night is done."

Were her words prophetic? Looking back upon them afterward, Beatrix could almost believe them so. She went slowly away, however, for she would not disobey the kind sister; and as Beatrix went slowly down-stairs, Sister Angela took her place by the old woman's side. Not until she had reached the foot of the stairs did the girl realize how very weak she was.

"Sister Angela is right," she said to herself. "My strength is not sufficient to keep up as she does. That will come in time."

She went to the room where she had been directed, and after she had drunk a cup of tea and partaken of some refreshment she felt better. She was about to return to her task, when there was a loud ring at the door-bell, followed by a bustle and confusion in the entrance hall.

"Another case, I suppose," commented the girl, and she hastened into the hall just as one of the assistants came hastily to meet her.

"An accident!" she announced briefly. "A man has been thrown from his horse right in front of the door; so, of course, he was brought in here, and Heaven knows we have scarcely room enough to receive any more. The affair of yesterday has filled our wards to overflowing."

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They were bringing the injured man into the hall, lying upon a stretcher, the pallid face uncovered, the eyes closed, as though Death had already set his seal there.

One glance, and Beatrix flew to the side of the stretcher with a wild cry which re-echoed through the house like a knell. But cries of pain and anguish were of too common an occurrence there to excite any comment.

She fell upon her knees beside the sofa where the injured man had been placed, and wrung her hands in frantic grief.

"Keith! Keith!" she wailed, in her wild, bitter anguish. "It is Keith, my husband, and he is dead!"

That agonized cry seemed to bring Keith back to life. The beautiful dark eyes flared swiftly open,

and rested upon the white, terrified face bending over his own.

"Beatrix!"

The name faltered from his pale lips in one wild, joyous outcry; then the eyelids fluttered down and he was unconscious once more. Beatrix rose to her feet, pale and still.

"Take him up to my own room," she said, turning to the men who had borne that still form into the house. "He will be my especial care.—He is my husband!" Then she added, after a slight pause: "If you will carry him up now, I will lead the way."

They obeyed her without a word, and Keith Kenyon was carried to his wife's room, and placed in bed, while the physicians took possession of him, and Beatrix hastened away to tell Sister Angela. [Pg 191]

The good sister was pleased and glad for Beatrix's sake that this strange occurrence had taken place, and Beatrix would have the privilege of nursing the man she so dearly loved. But the kindly face grew pale as death as she thought of the fresh complications that must now ensue. Who could foresee the end?

Beatrix took up her position at Keith's bedside and nursed him indefatigably. The days came and went, and still Keith lay there upon his bed of pain. Through Doctor Darrow, Beatrix was able to send word to old Bernard Dane as to Keith's whereabouts and condition, though Beatrix preferred that her own name should be kept out of the matter, and the message to Mr. Dane was sent, purporting to have come from Dr. Darrow.

Beatrix could not deny herself the privilege of nursing her husband, even though she knew that with his returning health she must go from him again. They must separate, and never hope to be anything to each other. Surely it was the saddest—the very saddest—experience on record. But the brave girl was strong in her determination. Better far to never see him again than to expose the life so dear to her to such a horrible fate!

It was the very acme of self-denial and abnegation; but any true woman would have done as Beatrix did. For what woman who loves a man will deliberately expose him to suffering of any description, mental or bodily? And this was such a horrible thing, that no wonder the poor girl, feeling herself accursed, felt at times almost tempted to take her own life, so that she might escape from the horrors of the future, and above all, put it beyond the possibility of harming the one so dearly loved. [Pg 192]

One day, not long after Keith's arrival at the Home, Beatrix was informed that a lady and gentleman wished to see Mr. Kenyon. They were in the waiting-room, and Beatrix hastened thither to receive them.

She had fully expected to meet old Bernard Dane, and probably Mrs. Graves. The thought of Serena had never once entered her mind; for as Keith was almost always delirious, he could not tell her of the strange changes that had taken place since Beatrix had left home.

Imagine her surprise, as she entered the reception-room, to see at the old man's side Serena, the woman who so cordially hated her—Serena, her bitter, implacable foe!

As Beatrix entered the room, old Bernard Dane uttered a wild cry of delight.

"Beatrix! Good heavens! is it really you?" he faltered, brokenly. "We—we thought that you were dead!"

She smiled; but still she observed, with a pang at her sensitive heart, that he did not come near her, or even take her hand. Did he fear contagion?

Serena drew back as she came near, as though she feared infection from the girl's presence.

"How do you do, Serena?" said Beatrix, quietly. "I did not expect to see you; this is quite a surprise. I thought that you had returned to your home in the North long ago." [Pg 193]

This is Serena's hour of triumph; for the sake of this moment of supreme satisfaction, she would have given a year of her life. She drew herself up proudly, and the pale eyes shone like glass.

"I shall never return North to live!" her shrill, high-pitched tones made answer; "my home is in New Orleans now. Have you not heard? Do you never see the newspapers? I am married. I am Mrs. Bernard Dane!"

In an instant Beatrix's mind had grasped the situation. She saw at once that this was Serena's game of vengeance.

CHAPTER XXIX.

SERENA'S FAILURE.

As Serena's announcement was made, and the words fell upon the silence with a clear note of triumph pealing through her voice, Beatrix fell back faint and stunned. She realized the truth at once; she saw Serena's game, and knew that she had won. She saw that Serena—stung by the fact that Keith Kenyon's love would never be hers, and that he had allowed himself to be led into an engagement which he had not desired, and of which he soon grew weary, and so had repudiated her—all this had made Serena a very devil. And then added to it was the fact of her own poverty. And here, right within her grasp, was the chance to retrieve herself, to gain a grand [Pg 194]

home and a fortune, and at the same time ruin Keith Kenyon forever. For the young man had been reared to believe himself to be Bernard Dane's prospective heir; and, of course, with such a rearing he was utterly unfitted for any position in life where he could earn his own bread. Surely the future looming up before him was pitiful to contemplate.

It was a revenge worthy of a woman—of a hard-hearted woman—one who has the fires of baleful jealousy burning in her heart.

It is said that a jealous woman is fit to reign in hell, and it is easy to believe it. Serena was half insane with jealous wrath, and would hesitate at nothing in the way of her scheme to punish Keith Kenyon for not loving her. As though it were possible for Keith to control and direct his own heart! For love is not a matter of our own volition. It must go where it is sent by fate; we can not steer its course. And so Serena, with her mad determination to revolutionize nature, must needs attempt to wreck two lives already saddened by the darkest and most bitter of sorrows—a sorrow more cruel than death.

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All this had flashed through Beatrix's brain as she stood there, her eyes upon Serena's pale, triumphant face, her heart sinking slowly into the very depths of dark despair. Keith's life was ruined—ruined irretrievably, his fortune gone, and the heavy, clanking chains of a marriage which could never be a real marriage, after all, fettering his every movement. And she was to blame for it all. In loving him and giving herself to him she had signed Keith Kenyon's death-warrant—a fearful, living death in life. She shuddered convulsively and sank into a seat.

"I cannot congratulate you, Serena," she returned, at last, forcing her white lips to speak, "because this marriage of yours is unnatural and wrong. No marriage will ever be sanctified without love—true love—and you have wedded this old man for his money."

Serena started angrily, and the red blood suffused her cheek for a moment.

"You had better choose your words in addressing me!" she snarled. "I will not bear your insults. I have come here to see Keith. Am I to see him or not?"

"You can not!" returned the young wife, bravely. "He is very ill, and I am his nurse. I would not permit any one for whom he cared to come to his bedside; I most certainly, then, will not admit you!"

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Her voice rang out clear and determined. Serena's face grew ghastly white, and her pale eyes scintillated.

"I will make you sorry for that!" she stormed. "How came you here? Who constituted you Keith Kenyon's nurse?"

"I have a right to nurse him; I, and I alone!" returned Beatrix, calmly. "And, besides that, I am a nurse—or, rather, an assistant here—and it would be my duty to nurse him. This is my refuge, my home."

A scornful sneer curled Serena's thin lip.

"And do not the sick people here risk contagion from such as you?" she cried.

It was a cruel question, but the hard heart of the jealous woman was capable of any cruelty to this girl who was her rival—who, no matter what Serena did, or how she planned and schemed, somehow always seemed to get ahead of her without an effort. Even now, accursed as she was, with this hideous inheritance hanging over her head like a two-edged sword, she was more blessed than Serena, for was she not allowed to nurse this man whom they both loved, while Serena was shut out even from a sight of his face?

"I will see him!" she cried, angrily. "I will find the matron of this institution, and demand to see Keith Kenyon. I have as much right to him as you."

Beatrix's large dark eyes met the gaze of the angry woman with a slow, calm scorn.

"He is my husband," she said, quietly.

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Serena's eyes blazed.

"And you—what are you?" she demanded. "Accursed! According to the law of the land he is not your husband, because a creature like you is an accursed thing, set aside and apart from other human beings, something too dreadful to contemplate. You must be mad to think that your marriage to Keith Kenyon is, or can be, lawful. Any court in the land will give him freedom from such as you."

Beatrix could not speak; she could not utter a word; she could only sit staring blankly before her, hearing Serena's terrible words, yet not heeding them apparently. But all the same every word, every syllable, sank into her heart like a branding iron, and stayed there. Perhaps it was true. Doubtless the courts of law would give Keith his freedom, if there was any law to fit this special and unusual case.

She would try. For his sake she would give him back his freedom. All this flashed through her brain as she sat there under Serena's scathing words, saying nothing, but hearing all. Old Bernard Dane intervened at length.

"Serena," he said, in his dictatorial way, "this is quite enough; you have no right to annoy and trouble poor Beatrix in this fashion. My child," turning to Beatrix with a deprecating air, "tell me, do you discover any symptoms of—of that awful trouble? How is your health, my dear?"

Beatrix's eyes—full of mournful protest—met his gaze.

"I am very well," she returned, gently; "never was better in my life. And I find no trace of anything that could ever so remotely resemble that awful thing to which you refer. It may be in my system, but so far I see nothing—" [Pg 198]

She choked down the emotion which overpowered her, and turned aside.

"Never mind, child. Don't trouble yourself to explain to me," cried the old man, hastily. "I did not mean to hurt your feelings. I only wanted to know. Now, Serena, if you are satisfied, I think we had better take our departure. Then we can not see Keith?"

Beatrice shook her head.

"He will recover, I feel sure," she returned; "but his recovery rests entirely upon his being kept quiet. Doctor Darrow says that it will take time. Several of his ribs are broken, and he has sustained other injuries. I will let you know every day how he is, Uncle Bernard."

"Thank you, my dear; thank you!" he cried, as he rose to go.

Serena said nothing, but her plain face wore a look that was not good to see. She only bowed coldly to Beatrice, and followed her liege lord from the room. A little later the sound of wheels going down the street told Beatrice that they were gone. She bowed her head upon her hands and gave vent to a storm of tears which she had been bravely choking back.

"Heaven help me to bear my burden," she murmured, softly. "Heaven give me strength."

In the meantime the Dane carriage drove homeward. Once arrived there, Bernard Dane went straight to the library. He opened the door, then started back with an exclamation of surprise. The room was occupied. A slight figure, all in black, sat at the escritoire, with bowed head resting upon one hand. He drew near and laid his hand upon her shoulder. [Pg 199]

"Celia!" he exclaimed. "Celia Ray, what brings you here?"

She lifted her head, and her ghastly face—ghastly from mental suffering—met his gaze. She rose slowly to her feet and faced him, like a forgotten sin come back from its grave to reproach him; and so she was.

"Bernard!"—her voice was low and tremulous—"I have only just heard of your marriage—your mad, insane marriage to Serena, my niece—my niece, remember—and so I came to see you at once. Now, answer me one question. What did you mean by promising me never to marry? You refused to make me your wife—to atone for the wrong you had done me, but you did promise not to marry any one else. You have broken your word, as all men do. False! false! false! Now, listen to me, Bernard Dane."

She drew herself up to an erect position, and her eyes glared into his face with a look of utter hatred, and the worst hatred in the world is that which is born of a slighted love. Her voice sounded like the hissing of a serpent as she went on:

"I can tell you something which would alter all your life, and make you happy, but I refuse to do it. I intend to punish you for what you have done. Go on in your fool's life, Bernard Dane; the day is coming when you will remember me, and curse the hour in which you first deceived me!"

CHAPTER XXX.

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A THREAT.

The old man's face grew pale and troubled.

"Celia, can not you let by-gones be by-gones?" he cried, tremulously. "I am old and feeble. I needed some one to take care of me, and as Serena—"

"Offered herself? Yes, I suppose that is about the case. All the same, I should think that you would have kept the promise you made me, since that was all the atonement you could make for my lost life—my ruined happiness. Bernard Dane, you are a villain!"

The old man's face grew stern, and a grim smile touched his lips.

"So I am. I don't deny it, Celia. When I look back upon my own past and recall all my awful deeds, and worse than all else, the plot that I had formed against two lives—the cruel, horrible plot—to ruin the happiness of two innocent hearts, I hate myself, I scorn myself, I loathe myself. Celia, you can not speak one half as bad of me as I deserve. But do not arraign me for taking the step that I have taken. I was ill and alone—"

"You might have sent for me!" the woman cried, passionately. "I would have nursed and tended you. But instead you hung a mill-stone around your neck which will prove your ruin. Serena Lynne is an artful, designing wretch, yet you think she is disinterested, perhaps. Bernard Dane, I am your wife in all justice—ay, more—" [Pg 201]

She checked herself abruptly. The old man bowed his head, and silence—awful silence—fell over the room. Every word that she had uttered had stung his heart with the full force of truth, and for a time conscience—that whip of scorpions—stung him with its bitter smart.

Well, it was some satisfaction to be convinced that he still possessed a conscience. He drew a little nearer her side at length, and laid his hand upon her shoulder.

"Celia,"—quite humbly he spoke her name—"won't you try to be less hard with me? I do not deserve it from you. And yet," he added, swiftly, at sight of the expression which crossed her face, "I acknowledge that I have wronged you, and—and I had no right to break my promise; but it is too late now. I could not atone under any circumstances now for past mistakes. You ought not to come here to make trouble, Celia."

"No,"—her eyes flashed angrily—"I ought not to make trouble for you. Of course not. You ought to have all the easy places in life, while I toil along over the rough, stony road. You are like all other men—false, and selfish, and cruel—hard as iron. All the same, I will keep my secret—the secret which I have long considered the advisability of telling you, but which I now think wiser to bury in my own breast. It is a secret which would make your life a happier one, and brighten up the skies immensely for other parties. But it will keep. I will do no good—no kindness—to you who have made my life so utterly miserable—a wretched failure. I will return evil for evil!"

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Her voice rang out harsh and hard; her white face was set and stern; she grasped the arm of the chair in which she was sitting as though to gain strength. Low under her breath she muttered, softly:

"If he only knew, if he only knew! Dare I tell him? He looks so old and worn, the shock might kill him."

She arose and walked over to the window, and stood there gazing forth upon the grounds without, her pale face full of grave trouble. That there was something upon her mind, something that troubled her and made her very anxious, there could be no doubt. She turned away from the window and began to pace slowly up and down the long room, her hands clasped, her eyes full of brooding care.

"I will go," she said to herself, at last, decisively. "If I remain here any longer, I shall be tempted to make a clean breast of the whole affair."

She turned abruptly about.

"I am going, Mr. Dane," she said, coldly; "good-bye."

He bowed his head, but made no attempt to speak. She turned away. The door opened and closed behind her. Celia Ray was gone.

Out in the hall she came face to face with Serena.

"Ah, Mrs. Dane!"—with a curious intonation in her voice, her steely eyes fixed upon Serena's startled face—"I must congratulate you—ahem! I suppose now you consider that you have made quite a grand match for yourself, that you have wedded a wealthy old man, whose entire fortune will go to you some day in the near future? My dear Serena, 'there's many a slip 'twixt cup and lip'."

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"What do you mean?" demanded Serena, harshly.

"Nothing—of course not. Only some day your eyes will see the truth, and you will be astonished, Mrs. Dane!"

A swift, angry light leaped into Serena's eyes. She turned away with a wrathful gesture just as Simons appeared.

"Simons,"—Mrs. Dane's voice was cold and hard—"show this woman out, and if she ever ventures here again do not admit her."

Simons bowed.

"I'll do so, ma'am, suah!" he returned.

"Will you?" retorted Mrs. Ray. "Very well. Mrs. Serena, your day is done. This insult is the last straw that breaks the camel's back. I will pay you off for this, if I swing for it!"

She walked swiftly to the outer door, and waving Simons aside, opened it herself and passed out. Her face was white as death, her eyes burning like flame.

"I will hesitate no longer!" she muttered low under her breath as she plunged on down the street. "Serena shall suffer for this! I will not hesitate for the sake of shielding him! I will do the work of destruction! I will tumble down Serena's little house of cards! If they had treated me differently—if Bernard had been kinder, and that wretch Serena not so insulting—I might have spared them, I might have continued to keep my secret. I have kept it for years; it would have gone to the grave with me. But the time has come at last, and I will tell, if I die for it!"

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The words faltered into silence upon her lips. She had been walking rapidly down the street, and as she spoke she was crossing to an opposite corner. Just at that moment down the long avenue a carriage came tearing, drawn by a pair of frightened horses running away. On, on they came! There was the sound of a fall, a wild, agonized cry of human suffering, and Celia Ray lay upon the stone pavement, with the iron-shod hoofs of the horses trampling her down.

CHAPTER XXXI.

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A crowd gathered in a moment to the scene of the disaster. Poor Celia's bruised and bleeding body was lifted from the ground and borne into a neighboring drug store. Here she was placed upon a sofa, and everything was done to resuscitate her that skill could suggest. Doctor Darrow chanced to be passing—or was it chance? In the days that came afterward, Douglas Darrow was wont to look back upon that moment, and humbly thank God for having directed his footsteps to the place where Celia Ray had been carried. For that occurrence was the beginning of a new chapter in the strange romance, a turning-point which was destined to bring about the end as unexpected as strange.

Mrs. Ray was a stranger to the young physician, and all inquiry failed to elicit any information as to her identity. In all the great city she could not have fallen into better hands than those of Doctor Darrow, for he was the kindest-hearted and most philanthropic of men. At last, despairing of ever reaching the truth in regard to the woman, Doctor Darrow sent her to the Home for treatment. He might have sent her to the Charity Hospital, but there was something in the forlorn aspect of the woman—something pathetic, it seemed to him—and there was a familiar look about her face which perplexed the doctor, for he was certain that he had never met the woman before. Yet the intangible resemblance to some one whom he had met before lingered in his mind, and he could not shut it out. So, with a vague feeling that it was his duty to do so, he ordered the unfortunate woman to be taken to the Home, where her injuries were promptly attended to. She was in a very precarious condition; Doctor Darrow saw that, and he entertained grave fears for her recovery. And, even in the event of her recovery, there were serious fears entertained from the effects of the blow upon her head from the horse's feet, which might result in insanity. It transpired that when Beatrix was not with Keith, she found plenty of occupation in the ward where Celia Ray was confined to her bed. As soon as Beatrix saw her she recognized the likeness to Mrs. Lynne, save that this woman's face was more refined, and bore the traces of sorrow and suffering.

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"I wonder who she is?" the girl asked herself, as she stood gazing down upon the white face of the sufferer. "Surely I have seen her somewhere before. She looks just like Mrs. Lynne, only there is a difference."

Even as the words passed her lips, the woman turned uneasily upon the pillow, murmuring as she did so:

"Bernard! Bernard! You will not be so cruel—so cruel!"

Beatrix started at the sound of that familiar name. But the sufferer had wandered away again into wild and incoherent delirium, and Beatrix could gain no information from the words which passed her lips. But still some strange influence drew her as often as possible to the ward where Celia Ray lay, growing gradually worse and weaker, until it became evident that she had not long to live. But there was something upon her mind. She tossed and turned in the fever and delirium, moaning and muttering broken fragments of a strange story, over and over, but so brokenly and fragmentary that Beatrix and Doctor Darrow could make nothing of her raving.

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In the meantime, Keith was recovering slowly but surely. And now the hour had come when Beatrix knew that she must have a talk with him, and go through the anguish of parting once more. Doctor Darrow had listened to Beatrix's announcement that the injured man was her husband, and his noble heart, though crushed with its sorrow and loneliness, did not shrink from the task before him. He had devoted himself to Keith Kenyon as much as he possibly could, and to the earnest labors of the young physician, as well as Beatrix's tender care, Keith Kenyon owed his return to health. The time came when Beatrix, standing at his bedside, listened to Keith's pleading words—words which broke her heart afresh.

"You shall not leave me, my darling!" the young man cried, passionately. "My wife, my wife, I need you! You must not separate us in this dreadful way, this death in life. It is worse than though death itself had intervened to tear us apart. Beatrix, look up, my beautiful darling, and say that you will give up this mad separation. It has not been proven that you are really—that you—that the disease is even in your system. Such things have been heard of before. For two or three generations a curse like that may lie dormant and then suddenly appear, just when it had come to be believed that it had been eradicated. It may never show itself in your life-time, my darling, and in any case you are my wife, and I claim you. Come, Beatrix!"

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"I can not, I must not! Keith, Keith, don't you know that you are holding open the very gates of Heaven to me, and yet I can not, dare not, enter? Don't you know that I would rather lay down my life today than be the cause of possible danger to you? Oh, my husband, so dear to me, don't tempt me, don't tempt me, or you will break my heart anew. For I can not, dare not, consent."

He bowed his head upon his hands and a storm of sobs shook his frame, sobs which choked his voice and made speech impossible. Beatrix laid her hand upon his head. It was to her the very bitterest of anguish to stand at his side and not dare to let her lips meet his in a sweet, clinging kiss of love; and she had not ventured to kiss his lips since that awful shock had come crashing down upon her like an avalanche—the discovery of the awful shadow upon her life, her dark inheritance.

She turned away pale and trembling. After a time she crept back to him and laid her hand upon his arm.

"Keith, my own, my precious husband!" she whispered, "this is more bitter to us than death—this parting—but it must be. And so, since we know that there is no hope for us—that we must be parted anyway—would it not be better for you, for your future—I have none, you know—to place the matter in the hands of the law, to appeal to the courts for your freedom? I am certain the fact

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of my being what I am, will be sufficient to free you. Oh, Keith, Keith! I can not be a blight upon you forever! You must be free from me, and hold up your head once more among your fellowmen. And once free, you will some time in the future, dearest, meet some one else—"

"Stop! For God's sake, stop! How can you speak such words to me?" he groaned, desperately. "Beatrix, you are my wife; whether we live as husband and wife, or are forever separated here upon earth, does not matter. You are mine and I am yours; no one can alter that. And whether we live apart or anear, I shall always be your husband—yours alone—until death shall part us. You remember the solemn marriage service, Beatrix, and the vows we took before God's holy altar? Never mention the divorce court to me again, my beautiful love—it is sacrilege—that can never be. Now, Beatrix, try to cheer up and hope for the best. Your case may not be hopeless, you know, and anyway—no matter what happens—even though the very worst, remember that I love you and you alone, and I shall love you till I die. Ah, there comes Doctor Darrow! I believe that I will tell him all our sad story, my Beatrix, and ask his advice and opinion. He has been so very kind to me; and to his skill, as much as your splendid nursing, I owe my restoration to health. For I shall soon be well now; I am sure of it. I am getting stronger and better every day. Ah, Doctor—"

Keith paused as the young physician drew near, his face quite pale and grave, in his eyes a look of something like suppressed excitement. [Pg 210]

"Mrs. Kenyon," he said, turning to Beatrix with a look in his sad, gray eyes which touched her heart in spite of herself, "will you go to Mrs. Ray? She is asking for you, and I think that there is something upon her mind which will not be relieved until she has seen you."

CHAPTER XXXII.

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A DEATH BED.

Beatrix rose from her seat at her husband's side and left the room in obedience to Doctor Darrow. Entering the ward where Mrs. Ray was lying, she went to the bedside and seated herself in a chair that stood near. The sick woman's eyes were wide open and fixed upon her face with an eager look of inquiry, as though longing to ask a question which, after all, she feared to put into words. Beatrix bent over the woman's pillow, and her eyes rested kindly upon the white, pain-distorted face.

"You wished to see me, Doctor Darrow says," Beatrix began at once.

A look of eager interest flashed over the sunken features, and one cold hand grasped the girl's arm in a vise-like grip. Her eyes glowed with a wild, supernatural light, her breath came and went in feeble, fitful gasps pitiful to witness.

"Yes—yes; I want to see you. I always want to see you," she panted, brokenly. "Come—come here. There, child, kneel down beside me where I can see your dear face; and—and take me in your arms, Beatrix, won't you? You will surely not refuse my last request?"

"No, indeed. If I can ease your pain in any way, or do anything for you, I will be so glad."

Beatrix had fallen upon her knees, and pillowed the poor head upon her breast. Something—a strange, unaccountable feeling of something like affection crept into the girl's heart as the worn cheek came in contact with her own. [Pg 212]

"What is it?" she asked, softly; "tell me."

Celia Ray's eyes studied the beautiful face.

"It seems strange," she said, softly, after a long survey of every feature, "that you should be so beautiful. Your father is—was, I mean—anything but handsome; and your mother—"

"My mother was a beautiful woman," interrupted Beatrix, hastily. "I have seen her portrait. She was far too lovely to have been my mother."

A strange expression crept over Celia Ray's worn face. She opened her lips as though to speak, but no words passed them.

"Beatrix," she said, softly, after a slight pause, "I have sent for you to ask you to do me a favor. I—I have something serious—of the greatest importance—to say, a confession to make. Will you see that I have a notary and necessary witnesses? This that I wish to say is most important; it must be placed upon paper."

"But"—Beatrix strove to be cheerful—"you will get well, Mrs. Ray. Doctor Darrow says that—"

"Doctor Darrow has acknowledged to me that my chances are small," interrupted Celia, hastily. "And, in any case, I must make this confession. It should have been made long ago, to try and set right a deadly wrong. Beatrix,"—wistfully—"you do not despise or dislike me, do you? You have nothing against me, have you, dear?" [Pg 213]

Beatrix looked the surprise which she could not speak.

"I? Good heavens, no! I scarcely know you."

A look of disappointment and pain, which was not all physical, crept over the white, sunken face.

"Small wonder!" she muttered, under her breath; "and whose fault is it, after all?" Then, aloud,

she added, eagerly, "I—I wanted to talk to you about this; that was the reason why I did not send for Doctor Darrow. He is good, but, then, he is nothing to me, after all. I am, of course, only one of his patients to him; he feels no personal interest in me or my fate. Beatrix, you will care, you will have some affection for me? Don't look so surprised. I—I knew your mother. I saw you when you were a babe. Many a time I have held you in my arms, for I was your nurse, you know. I was selected to rear you, and also Keith—dear Keith! And now you are his wife? Well, that is as it should be. You did not know that I had nursed you," she went on swiftly, smiling feebly at the look of astonishment upon Beatrix's face; "but Bernard Dane knew, and he will tell you that I am speaking truly. You will send a notary to me, will you not?" she cried, her voice rising shrill and troubled.

Beatrix rose.

"You shall have whatever you wish," she returned. "I will go at once and attend to it."

"Beatrix."

"Yes, dear."

"Will you kiss me?"

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No answer; Beatrix turned away. Even though this woman was dying, the girl shrank in her own sensitive way from pressing her lips to those which contagion was powerless now to injure.

"I—can not," she responded. "Mrs. Ray, you do not know—I—am forbidden to kiss any living creature, even my own."

A strange light flared into the sunken eyes.

"God forgive me!" she muttered; "for I alone am responsible for all this."

But before Beatrix could speak an awful spasm of pain seized the woman, and for a few moments it seemed as though the life would leave the frail, pain-racked frame. But after a time the paroxysm passed, and very still and pale, Celia Ray lay back upon the pillow, her eyes closed, her breath coming and going in panting gasps. She opened her eyes at last and fixed them upon Beatrix's face with an eager look, a devouring expression that made the girl's heart throb with a strange sensation which she had never before experienced.

"I have never before felt so strange an influence," Beatrix said to herself, as she met the look of hungry affection from the sunken eyes.

Celia lifted one feeble hand with a gesture toward the door. Beatrix understood.

"I am going now for the notary," she responded at once. "Do you think that you are strong enough to attend—to—see him?"

"Yes, yes. I must be, I will be. It is a matter of vital importance, life or death. Go at once, my child."

There was a strange note of wistful tenderness in the poor, feeble voice—something which touched an answering chord in Beatrix's breast and made her feel strangely sad. She left the room at once, and finding Doctor Darrow, told him of Mrs. Ray's wish to see a notary. The physician looked grave.

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"That there is something of great and serious importance upon her mind, I have no doubt," he said, "for I have watched her closely. I believe, from the bottom of my heart, that it is that which retards her recovery. Yet, after all, her recovery is very uncertain; I fear it is out of the question for her, poor soul! I will send a notary and two witnesses," he added, hastening away.

Half an hour later a grave, elderly man entered the ward where Celia Ray lay still and weak, waiting for him to come.

Writing materials were soon brought, and the work began. In a low but perfectly distinct voice, Celia Ray repeated the statement which she wished the notary to transcribe. It took some time, and it was late in the evening before it was concluded, and the paper signed, witnessed, and properly sealed. Then the notary arose to go. The sick woman sighed wearily.

"Give me the document!" she cried, eagerly.

It was placed in her hand.

"Now send for Beatrix!" she demanded, in a loud, shrill tone. "And in the morning—the first thing in the morning—I must see Bernard Dane. I will not have him disturbed tonight, for he is old and does not sleep well. I will wait until morning."

Even in dying, the poor creature studied, first of all the comfort of this man so dearly loved, and who had wrecked her life. But alas! when morning came, poor Celia was gone, and Bernard Dane would never look into her eyes or hear her voice again. She passed away quietly about midnight. The trained nurse sat at her bedside.

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"I want Beatrix!" she cried, lifting her head from the pillow. "Send her to me; I need her. It is so dark—so dark and cold! I will hold her hand, and then I shall not be so lonely."

So Beatrix was summoned from her bed, where she had gone, for Doctor Darrow had insisted upon her taking a good night's rest, as it did not seem likely that she would be needed that night.

She came to the bedside of the dying woman. As soon as her eyes fell on the gray, pinched face, Beatrix knew that Celia Ray's journey here was nearly done.

"What can I do for you?" she cried eagerly.

Celia opened her feeble arms.

"Come to me, my baby!" she cried. "Come to the one who has loved you so! Beatrix the clouds are lifting from your life; you will soon be very happy. Tell me, do you hate Serena?"

Beatrix shuddered.

"No; I hate no one," she returned gravely. "It is very wrong to do so. Let us hope that Serena will be sorry for what she has done."

"She will never be sorry—never, until she dies!" panted the dying woman, wildly. "I know her; she is a wicked, cruel woman. She has tried to break your heart, my darling; for she hated you for your beauty, and because Keith Kenyon loved you. She is hard and heartless, cruel and vindictive—a wicked woman—and she deserves her downfall. Beatrix, here is the paper that the notary executed to-night, also some other papers of great importance. I leave all with you. You will open them one month after I am dead. By that time, so Doctor Darrow says, Keith will be fully restored to his former strength and health, and I—shall be forgotten in my lonely grave."

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"No, no!" sobbed Beatrix, a strange, desolate feeling touching her tender heart with a pang of suffering, a curious sensation that in some way this woman's life, sad, lonely, ever reaching out for something, one thing unattainable, was in some way connected with her own, "you shall not be forgotten. I will do all that I can."

"I understand. Then my baby will go to see the lonely grave sometimes where poor Celia sleeps—even the name upon the stone a false one. Listen, child; I am not poor, and what I have is all for you."

"But your sister, Mrs. Lynne—" began Beatrix, hurriedly.

"She has never been a sister to me," panted the dying woman, wildly; "and I have carefully concealed from her the secret of my life, because she was not fit to share it. But no matter now; the papers will tell you all. Now I am tired and must sleep. Kiss me, Beatrix; I am dying, and I am—your—"

She strove hard with a mighty struggle to speak another word, but the rigid lips refused to give it utterance. The word which was not spoken in life could never be spoken in death. Beatrix stooped and kissed her. She smiled sweetly and so, smiling, died.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

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IN DEADLY PERIL.

Beatrix felt a strange sensation as she stood alone at the midnight hour beside the dead woman. It was not terror, it was not the natural and instinctive shrinking from death—death in any form; for Beatrix had seen so much of the dread messenger that she had grown inured to such scenes since she had come to live at the Home. But still within the girl's heart there lingered a strange feeling of sorrow, as though she had lost a friend, a very dear friend.

She drew the sheet up over the calm, white face upon the pillow; but first she kissed the cold cheek once more. Then she took the package of papers and went swiftly up to her own room. The nurse who had been in charge had already hastened to give due notice of Celia's death, and the poor body was soon prepared for its last resting-place.

Beatrix locked the precious papers safely away in her own wardrobe, then she threw herself upon her bed to try and get a little sleep. She was very tired, and her eyes closed at once, and she was soon in the land of dreams—strange land, whither we all stray at times, sometimes with friends, and often with those whose faces we do not know, and whom we meet only in the land of dreams. Beatrix dreamed that night of Celia Ray. It seemed that the dead woman came to her and took her in her arms, and held her close to her heart, whispering tender, loving words, and calling her her baby and darling child. Beatrix awoke with a feeling that she had been with spirits, for the presence of the dead woman in her slumbers had seemed so real.

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Early in the morning Beatrix dispatched a messenger to Bernard Dane with the information of Celia's death. To her surprise, the old man himself made his appearance at the Home and he came alone. He inquired for Beatrix, and when she entered the reception room she found him sitting with bowed gray head, looking the very picture of despair.

"Where is she?" he asked abruptly. "Beatrix, I will send a burial casket, and I will have her body brought to my house; the funeral services will be held there."

He would vouchsafe no explanation for his great interest in the dead woman, and Beatrix concluded it was for the sake of old acquaintance that he intended giving Celia Ray the grand, pompous funeral; and then was she not Serena's aunt? Surely there was nothing very strange in it, after all.

So everything was done as the old man directed. The funeral took place from the old Dane mansion, and Celia Ray's broken heart was laid to rest in the Howard Cemetery beneath a green mound with white marble coping—a lovely spot.

Serena looked like a galvanized corpse during the funeral services, her pale eyes full of a half-

angry light. She hated the dead woman, and began to believe that she had good reason to do so, for Bernard Dane was mourning as one without hope over the death of Celia Ray. Strange and unaccountable though it may seem, no sooner was she dead and gone than Bernard Dane began to appreciate her great and unselfish affection for his unworthy self.

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And Serena was aware of his grief. She watched the old man as he moved about, the very image of woe, his wrinkled face pale and worn, his form trembling, and during the next four days he grew to look five years older.

When the funeral was over and Mr. and Mrs. Dane had returned to their great, solitary house, Serena marched straight into the library, where her husband sat, his head—grayer than ever now—resting upon his hand, his eyes full of sadness.

"Now Mr. Dane," she began at once, in her shrill, sharp voice, "I want to know what this means. I have waited patiently for an explanation, but I will wait no longer. I mean to get at the root of this mystery.

"What was Celia Ray to you? You can not deceive me. I know perfectly well that no man would mourn over a woman's death as you are mourning over hers, unless there had been something very serious between them. Tell me, for I will know!"

"She was the only woman that ever really loved me!" groaned the old man, desperately. "And I loved another, and turned from her. But she repaid me by a life-time of devotion, and even when she died would not send for me—so Beatrix tells me—because she would not have me disturbed in the night. I have never appreciated her worth before—never! I feel that I have acted the part of a fiend to the best and truest of women. You need not look so angry, Serena. I am only telling you the truth, which you demanded. I shall mourn for Celia as long as I live, which, I trust will not be much longer. I wronged her cruelly, and I fear that God will never forgive me."

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Surely old Bernard Dane was a changed man. A few months before, such words would not have passed his lips. Old age and the sorrows of his life were crowding fast upon him now, and making him see the folly of his past, and the blessings showered upon him which he surely had not deserved. But Serena felt, in her bitter hatred, that she could reach out and hurt the poor woman in her grave.

"No matter," she cried angrily, as she sat nursing her wrath to keep it warm; "I am mistress here and Bernard Dane is old and feeble. It will not take long, now that Aunt Celia is dead and out of the way, to resume my old power over him. I must hold a tight rein, or my control will be diminished. No more of those people shall be allowed here. Beatrix must never show her face here again. She shall never enter these gates while I live!"

That night Beatrix retired earlier than usual. She had attended Celia's funeral and seen her laid to rest; then she had returned to Keith's side for a long and loving conversation. She had not been assigned any special task that night, and so it came to pass that she was able to retire early, and was soon in a sound sleep.

She was aroused from sleep by a strange sensation—a fear of approaching danger—a curious tightening about the muscles of the throat, as though breath was about to leave her. She sat up in bed and peered through the darkness, uttering a low cry of horror as she did so. The room was filled with dense smoke. The house was on fire!

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With a sickening horror creeping slowly over her, the girl rose and hurriedly dressed herself. Then remembering the papers which Celia's dying hand had intrusted to her care, she removed the package from the wardrobe and hid it away in her bosom. She opened the door of her room. Smoke—fire! Great, fiery tongues of flame met her on every side. Choking, gasping for breath, she turned in the direction of Keith's chamber, which was situated at the furthest end of the hall from her own. Could she save him? His strength had not altogether returned to him. Would he be able to make his escape, even with her help?

"Then I will perish with him!" she murmured, desperately. "Heaven help me! Heavenly Father, have mercy, and direct me!"

Shouting wildly with all her strength the one word "Fire!" she fought her way through the smoke and flame down the long hall, and paused at last before the door of Keith's chamber.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

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A MARTYR.

"Fire! fire! fire!"

The ominous cry rang forth through the silence of the night, and instantly there was a response. Close to Beatrix's side a slight form glided swiftly through the thick black smoke, with red-hot tongues of flame licking hungrily at her as she passed. A hand caught Beatrix's arm, and a voice cried wildly:

"Child! child! where are you going?"

Beatrix turned to meet the frightened eyes of Sister Angela.

"I am going to Keith—to my husband," she answered, trying to calm her voice so that the sister

could hear her above the roar of the flames. "Ah, there is Doctor Darrow! Doctor, save those poor people below, if possible!" she went on wildly.

"My work is here!"

Douglas Darrow came to her side, and taking her hand, raised it to his lips. There was a strange expression upon his face, and his lips moved slowly, as though he were speaking in a whisper; but the words reached her ears.

"God bless and help you!" he said, hastily; and then he moved rapidly away, and Beatrix threw open the door of her husband's chamber.

Over the threshold she darted to the bedside, and stooping, she shook the sleeping man with all her strength. [Pg 224]

"Keith! Keith!" she cried, wildly. "Wake up, my darling! The house is on fire, and I have come to save you!"

His dark eyes flew open with a dazed expression.

"Yes—yes," he faltered.

"Come, Keith, come!" She lifted him in her arms and drew him up to a sitting position. "See!" she cried; "the flames are approaching us, and we shall be cut off from all hope of safety. Come, my darling!"

He arose and dressed himself in a moment. The fire was making fearful headway. How it had originated no one could say; but it had the whole building in its awful clutches, and it was evident that it must be consumed.

Below stairs, Doctor Darrow worked like a hero, doing all within his power to save the lives of the unfortunate sick people.

At last, after an hour's hard labor, aided by the gallant firemen and the assistants belonging to the Home, all the sick were safely removed to a neighboring house which happened to be vacant, and whose doors were burst open for the purpose by Doctor Darrow.

In the midst of the bustle and confusion, the din and uproar, the shrieks of the terrified patients, the shouts of the firemen, and cheers from the crowd gathered outside, assisting with all the ardor of a New Orleans crowd, warm-hearted and sympathetic, ready to do anything for their suffering fellow-creatures, Doctor Darrow forgot even Beatrix, and knew not what had taken place. [Pg 225]

Sister Angela, too, was fully occupied. She flitted through the smoke-filled rooms like an angel of light, helping, cheering—a very angel, indeed. The good spirits were ever with her; the sweet, pale face looked like the face of a saint.

One by one, she brought down and out into safety the children connected with the institution, for there was a large ward set apart for little ones; and of all the sufferers, old and young, not one perished from that night's awful work. None were called from this life to the life to come but one who was well prepared—even Sister Angela.

When the children were all carried forth, as was believed, it occurred to her that there was one still left within the burning building—a poor, puny little creature who had been removed from the children's ward to Sister Angela's own room—a tiny little closet at the very top of the house. In the excitement of that awful night, Sister Angela had rushed to the rescue of the little ones, and had quite forgotten the sickly little babe sleeping soundly in its cradle away up in the attic.

When all the children had been removed and the little creatures marshaled together in the big empty house opposite, one alone was found to be missing—the little one placed under the care of Sister Angela.

"The baby!" she cried, aghast. "Oh, what shall I do? It is up in my room!"

"My dear," returned the elderly sister who shared Sister Angela's labors, "I fear that it is too late, that nothing can be done. See, the whole house is wrapped in flames. I am sorry, Heaven knows, but I fear that we can do nothing." [Pg 226]

"I must—I must at least try!" Sister Angela was wringing her hands frantically. "Oh, sister, I could not live and know that—that the child was intrusted to my care. God forbid that I should be the cause of a little child—one of Christ's little ones—losing its life!"

It seemed fanatical, for the babe was a sickly little creature, and could not live long at best; but the face of Sister Angela—white as marble—was set with a resolute look. It was evident that she would not be persuaded from her purpose.

"I must go!" she cried, wildly; "I dare not stay behind. Let me go, sister, and if—if I never come back, remember that I died in doing my duty!"

"May God and the saints have you in their holy keeping!" said the sister, solemnly. And the martyr disappeared within the flame-wrapped building. For a moment the sister gazed after the vanishing figure, then, white and horror-stricken, she started to follow her.

"I can not stand here quietly and see her go to certain death," she cried—"I can not do it."

But as she entered the burning house the black smoke engulfed her, and the fiery flames drove her back. Gasping, smothering, suffocating, she fought her way out into the open air once more, and fell in a huddled heap upon the ground in a dead swoon.

Through the horrible smoke and flames the heroic sister made her way. It seemed as if she would never reach the attic.

The stairs had not burned away; the fire seemed not to have reached them yet, and so she was able to toil slowly and painfully through the smoke up to the attic. It was a long and weary task, for the black smoke was thick and awful, and the red hot flames scorched her as she went. On—on! Was it hours or days since she started? On—on! The attic was reached at last, and blinded by the smoke, and gasping feebly for breath, Sister Angela threw open the door of her room.

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The child was lying in its little cradle; it had just awakened, and was crying bitterly. The good sister flew to its side and lifted it in her arms. It was only a little babe—a sickly little creature, born of poor and unknown parents—but it was one of Christ's little ones, and this holy woman was about to die for its sake. She flew to the door of the room with the babe in her arms, held close to her breast, full of the divine mother-love which forms a part of the nature of all good women, and upon the threshold she came to a frightened halt. The smoke and flames filled the corridor, and beyond—beyond there loomed up a solid wall of fire, while smoke and flames wound around the doomed staircase and wrapped it in crimson folds.

For a moment the heroic woman stood, still holding the child in her arms—the child for whom and with whom she was about to die—her eyes fixed helplessly upon the flame-wreathed staircase, cut off from all hope. Then she went swiftly back to the room and over to the one window. She flung it open, and still clasping the child, stood there uttering piercing shrieks.

Some one heard her, and a ladder was swung up at once. Sister Angela drew forth her rosary, and with the child held close to her breast, began to pray, her face like the face of a saint reflected in the lurid light from the conflagration. The ladder was adjusted, but too late; the flames darted forth and seized it in deadly embrace. The whole house tottered now upon its foundations. Only the white face of the sister at the upper window, with the child in her arms. That picture will be remembered by those who saw it to their dying day. Only a poor, obscure Sister of Charity—a lowly life lived out amid the poor and the fallen and suffering. But who shall say that it was lived in vain?

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And now another ladder was swung, but just as one of the brave and heroic firemen was about to step upon it and risk his own life, in a mad attempt to save the heroic woman above, the structure trembled violently, and the burning house gave way, the entire wing of the building falling with a horrible crash, and the white, saintly face at the upper window, with the babe upon her breast, the pale lips framing prayers, while the enraptured eyes gazed far above at that Heaven which she was so soon to enter, was seen no more—will never be seen again in this world.

Out in the cool night air Beatrix had managed to drag Keith, but at last he had fallen, faint and exhausted, to the ground, and Beatrix fell upon her knees at his side.

The first faint gleam of the early morning began to creep into the eastern sky, and still the crowd lingered about the smoking ruins, though there seemed no more to be done.

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Beatrix was making up her mind to send for a cab in which to convey Keith to his home at old Bernard Dane's. It was the place for him to go, but she—she—must she seek refuge in that horrible place, the lepers' hospital, after all?

It was a grewsome thought, and as she realized what it meant to her and to Keith—the endless separation, the death in life—for the first time since she had learned of this awful sorrow, her own dark inheritance, the poor girl felt that she "could curse God and die!" And how could she know of the great good in store, the wonderful and unexpected blessing which God was about to bestow upon her? So it often is with us poor mortals. Just at the darkest hours of our lives the light is breaking, though hidden from our eyes.

At last Doctor Darrow, smoke-blackened and burned in several places, made his way to Beatrix's side. He gazed full into her face with a strange, intent look, as though seeking to read her very heart. From his lips there issued a low cry, which sounded like a cry of joy.

"God be praised!" he ejaculated. "Beatrix, listen to me: out of all this evil some good has come. You have been unconsciously subjected to the fire test, and you are burned, severely burned. Get down on your knees, and thank God for those scars, dear Beatrix, for they prove a glorious truth. Had you escaped from the fire uninjured, there would have been no doubt that the horrible scourge of leprosy existed in your system. But, Beatrix, Beatrix! you are badly burned, and—look up, dear friend—you are free from the taint of leprosy; there is no mistake!"

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CHAPTER XXXV.

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HOW THE NEWS WAS RECEIVED.

Pale and dazed, Beatrix gazed into the young physician's face. Could it be possible? Were his words true? Was there a hope that she might, after all escape the dreadful scourge, the awful curse, and be restored to her rightful place in the world, no longer an outcast, no longer looked upon as a thing of horror, an object of aversion? It seemed too good to be true. She fell backward

a little, trembling like a leaf. Doctor Darrow caught her in his arms and placed her on a seat near by. Keith, who had recovered from the swoon into which he had fallen after his rescue from the burning building, could only gaze into her face, not able to speak a word.

"Let us drive at once to Mr. Dane's," Doctor Darrow's voice broke the silence which followed. "I will explain to Mr. Dane, and I see no reason why you should not be restored to your old place there, Mrs. Kenyon."

Her eyes met his with a look of gratitude. Then all at once it flashed across her mind that the old house had a new ruler now. Serena was its real head, its tyrannical mistress. Could she go back there? Would Serena allow it? And could she be happy under the same roof which Serena claimed as her own? In a few words she expressed her doubts and fears. Keith's eyes flashed.

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"If you do not accompany me, I shall not go there," he exclaimed; "so that settles it! Where you go, Beatrix, I shall go. No one shall separate us again. And if Doctor Darrow is right in his conjectures, there is no longer the shadow of a reason for our separation. Beatrix, darling wife, happy days are drawing near, thank God!"

A cab having arrived, Doctor Darrow helped the two into it, and took his own seat opposite.

"I had better go with you," he said, "for I wish to explain to Mr. Dane. It is time that this cloud should be lifted from Mrs. Kenyon's life."

"We will be only too glad to have you accompany us," returned Keith, heartily.

And so they drove away together—away from the ruins of the Home—the funeral pyre of one of the noblest of women—and were soon in the aristocratic portion of the city.

At last the cab halted before the door of the Dane mansion. A dilapidated trio—hatless, soiled, and weary—they were ushered into the presence of Mr. and Mrs. Bernard Dane.

At sight of the visitors, Serena arose majestically.

"Simons,"—in a commanding tone—"these people are not received here; show them out."

"Serena!" Old Bernard Dane darted forward, his face pale, his form trembling. "You are going a little too far. These are my adopted son and daughter. I forbid you to insult or show them any rudeness. Doctor Darrow is a highly prized friend. Be seated, all of you. Simons, bring some wine and a little cold chicken or something to refresh us. We had just read in the morning paper of the fire," he added, turning to Keith as he spoke. "I was about to go and see what had become of you; but the paper stated that no one was killed; no lives lost in the flames but the good Sister of Charity and the little child; so I felt relieved upon that score. Ah! here comes Simons. Now you all must eat and drink, for I must confess you look pretty badly used up."

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They needed no second invitation, and when the repast was over and they felt strengthened and refreshed, Doctor Darrow proceeded to tell his story, ending by expressing his opinion, professionally, that Beatrix had escaped the awful scourge.

"I think that there is no room for doubt upon the subject," the physician said, in conclusion. "I have never known the fire test to fail."

"Doctor De Trobriand told me of it," intervened old Bernard Dane, excitedly. "He said that if I could in any way expose Beatrix to the action of fire, I would prove beyond a doubt if she were really afflicted with leprosy. You understand my cruel treatment of you now, Beatrix, do you not, that night, long ago, when I tried to induce you to put your hand into the fire?"

"Yes, I remember, Uncle Bernard," she returned, "and I must confess that at the time I was awfully frightened. I thought that you had suddenly lost your reason."

"No wonder!"—the old man smiled grimly. "And now I suppose you all need rest; and Beatrix certainly must have those burns dressed. Lucky that her face has escaped injury. Go upstairs to the blue room, Beatrix."

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But Serena barred the way.

"I am mistress here!" she snarled, "and I say that no leprous person shall remain under my roof. It was proved beyond a doubt that her mother, Mildred Dane, was afflicted with the dreadful disease. How then do you know how soon it will show itself in Beatrix, her child? The parent always transmits the disease to the children. There is no mistake upon that point; no avoiding the truth—"

"You are mistaken!"

Doctor Darrow's voice broke in upon Serena's angry tirade.

"I beg your pardon for the contradiction, Mrs. Dane, but you are mistaken. Let me give you an instance of the truth, which proves that the disease is not always transmitted to the children direct from the parents. It may lie in abeyance for two or three generations, and then appear in the next. The story that I am about to relate to you, with your permission, is true, and I repeat it from the written notes of a physician—a friend of mine—who was well acquainted with the parties concerned:

"I used to know a Cuban hero—a revolutionist—who had been run out of his native island by the government. He was the son of a rich planter, had been well educated in France and Spain, and had many accomplishments. He went to New York, and into the cigar business, and soon became wealthy. He married a New York girl and had a family. He had grown to be immensely rich, and lived in grand style, drove blooded horses, and owned his own opera-box. One night he had a long

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consultation with the family physician in a private room in his elegant mansion. When the doctor left, the Cuban said to his wife in a careless tone: 'Let us go down to Delmonico's, my dear, and have supper.' They went, and the two passed the gayest, merriest evening imaginable.

"A little after midnight they returned home. She went to bed and fell asleep, the lights still burning in the house. Just as the first faint streaks of dawn began to appear in the eastern sky, she awoke with a cold chill creeping over her. Some instinct warned her that evil had occurred.

"She rose and sought her husband. She found him in his private room, lying on the floor, stone dead, with a revolver still grasped in one cold hand. He had spent the night arranging his affairs. He had left her many tender messages, which told of his love for her and his children, and tender kisses for the dear ones whose lips he dared not press himself.

"That interview with his family physician had betrayed the secret to him. Leprosy, which had occurred among his ancestors generations before, had declared itself in him, and he had taken the shortest way of doctoring it."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

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"ALL'S WELL."

There was silence in the room when Doctor Darrow finished his story—silence broken at length by Serena's cold, harsh voice.

"But that does not prove that Beatrix is exempt from the curse entailed upon her," she said, coarsely. "I consider her unfit to associate with other people until the exact truth is proved, and I decline to receive her here in my house. I will not expose myself and others to possible contagion. And, besides, the very thought of having such a horror under one's roof is not agreeable, I can tell you. I think, Doctor Darrow, that you, as a physician, would be better employed with something else, than in trying to impose a case like this upon Mr. Dane and myself!"

Doctor Darrow colored.

"I assure you, Mrs. Dane," he began, coldly, "that Mrs. Kenyon is free from the awful taint. You need not be uneasy."

But Serena only tossed her head with a sneer.

"I do not intend to be!" she cried. "Mrs. Kenyon is nothing to me. It does not matter to me what becomes of her. She has made trouble always where-ever she went. But she shall certainly not remain under my roof!"

"Mrs. Dane!"

Keith Kenyon came to Serena's side and gazed into her angry face with eyes full of calm contempt. [Pg 237]

"You need say no more. My wife shall not trouble you, or infringe upon your hospitality any longer than is absolutely necessary, for she is not altogether penniless. Mrs. Ray bequeathed her little property to Beatrix."

"Aunt Celia!" Serena's voice rang out shrill and sharp. "Oh, no, Keith, that is impossible. She has always intended mamma to have her property; and mamma is her only relative, and according to law is entitled to the estate."

"Mrs. Ray's will says differently," returned Keith, coldly. "It matters little to us, however; we can exist without the legacy; but these are cold facts, Mrs. Dane, as I will prove to you at any time. But we will not trouble you now, or remain as unwelcome guests. Come Beatrix."

Bernard Dane sprang forward, pale and excited.

"No, you shall not go!" he cried. "This is my house; nay, more—it is yours, Beatrix. You shall not go. Do not mind what Serena says; you have more right here than she has!"

"Mr. Dane!" Serena's voice trembled with suppressed anger. "What do you mean?"

"I mean this!"

Old Bernard Dane faced the angry woman with unflinching eyes.

At that very moment Beatrix's slight form began to sway unsteadily, and she fell to the floor in a dead faint.

"Good heavens!" cried Bernard Dane, excitedly, "here we stand dickering over a foolish matter, and poor Beatrix is suffering. Doctor, her burns must be attended to at once. Mrs. Graves will help her to bed; she must be taken care of." [Pg 238]

Doctor Darrow was already busily engaged in removing the scorched and tattered bodice of Beatrix's dress from about the beautiful white neck and arms. As he did so, a package of papers fell from the bosom of her dress to the floor. Bernard Dane stooped and picked them up. It was the package of papers which Celia Ray had intrusted to the care of Beatrix. As his eyes fell upon these papers the old man uttered a cry of surprise. Drawing his spectacles from his pocket, he put them on, and eagerly opened the package.

"Good heavens!" he ejaculated; then turning aside he sank into a seat and began to read the

papers carefully.

He started up and faced Serena, pale and trembling.

"Listen!" he cried, in an awful voice, "and before you enact the rôle of grand lady and turn your betters from your doors, first find out if they are your doors. Serena Lynne, go home to your mother as soon as you see fit. You have no right here. You are not my wife!"

A horrible silence fell over the room, and over the astonished group. Unable to speak, Serena stood glaring into the old man's angry face.

"Explain, Uncle Bernard!" said Keith.

"I will. In the first place, I must confess my own crime. Years ago Celia Ray first began to care for me, but I was madly in love with Mildred Dane, and would not think of any other woman. Still, Celia continued to care for me, and her love lived as long as she did. It was the only unselfish affection ever bestowed upon me. But I was a villain; and although at last seeing that my love for Mildred was vain, I consented to make Celia my wife, secretly resolved that the marriage should not be legally solemnized. I have nothing to say in extenuation of my own villainy, only I have suffered since that time more pangs of conscience than enough to atone. Well, the marriage was gone through with, and she believed herself my wife. One child was born to us—a girl—who died in infancy. After a time I told her the truth—that we were not legally married, and that we had better separate. She went away, and for years we did not meet. And now she is dead, and it is too late to atone! But these papers prove, beyond a doubt, a surprising truth, which she knew for years, but was too proud to break to me. She only begged me never to marry, and trusted to my honor to keep my word. But here is the truth. Our marriage was legal! Here is every proof. Serena, you have never been my wife. The fortune for which you married me could not be yours, anyway, for the wealth in my possession was willed to me by Mildred Dane, as she inherited it from my relative, Godfrey Dane, and it was long ago given to Keith Kenyon by deed of gift."

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Doctor Darrow was eagerly glancing over the papers in his hand. All at once he uttered a cry of surprise.

"Listen!" he panted, breathlessly. "Why, it is miraculous!"

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And then he went on to read Celia Ray's dying confession. When Bernard Dane had taken poor Mildred and her child to the distant North, hoping to prolong her life for a time, Celia had followed them. It was Mildred's child that had died, and Celia had substituted her own in place of it. For she had falsely represented that it was dead, with the hope of bringing about a substitution some day.

So the truth dawned upon the group, and Beatrix, recovered from her swoon, listened with bated breath, and it seemed more than Bernard Dane could bear—this sudden change from grief to happiness. Beatrix was his own child—Celia Ray's little child! The tainted blood of Mildred Dane's ancestors did not flow in her veins. Every necessary proof accompanied Mrs. Ray's deposition—there was no room for doubt.

And so the black clouds rolled away from the lives of Beatrix and Keith, the two who had loved each other so devotedly, and who had so nearly been parted by an awful fate; and Beatrix thanked God that she had been permitted to cheer her dying mother's pathway to the grave.

Serena and Mrs. Lynne left New Orleans forever and returned to the North; but first Beatrix nobly settled upon them the little fortune which Celia Ray, her own mother—how strange it all seemed!—had bequeathed to her.

And now, as happy as mortals can be, Beatrix and Keith Kenyon live in the grand old Dane mansion with the old man whose wickedness had so nearly wrecked both their lives. He is a repentant old man now—good and kind to everybody. Doctor Darrow is a welcome visitor there, and a bonny boy with soft, dark eyes and golden hair is called Douglas Darrow Kenyon, while a golden-haired tot of three years—a veritable sunbeam—is named Angela. And every day of her life Beatrix Kenyon thanks God from the depths of her grateful heart for saving her from that fearful curse—her dark inheritance.

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THE END.

Transcriber's Notes:

The original edition contained several pages of advertising at the end; these have not been reproduced here.

Retained some inconsistent hyphenation (e.g. bedside vs. bed-side).

Retained some inconsistent accents (e.g. role vs. rôle).

Page 146, changed "intervenes" to "intervened."

Page 155, changed "unkept" to "unkempt."

Page 214, changed "srange" to "strange."

Page 217, changed "wildy" to "wildly."

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