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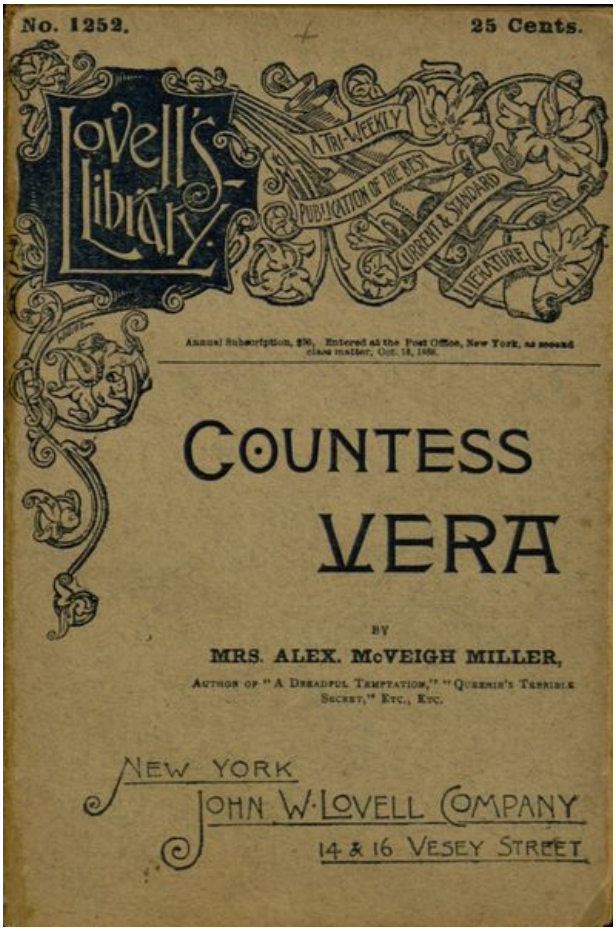


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# COUNTESS VERA

BY

**MRS. ALEX. McVEIGH MILLER,**

AUTHOR OF "A DREADFUL TEMPTATION," "QUEENIE'S TERRIBLE SECRET," ETC., ETC.

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# COUNTESS VERA;

OR,

*The Oath of Vengeance*.

By MRS. ALEX. McVEIGH MILLER.

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# CHAPTER I.

"Dead!"

Leslie Noble reels backward, stunned by the shuddering horror of that one word—"*Dead*!" The stiff, girlish characters of the open letter in his hand waver up and down before his dazed vision, so that he can scarcely read the pathetic words, *so* pathetic now when the little hand that penned them lies cold in death.

"Dear Leslie," it says, "when you come to bid me good-bye in the morning I shall be dead. That is best. You see, I did not know till to-night my sad story, and that you did not love me. Poor mamma was wrong to bind you so. I am very sorry, Leslie. There is nothing I can do but *die*."

There is no signature to the sad little letter—none—but they have taken it from the hand of his girl-wife, found dead in her bed this morning—his bride of two days agone.

With a shudder of unutterable horror, his glance falls on the lovely, girlish face, lying still and cold with the marble mask of death on its beauty. A faint tinge of the rose lingers still on the delicate lips, the long, curling fringe of the lashes lies darkly against the white cheeks, the rippling, waving, golden hair falls in billows of brightness over the pillow. This was his unloved bride, and she has died the awful and tragic death of the *suicide*.

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Let us go back a little in the story of this mournful tragedy, my reader, go back to the upper chamber of that stately mansion, where, on a wild night in October, a woman lay dying—dying of that subtle malady beyond all healing—a broken heart.

"Vera, my darling," says the weak, faint voice, "come to me, dear."

A little figure that has been kneeling with its face in the bed-clothes, rises and comes forward. The small, white face is drenched with tears, the dark eyes are dim and heavy.

"Mamma," the soft voice says, hopefully, "you are better?"

The wasted features of the invalid contract with pain.

"No, my little daughter," she sighs, "I shall never be any better in this world. I am dying." [Pg 2]

A stifled cry of pain, and the girl's soft cheek is pressed to hers in despairing love.

"No, mamma, no," she wails. "You must not die and leave me alone."

"Alone?" the mother re-echoes. "Beautiful, poor and alone in the great, cruel world—oh, my God!"

"You cannot be dying, mamma," the girl says, hopefully. "They—Mrs. Cleveland and Miss Ivy—could not go on to their balls and operas if you were as bad as *that*!"

Something of bitter scorn touches the faded beauty of the woman's face a moment.

"Much they would care," she says, in a tone of scorn. "At this moment my sister and her proud daughter are dancing and feasting at the Riverton's ball, utterly careless and indifferent to the fact that the poor dependent is lying here all alone, but for her poor, friendless child."

"You were no dependent, mamma," the girl says, with a gleam of pride in her dark eyes. "You worked hard for all we have had. But, mamma, if—if you *leave* me, I will not be Ivy Cleveland's slave any longer. I shall go away."

"Where, dear?" the mother asks, anxiously.

"Somewhere," vaguely; "anywhere, away from these wicked Clevelands. I hate them, mamma!" she says, with sudden passion in her voice and face.

"You do not hate Leslie Noble?" Mrs. Campbell asks, anxiously.

"No, mamma, for though he is akin to them he is unlike them. Mr. Noble is always kind to me," Vera answers, musingly.

"Listen to me, Vera, child. Mr. Noble l—likes you. He wishes to marry you," the mother exclaims, with a flush of excitement in her eyes.

"Marry me?" Vera repeats, a little blankly.

"Yes, dear. Are you willing?"

"I—I am too young, am I not, mamma?"

"Seventeen, dear. As old as I was when I married your father," Mrs. Campbell answers with a look of heart pain flitting over the pallid face.

"I have never thought of marrying," Vera goes on musingly. "He will not be angry if I refuse, will he, mamma?"

"But, Vera, you must not refuse," the invalid cries out, in a sudden spasm of feverish anxiety. "Your future will be settled if you marry Mr. Noble. I can die in peace, leaving you in the care of a good husband. Oh, my darling, you do not know what a cruel world this is. I dare not leave you alone, my pure, white lamb, amid its terrible dangers."

Exhausted by her eager speech she breaks into a terrible fit of coughing. Vera bends over, penitent and loving.

"Cheer up, mamma," she whispers; "I am not going to refuse him. Since he wants me, I will marry him for your sake, dear."

"But you like him, Vera?" the mother asks, with piteous pleading.

"Oh, yes," calmly. "He is very nice, isn't he? But, do you know, I think, mamma, that Ivy intended to marry him herself. I heard her say so." [Pg 3]

"Yes, I know, but you see he preferred you, my darling," the mother answers, with whitening lips.

"Then I will marry him. How angry my cousin will be," Vera answers, with all the calmness of a heart untouched by the *grande passion*.

"Yes, she will be very angry, but you need not care, dear," Mrs. Campbell answers faintly. "Leslie will take you away from here. You will never have to slave for the Clevelands any more."

The door opens suddenly and softly. A tall, handsome man comes into the room, followed by a clerical-looking individual.

"Oh, Leslie, you are come back again," Mrs. Campbell breathes, joyfully. "I am glad, for I cannot last but a few minutes longer."

"Not so bad as that, I hope," he says, gently, advancing to the bedside; then his hand touches lightly the golden head bowed on the pillow. "Is my little bride ready yet?" he asks.

The girl starts up with a pale, bewildered face.

"Is it to be now?" she asks, blankly. "I thought—I thought——"

But Mrs. Campbell, drawing her quickly down, checks the half protest with a feverish kiss.

"Yes, dear, it is to be now," she whispers, weakly. "I cannot die until I know that you will be safe from the Clevelands. It is my dying wish, Vera."

"Then I am ready," Vera answers, turning a pale and strangely-solemn face on the waiting bridegroom.

The bridegroom is pale, too. His handsome face gleams out as pale as marble in the flickering glare of the lamps, the dark hair tossed carelessly back from the high, white brow, gleaming like ebony in the dim light. The dark, mustached lips are set in a grave and thoughtful line, the dark blue eyes look curiously into the bride's white face as he takes her passive hand and draws her forward toward the waiting minister.

It is a strange bridal. There are no wedding-favors, no wedding-robes, no congratulations. The beautiful marriage words sound very solemn there in the presence of the dying, and the girlish bride turns silently from the side of the new-made husband to seek the arms of her dying mother.

"Bless you, my Vera, my little darling," the pale lips whisper, and then there falls a strange shadow on the room, and a strange silence, for, with the murmured words of blessing, the chords of life have gently parted in twain, and Mrs. Campbell's broken heart is at rest and at peace in that Heavenly peace that "passeth all understanding."

# CHAPTER II.

The long, wintry night wanes slowly. Vera's own loving hands have robed the dead for the rest of the grave. She has gone away now to the solitude of her own little chamber under the eaves, [Pg 4] leaving Leslie Noble keeping watch beside the loved lost one.

She has forgotten for a moment the brief and solemn words that gave her away to be a wife in her early innocent girlhood; she remembers only that the one creature that loved her, and whom she loved, is dead. Crushed to earth by her terrible loss, Vera flings herself face downward on the chilly, uncarpeted floor, and lies there mute, moveless, tearless, stricken into silence by the weight of her bitter despair.

Who that has lost a mother, the one true heart that loves us truly and unselfishly of all the world, but can sympathize with the bereaved child in her deep despair.

In vain the kind-hearted minister whispered words of comfort, in vain Leslie tried to soothe her, and win her to tears, in awe of her strange, white face and dry-lidded eyes. They could not understand her, and were fain to leave her alone, the while one quoted fearfully to the other:

> "The grief that does not speak,
> Whispers the o'er-fraught heart and bids it break."

So the chilly night wanes, and at three o'clock in the morning, carriage wheels echo loudly in the street below, and pause in front of the house. The haughty mistress, and Ivy, her daughter, have returned from the esthetic ball whose delights they could not forego, although their relative lay ill unto death in the house.

A tap at Vera's door, and Mrs. Brown, the chamber-maid, glances in. The worthy woman has been out at "a party" herself, and is quite unconscious of all that has happened since she left the house. Her stolid gaze falls curiously on the recumbent figure on the cold, hard floor.

"Wake up, Miss Vera! Whatever be you a-sleeping on the cold floor this night for? Miss Ivy says for you to come down to her room immejitly."

Disdaining a reply to the coarse woman, Vera drags herself up from the hard floor, and with stiffened limbs takes her way to the luxurious apartment of her cousin.

How different this large and comfortable room from Vera's bare and fireless little den. Miss Cleveland's apartment has soft hangings of pale-blue plush, bordered with silver, cream lace curtains, a blue satin counterpane embroidered with silvery water-lilies. The atmosphere is warm and dreamy, and languid with the scent of hot-house flowers in blue and silver vases. The mistress of all this elegance stands in the center of the room, clothed in an esthetic gown of pale-blue, embroidered down the front with small sunflowers. She is a pretty blonde, with straw-colored hair in loose waves, and turquoise blue eyes, that usually wear an expression of infantine appeal and innocence. Just now the eyes look heavy and dull, and there is a tired, impatient look on her delicate-featured face.

"Here you are *at last*," she says, as Vera comes slowly in with her white face and heavy eyes, with their look of dumb and hopeless pain. "Hurry up now and undress me; I'm tired and sleepy, and [Pg 5] ready to drop!"

Vera stands still, looking gravely at her, and making no move to obey the cool and insolent mandate. For years her cousin has ruthlessly trampled her under foot, and made her a despised slave.

It comes to the girl with a sudden thrill of triumph now that this is the last time Ivy will ever order her about. She is Leslie Noble's wife, and he will shield her from her cousin's abuse.

"Come, don't stand staring like a fool," Ivy breaks out coarsely and impatiently. "Don't you see I'm waiting? Here, pull off these tight slippers. I cannot stand them a minute longer!"

She throws herself into a blue-cushioned chair, and thrusts forward her small feet encased in white kid slippers and blue silk hose, and Vera, conquering her strong impulse of rebellion, kneels down to perform the menial service.

After all, what does this last time matter? she asks herself, wearily. After to-morrow she will be out of their power. Tonight, while that dear, dead mother lies in the house, she will keep still, she will have peace, no matter how bitter the cup of degradation pressed to her loathing lips.

With steady hands she unlaces the silken cords that lace the white slippers, draws them off the compressed feet, and unclasps the satin garters from the blue silken hose. All the while Ivy raves angrily:

"I have seen for some time that you rebel against waiting on me, ungrateful minx, as if all you could do would repay us for the charity that has clothed and fed you all your life. To-morrow I shall report you to your mother, and if she does not bring you into better subjection, you shall both be driven away, do you hear?"

Her mother! This is the iron rod with which they have ruled poor Vera all her life long. That poor, drooping, delicate mother, whose hold on life had never been but half-hearted, whose only home and shelter had been the grudging and hard-earned charity of her heartless and parsimonious sister. Day in and day out the Clevelands had driven their two weak slaves relentlessly, always holding over their heads the dread of being turned out to face the cold world alone.

A low and bitter laugh rises to Vera's lips at the thought that that poor, meek dependent is beyond their dominion now, and that Ivy's threatened complaints can never rise to that high Heaven where her mother's freed spirit soars in happiness and peace.

"Not that you are of much account, anyway," pursues the heartless girl, angrily. "You can never be trained into a proper maid, you stiff-necked little pauper. If mamma were not so mean and stingy she would let me have a real French maid like other girls. Never mind, when once I am Mrs. Leslie Noble I'll show her how I will spend money!"

Vera shivers, and her heart thumps heavily against her side. The one idea of Ivy's life is to marry Leslie Noble. He is handsome, fascinating, wealthy, in short, her *beau ideal* of perfection. He has [Pg 6] come on a month's visit to her mother from a distant city, and both *mater* and daughter are sure, quite sure, that the object for which he was invited is accomplished; they have hooked the golden fish, they have no doubt. What will Ivy say when she knows that she, the despised Vera, is Leslie Noble's chosen bride?

"She will kill me, just that!" the girl murmurs to herself in terror, while a second terror shakes her slight frame.

"What are you trembling for?" Ivy demands, shortly. "Are you afraid I will slap you as I did last night? Well, you richly deserve it, and I don't know but that I may. Hurry, now, and fix my hair and bring my *robe de nuit*. It will be broad daylight before I get into bed. And I want to rise early to find out why Leslie did not come to the ball."

Vera moves about mechanically, obeying orders, but answering never a word.

A golden gleam has come into the eyes beneath the drooping lashes, a heavy, deep red spot glows in the center of her death-white cheeks. Half-frightened as she is at the thought of Ivy's rage when she learns the truth, she is yet filled with triumph at the thought of her own vengeance on her enemies, this glorious vengeance that has come to her unsought.

*She* will be Leslie Noble's wife, she will queen it over Ivy and her mother. She will wear satin and laces and diamonds, she will have French maids to wait on her, and then a sudden anguished recollection drives the blood from her heart and forces a moan of despair from her white lips—what is all her triumph since it cannot bring back the dead?

She is moving to the door, having tucked the blue satin counterpane about Ivy's small figure, when the straw-gold head pops up, and the frivolous beauty recalls her.

"I say, Vera, is the embroidery finished on my Surah polonaise? Because I shall want it to-morrow night to wear to Mrs. Montague's *german*. Tell your mother I shall want it without fail. I am tired of this shamming sickness. It's nothing but laziness—just *that*. Did you say it was finished?"

"No," Vera answers her, through her white lips. Ivy springs up tumultuously in the bed.

"Not finished!" she screams, shrilly.

"Scandalous! I tell you I want it to-morrow night! I will have it—you hear! Go and tell your mother to get up this instant and go to work at it. Go and tell her—you hear?"

Vera, with her hands on the latch, and that crimson spot burning dully on her cheeks, answers with sudden, passionate defiance:

"I will not!"

All in a moment Ivy is out of bed, and her small, claw-like fingers clutch Vera's arm, the other hand comes down in a ringing slap on Vera's cheek.

"Take that, little vixen!" she hisses, furiously, "and that, and that! How dare you defy me?"

Vera pushes her off with a sudden passionate defiance.

"Because I am not afraid of you any longer," she says, sharply. "Because poor mamma has [Pg 7] escaped you. She is free—she is dead!"

"Dead!" Ivy screams in passionate wrath. "Dead—and the embroidery not finished on my Surah polonaise! It is just like her—the lazy, ungrateful thing! To go and die just when I needed——"

But Vera slams the door between her and the rest of the heartless lament, and flies along the hall laughing like some mad thing. In truth the horrors of this dreadful night have almost unseated her reason. She shuts and bolts herself into her room, her young heart filled with wild hatred for her heartless cousin.

"To-morrow I shall have my revenge upon her," she cries, with clenched hands. "I would not tell her to-night. My triumph would not have been complete. I will wait—wait until to-morrow, when Leslie Noble will take me by the hand and tell her to her face that he loves me, and that I am his wife!"

And her strange, half-maddened laugh filled the little room with weird echoes.

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## CHAPTER III.

To-morrow, Vera's to-morrow—dawns, rainy, chilly, cheerless, as only a rainy autumn day can be. The wild winds sigh eerily around the house. The autumn leaves are beaten from the trees and

swirl through the air, falling in dank, sodden masses on the soaked grass of the lawn. The sun refuses to shine. No more dreary and desolate day could be imagined.

With the earliest peep of dawn Vera makes her way to her mother's room.

It is lonely and deserted save for the sheeted presence of the quiet dead. The lamps burn dimly, and there is a silence in the room so deep it may be felt.

With a trembling hand Vera turns down the cold linen cover for one long, lingering look at the beloved face—the strangely-beautiful marble-white face, on which the story of a life-long sorrow has carved its mournful record in the subtle tracery of grief.

Mrs. Campbell has been that most sorrowful of all living creatures—a deserted wife!

The beautiful, dark eyes of her daughter have never looked upon the face of the father who should have loved and nurtured her tender life.

But it is all over now—the pain, the sorrow, the loneliness, the deep humiliation. The small, toil-stained hands are folded gently together over some odorous white tube-roses that Vera has placed within them!

The jetty fringe of the long, black lashes rests heavily against the thin, white cheeks, the beautifully-curved lips are closed peacefully, the golden brown hair, thickly-streaked with gray, is parted sweetly on the peaceful brow.

As Vera gazes, the tears, which have remained sealed in their fountains till now, burst forth in healing showers, breaking upon the terrible calm that has been upon her.

Again and again she presses her hot, feverish lips to the cold, white brow of the only friend her lonely life has ever known. [Pg 8]

"Oh, mamma, mamma, if you might but have taken me with you," she sobs, bitterly.

"The best thing that could have happened," says a curt, icy voice behind her, and turning with a shiver of repulsion, Vera beholds her aunt, Mrs. Cleveland, who has entered noiselessly in her furred slippers and crimson dressing-gown.

She comes to the foot of the bed and stands silently a moment regarding the cold, white features of her dead sister, then hastily turns her head aside as if the still face held some unspoken reproach for her.

"Cover the face, Vera," she says, coldly. "It is not pleasant to look at the dead."

"Not when we have wronged them," the girl murmurs, almost inaudibly, and with deep bitterness.

"What is that you are saying?" demands Mrs. Cleveland, sharply. "'Not when we have wronged them,' eh? Beware, girl, how you let that sharp tongue of yours run on. You may chance to see the inside of the alms-house!"

But Vera, biting her lips fiercely, in mute shame at that angry slip of the tongue in presence of the dead, makes no answer. Dropping the white sheet back over the sealed lips that cannot open to defend her child, she buries her face in the pillow, trembling all over with indignation and grief.

Mrs. Cleveland stands contemplating her a moment with a look of contemptuous scorn on her high, Roman features, then, to Vera's amazement, she exclaims:

"One of the servants told me that Leslie Noble brought a preacher in here last night. Was it to administer the sacrament to the dying?"

No answer from Vera, whose face remains buried in the pillow.

"Speak!" Mrs. Cleveland commands, coming a step nearer, "did he come to administer the consolations of religion to the dying?"

"No," Vera answers, lifting her white face a moment, and looking steadily into her enemy's questioning eyes. "No."

"No," Mrs. Cleveland echoes, with a look of alarm. "What then, girl, what then?"

But Vera, with the strange reply, "You must ask Mr. Noble—he will inform you," drops her pallid face into her hands again.

Mrs. Cleveland makes a step forward, resolving in her own mind "to shake the breath out of that stubborn girl," but even her wicked nature is awed by the still presence of death in the room, and she desists from her heartless purpose, and, retreating to the door, pauses with her hand on the latch to say, icily:

"Your mother's funeral will take place from the Epiphany Church this afternoon. Mourning garments will be sent to your room for you to wear."

Vera springs to her feet with a heart-wrung cry:

"So soon! Oh, my God, you will not bury her out of my sight to-day, when she only died last night!" [Pg 9]

Mrs. Cleveland's haughty features are convulsed with anger.

"Hush, you little fool!" she bursts out, angrily. "Do you think that dead people are such enlivening company that one need keep them in the house any longer than is necessary to provide a hearse

and coffin? Only died last night, forsooth! Well, she is as dead now as she will be a hundred years hence, and the funeral will take place this afternoon. You will be ready to attend, if you understand what is good for yourself."

So saying, she sweeps from the room, slamming the door heavily behind her.

Alas, the bitterness of poverty and dependence. Vera throws herself down by the side of the bed, and weeps long and bitterly, until exhausted nature succumbs to the strain upon it, and she sleeps deeply, heavily, dreamlessly, wrapped in a dumb, narcotic stupor rather than healthful slumber. She is hustled out of the way at length that her mother may be placed in the plain coffin that has been provided for her, and a few hours later—oh, so piteously few—she is standing by that open grave in Glenwood, hearing the dull thud of the earth, and the patter of the rain upon the coffin, and the solemn voice of the minister, repeating in tones that sound faint and far away to her dazed senses, "Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust."

From her carriage, where she sits impatiently waiting the conclusion of the sacred service, Mrs. Cleveland watches the scene, frowning impatiently at the sight of Leslie Noble supporting Vera on his arm, and holding his umbrella carefully over her, reckless of the rain-drops that patter down on his uncovered head and face. Mrs. Cleveland does not like the look of it at all. She regards Leslie as Ivy's own especial property. Leslie is too kind-hearted. Why should he trouble himself over Vera Campbell, her despised niece, who is no better than a servant to Ivy, her idolized daughter. She does not like the look of it at all, and when Leslie hands the sobbing girl into the carriage, and takes a seat by her side instead of Mrs. Cleveland's, the matron's vexation rises into almost uncontrollable rage. Biting her lips fiercely, she resolves that as soon as they reach home she will give the young man a broad hint to cease his little kindnesses in that quarter.

The occasion comes very soon. It is almost dark when they reach home. The gas is lighted and a cheerful fire glows in the luxurious parlor.

Mr. Noble leads his passive companion deliberately in, and installs her in a cushioned seat before the fire. With deft fingers he removes the heavy veil and hat, the black shawl, and the wet gloves, and chafes in his own warm clasp the half-frozen little fingers.

"Upon my word!" drawls a thin little voice, full of anger and surprise.

Mr. Leslie, glancing up, sees Ivy reclining on a couch, and regarding the scene with supercilious surprise commingled with anger. Mrs. Cleveland, who has followed them into the room, stands still, a mute statue of rage and dismay. [Pg 10]

"I—I should like to know the meaning of this, Mr. Noble," she gasps at length, haughtily. "I do not allow that girl in my parlor! Let her go to the servants' room. They are good enough for the likes of her."

Mr. Leslie turns his pale, handsome face round with an air of surprise.

"She is your sister's child," he says, with reproach in every tone of his voice.

"Yes, to my sorrow," Mrs. Cleveland flashes out. "Add to that that she is a pauper and an ingrate! Vera Campbell, get up and go to your own room. *You* ought to know your place if Mr. Noble does not!"

Vera rises silently, and standing still a moment, looks up into Leslie Noble's face. The supreme moment of her triumph has arrived. With a nervous tremor she looks up into his face for courage to sustain her in the trying ordeal of the Clevelands' wrath before its vials are poured out upon her shrinking head.

But the expression of the handsome, troubled face does not exactly satisfy her. He is not looking at her. His eyes are fixed on Ivy Cleveland's pretty face with its pink cheeks and turquoise-blue eyes. There is tenderness, regret and trouble in the rather weak though handsome face.

"Go, Vera," Mrs. Cleveland reiterates, sternly and impatiently.

Then Leslie's eyes fall on the slight, black-robed figure standing in silent, proud humility by his side.

He stoops over her, not to caress her, as for a moment she vaguely fancied, but to whisper in her ear:

"Do as she bids you this time, Vera. Go to your room and sleep soundly to-night. I will have it out with her now, and in the morning I will take you away."

She flashes one quick glance into his troubled eyes, bows her head, and goes mutely from the room. But something in that look haunts Leslie Noble ever after. It seemed to him as if those dark eyes said to him plainer than words could speak: "You are a coward. Are you not afraid to acknowledge your wife?" He is right. The look in her eyes has been palpable contempt.

She goes from the room, but only to enter the room adjoining the parlor, and conceal herself behind the heavy, dark-green hangings. So this is the grand triumph her imagination has pictured for her. This is the weak way in which her husband takes her part against the world.

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## CHAPTER IV.

When Vera has gone from the room, an embarrassed silence falls. Mrs. Cleveland is wondering what to say next. It is no part of her plan to offend Leslie Noble. She prefers to conciliate him. For Leslie himself, he is wondering in what terms he shall convey the truth to his arrogant relative and her haughty daughter.

"You must not take offense, Leslie, at my interference in this case," Mrs. Cleveland stammers at length. "I know your kind, easy nature, and I cannot tamely see you imposed upon by that wretched girl, who is the most ungrateful and hard-hearted creature you could imagine, and only fit to herd with the low and vulgar." [Pg 11]

"I do not understand you," Mr. Noble answers, resting his arms on the back of the chair, and turning on her a white, perplexed face.

"She comes of bad stock," answered Mrs. Cleveland. "Her mother, my sister, married most wretchedly beneath her. The man was a low, drunken, brutal fellow, with nothing under Heaven to recommend him but a handsome face. As might have been expected, he abused and maltreated his wife, and then deserted her just before the birth of his daughter, who resembled him exceedingly in character as well as in person."

Leslie Noble winces. Pride of birth is a strong point with him. He is exceedingly well-born himself. The story of this drunken, wife-beating fellow thrills him with keenest disgust.

"Where is the fellow now—dead?" he asks anxiously.

"No, indeed; at least, not that I ever heard of," Mrs. Cleveland answers. "I have no doubt he is alive somewhere, in state prison, perhaps, and he will turn up some day to claim his daughter, and drag her down to his own vile depths of degradation."

Mr. Noble is silent from sheer inability to speak, and Mrs. Cleveland resumes, with apparent earnestness:

"I have my doubts whether I am acting right in keeping the girl here. She is a dead expense to me, and the most ungrateful and violent-tempered creature that ever lived. Would you believe that she flew at poor, dear little Ivy, and boxed her ears this morning? My pity and affection for my sister induced me to give them a home as long as she lived, but now that her influence is withdrawn from Vera, she will be perfectly unmanageable. I think I shall send her away."

"Where?" inquires Mr. Noble, trying to keep his eyes from the pink and white face of Ivy, who is listening intently to every word, without speaking herself.

"To some place where she may earn her own living, or, perhaps, to the House of Correction. She sadly needs discipline," is the instant reply.

Leslie Noble's face turns from white to red, and from red to white again. What he has heard has utterly dismayed him.

"I wish that I had known all this yesterday, or last night," he mutters, weakly.

"Why?" Mrs. Cleveland asks, startled by the dejected tone.

Leslie Noble looks from her to Ivy, who has started into a sitting posture, and fixed her blue eyes on his face.

"Because I have something shocking to tell you," he answers, growing very pale. "You must not be angry with me, Mrs. Cleveland, nor you, Ivy. It would not have happened if I had known all that I know now."

"Oh, what can you mean?" screams Ivy, startled into speech by her vague fear. [Pg 12]

"You remember that I declined the Riverton's ball last night on the score of a violent headache?" he says, looking gravely at her.

"Yes, and I missed you *so* much. I did not enjoy the ball *one bit*," she murmurs, sentimentally.

Mr. Noble sighs furiously.

"I wish that I had gone, no matter how hard my head ached," he says, dejectedly. "Then Mrs. Campbell would never have sent for me to come to her room."

"To come to her room!" mother and daughter echo in breathless indignation.

"Yes," answers the young man, with another sigh.

"Impertinent! What did she wish?" Mrs. Cleveland breaks out, furiously, pale to the lips.

"She wished to tell me that she was dying, and to leave her daughter in my care," he stammers, confusedly.

"Go on," Mrs. Cleveland exclaims.

"She told me that Vera was delicate, sensitive, helpless and friendless, and so good and sweet that none could help loving her. She declared she could not die in peace without leaving her in the care of a kind protector."

"A fine protector a young man would make for a young girl," Mrs. Cleveland sneers, with cutting irony.

"You do not understand, I think," Leslie answers her, gravely. "She wished me to make her my wife."

"Your wife! Marry Vera Campbell!" Ivy shrieks out wildly.

He trembles at the passionate dismay of her voice, but answers, desperately:

"Vera Noble, now, Ivy, for her mother's grief overcame my reason, and I made her my wife last night by the side of her dying mother."

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## CHAPTER V.

Following that desperate declaration from Leslie Noble, there is a scream of rage and anguish commingled. Ivy has fallen back on the sofa in violent hysterics. Mrs. Cleveland glares at him reproachfully.

"You have killed her, my poor Ivy!" she cries. "She loved you, and you had given her reason to think that—you meant to marry *her*."

"I *did* so intend," he answers, on the spur of the moment. "I was only waiting to be sure of my feelings before I declared myself. But now, this dreadful marriage has blighted my life and hers. Poor little Ivy."

"I could almost curse my sister in her grave!" Mrs. Cleveland wails, wringing her hands.

"Curse me rather," Leslie answers, bitterly, "that I was weak enough to be deluded into such a mesalliance. She was ill and dying, she barely knew what she did; but I was in full possession of my senses. Why did I let my weak pity overcome me, and make me false to the real desire of my heart?" [Pg 13]

"Falsest, most deceitful of men!" sobs Ivy from her sofa, and Leslie takes her white hand a moment in his own, pressing it despairingly to his lips as he cries:

"You must forgive me, Ivy, I did not know how well I loved you until I had lost you."

Mrs. Cleveland interposes sternly.

"Come, come, I cannot allow any tender passages between you two. If Leslie intends for this nefarious marriage to stand, it will be best that he shall remain a stranger henceforth to us both."

"To stand?" Leslie repeats, looking at her like one dazed.

"Yes," she answers, meaningly. "I ask you, Leslie, if such a marriage as this can be legal and binding?"

"Oh, yes, it is perfectly so," he answers.

"Do you love her? Oh, Leslie, do you love that dreadful girl?" wails Ivy, from her sofa.

He shakes his head, Mrs. Cleveland having interdicted other intercourse.

"Do you intend to live with her?" Mrs. Cleveland queries, significantly.

"Pray, what else can I do?" Mr. Noble queries, bewildered, and Ivy groans, lugubriously.

"Oh, nothing, nothing," the lady answers, with a scornful laugh. "But if it were me who had been deluded into such a marriage with a low and mercenary girl, I am sure that nothing could induce me to live with her. I would either divorce her, or pension her off."

Mr. Noble walks up and down the floor with folded arms, in deep agitation.

"It would be quite impossible to procure a divorce," he answers, after a moment's thought. "I could assign no earthly cause for demanding one. I married her of my own free will, though I admit I was unduly persuaded."

"All she cares for is your money," snaps Ivy, quite ignoring the fact that this was her own motive for winning him. "It will kill me if you take her home with you, Leslie. I shall die of a broken heart."

"Poor, deceived dear," sighs her mother, while Leslie breaks out, ruefully:

"What else can I possibly do, Ivy?"

Mrs. Cleveland, who had been silently cogitating, answers with sudden blandness:

"If you want my advice, Leslie, you shall have it, unfairly as you have treated us. I say the girl is ignorant and uneducated, and quite unfit to become the mistress of your elegant home in Philadelphia. If you are compelled to stick to your unlucky bargain, you must try and make the best of it. You will have to put her into a strict convent school where her ill-nature will be tamed down, and her manners educated up to the proper standard for your wife. How do you like that plan?"

Her magnetic gaze is fixed on Ivy as she speaks, compelling her to be silent, though she was raising her shrill voice in protest. [Pg 14]

"Would they be harsh with her?" Leslie asks anxiously, some instinct of pity for the orphan girl struggling blindly in his heart.

"Not at all. I was educated at a convent school myself. I liked it very much. But you will have to be very positive about Vera, to induce her to go. She will wheedle you out of the notion if possible. Raw, untrained girl as she is, she thinks she is quite capable of doing anything, or filling any position. But if you listen to *her*, you will find yourself mortified and disgraced directly,"

blandly insinuates the wily woman.

Leslie Noble winces as she had meant he should. He is very proud and sensitive, this rich, handsome man who finds himself placed, through his weakness, in such a sore strait.

"I think your plan is a very good one," he says, hastily. "Do you know where there is a school, such as you named just now?"

"I can give you the address of one in Maryland," Mrs. Cleveland answers, readily.

"I will go there to-morrow and make arrangements for her reception as a pupil," he replies. "Would it be better to apprise her of my intention beforehand?" he inquires with some embarrassment.

"No, decidedly not. She might find means to circumvent you. She is a very sharp witted girl. Merely tell her that you are called away unexpectedly, on business, and that you will leave her in my charge until you return."

"Would it be agreeable to you to have her stay that long?" he queries.

Mrs. Cleveland smiles a little grimly.

"Of course, as your wife, Vera may expect every courtesy from me," she answers in a strange kind of voice, and there the conference ends.

From her hiding-place in the adjoining room Vera creeps out with a white face, and takes her way up-stairs to her mother's room. Her step is slow and heavy, her eyes are dull and black, there is no single gleam of brightness in them. The last drop has been added to the already overflowing cup of misery and despair.

With an unfaltering hand she goes to a small medicine chest kept for her mother's use, and unlocking it, takes out two small vials filled with a dark-colored liquid. Each vial has a label pasted on, containing written directions for use, but without the name of the drug.

Vera knits her straight, black brows thoughtfully together as she puzzles over them. "I remember," she says, aloud, "that mamma said one would produce a long, deep sleep, the other—death! Now which is which?"

After a minute she decides to her satisfaction, and placing one vial back, goes away with the other in her bosom. In her own little room she sits down to pen a few words to Leslie, then slowly kneels by the bedside.

"I do not think anyone can blame me," she murmurs, "not even God. The world is so cold and hard I cannot live in it any longer. I am going to my mother."

Some broken, pleading words falter over the quivering, white lips, then a low amen. [Pg 15]

She rises, puts the treasured vial to her lips, and drains the last bitter drop, throwing the empty vessel on the hearth where it cracks into a hundred fragments. Then she lies down upon the bed with her letter to Leslie clenched tightly in her slim white hand. And when they come to awake her in the morning, she is lying mute and pale, with the marble mask of death over all her beauty.

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## CHAPTER VI.

When they tell Leslie Noble the fatal truth—when they lead him to the cold, bare chamber where his girl-wife lies dead, he is stunned by the swift and terrible blow that the hand of fate has dealt him. A quick remorse has entered his soul. He did not love her, yet he would not have the light of her young, strong life go out in darkness like that.

Though he has walked the floor of his room all night, raving, and almost cursing himself because he had married her, the sight of her now—like *that*—and the sad pathos of that brief letter touch him to the depths of his heart with a vain remorse and pity. With a faltering voice he reads aloud the sad and hopeless words:

"When you come to bid me good-by in the morning I shall be dead. That is best. You see, I did not know till to-night my sad story, and that—that you did not love me! Poor mamma was wrong to bind you so. I am very sorry, Leslie. There is nothing I can do but die!"

His glance falls on Mrs. Cleveland, who is standing in the room with a strange expression upon her face. He does not like to think it is relief and satisfaction, and yet it is marvelously like it.

"Who has told her the truth? How has she learned it?" he asks. "I never meant that she should know. I meant to do my duty by the poor, friendless girl."

"No one told her. She must have listened at the door last night. It was like her low, mean disposition to be peeping, and prying, and listening to what did not concern her," Mrs. Cleveland bursts out, scornfully.

"Pardon me, but our conversation *did* concern her," he answers, gravely.

"At least, it was not intended for her hearing," she replies, shortly.

Mr. Noble is silent a moment, gazing earnestly at the pale, dead face, from which the woman's eyes turn in fear and aversion.

"Perhaps we have wronged her," he says, slowly. "If she had been what you believed her—coarse and low, and violent like her father—would she have been driven," shudderingly, "to this!"

"You are allowing a maudlin sentimentality to run away with your reason, Leslie," the woman answers, coldly. "Do you suppose I have lied to you? The girl has lived here since infancy. I knew [Pg 16] her temper well, and I repeat that she was unbearable. I only endured her for her mother's sake. This is very sad. Of course, you feel badly over it. And yet, common sense whispers that this is a most fortunate thing for you. You are freed from a galling bond. Had she lived, she would almost inevitably have become a sorrow and a disgrace to you."

"We should not speak ill of the dead," he answers, a little sternly.

"Pardon me; I know there are some truths which we innately feel, but should not give expression to," she answers, with keen irony.

"Does Ivy know?" he asks her.

"Not yet; poor dear, I have been watching by her bedside all night. She is ill and almost heart-broken. I must go and break the news to her now."

She moves to the door, but, seeing him standing irresolute in the center of the floor, looks back over her shoulder to say, anxiously:

"Will you come away now, Leslie? The women would like to come in to prepare the body for the grave."

He shivers, and turns to follow her, casting one long, lingering look at the fair, immobile face upon the pillow.

"I did not know she was so beautiful," he murmurs to himself as he passes out.

"Have you no message to send Ivy?" Mrs. Cleveland asks him, as they pass along the hall. "She would be so glad of even one kind word from you."

"I thought you interdicted all intercourse between us last night," he answers, blankly.

"Yes; but the *obstacle* no longer remains," she replies, significantly, and, with a violent start, Leslie realizes the truth of her words. In his horror and surprise he had not thought of it before. Yes, Vera's death has set him free—free to marry Ivy when he will.

"Tell her that I am very sorry she is ill. I hope she will soon be better," he answers, gravely and courteously. He will not say more now out of respect to the dead, and Mrs. Cleveland is wise enough not to press him.

Ivy, whose pretended illness is altogether a sham, is jubilant over the news.

"Was there ever anything more fortunate?" she exclaims. "Lucky for us that she listened, and found out the truth."

"Yes, indeed, she saved me a vast deal of plotting and planning, for I was determined that she should be put out of the way somehow, and that *soon*," Mrs. Cleveland answers, heartlessly. "The little fool! I did not think she had the courage to kill herself, but I am very much obliged to her."

"'Nothing in her life became her like the leaving it,'" Ivy quotes, heartlessly.

"Remember, Ivy, you must not allow Leslie to perceive your joy. He is very peculiar—weak-minded, indeed," scornfully. "And he might be offended. Just now he is carried away by a maudlin sentimentality over her tragic death."

"Never fear for me. I shall be discretion itself," laughs Ivy. "But, of course, I shall make no display [Pg 17] of grief. *That* could not be expected."

"Of course not. But it will be a mark of respect to Leslie if you will attend the funeral to-morrow."

"Then I will do so, with a proper show of decorum. I am determined that he shall not slip through my fingers again."

So the two cruel and wicked women plot and plan, while the poor victim of their heartlessness lies up-stairs dead, in all her young, winsome beauty, with her small hands folded on her quiet heart, and the black-fringed lashes lying heavily against the marble-white cheeks. They have robed her for the grave, and left her there alone, with no one "to come in and kiss her to lighten the gloom."

So the day wanes and the night, and Vera lies still and white in the long black casket to which they have consigned her. They have left the cover off, and only a transparent veil lies lightly across her face, through which her delicate features show clearly. How wonderfully the look of life lingers still; how the pink lips retain the warm, pink coloring of life. But there is no one to note how wonderfully death has spared her fairness; no one to exclaim, with the power of affection:

"She looks too sweet and life-like for us to bury her out of our sight."

Afternoon comes, and they carry the casket down into the parlor where a little group are waiting to hear the brief service of the black-robed minister. Then they gather around in the gloomy, darkened room, glance shudderingly at the beautiful white face, and turn away, while the stolid undertaker screws down the coffin-lid over the desperate young suicide. After that the solemn, black-plumed hearse is waiting to bear her away to her rest, by her mother's side. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust." "*Resquiescat in pace.*"

Leslie Noble goes home that night. In his character of a widower, he must wait a little space before he renews his suit to the impatient Ivy.

"You will come back to me soon, Leslie dear?" she sighs, sentimentally, as she clings to his arm.

"As soon as decorum permits me," he replies. "Will you wait for me patiently, Ivy?"

"Yes, only do not stay too long," she answers, and he presses a light kiss on her powdered forehead, which Ivy takes in good faith as the solemn seal of their betrothal.

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"Oh, dear, it is very lonely," Ivy sighs, that evening, as she and her mother sit alone in the luxurious parlor, where so late the presence of death cast its pall of gloom. "I miss Leslie very much. Shall we be obliged to seclude ourselves from all gaiety, mamma, just because those two people—the plague of our lives—are dead?"

"I am afraid so—for awhile, at least, dear. People would think it strange, you know, my dear Ivy, if we did not make some outward show of grief," Mrs. Cleveland answers, thoughtfully, for she has [Pg 18] been turning the matter over in her own mind, and, like her daughter, she cannot endure the thought of foregoing the daily round of fashionable pleasures that are "meat and drink to her."

"How horrid!" complains Ivy. "I should die of the dismals! Listen, mamma, I have a plan."

"Really?" Mrs. Cleveland asks, with faint sarcasm, for her daughter is not at all clever.

"Yes, although you think I am so stupid," Ivy answers, vivaciously. "It is this, mamma. Let us leave Washington and go south this winter to one of the gayest, most fashionable cities, and have a real good time where nobody can expect us to be snivelling several long months over two deaths that give us unqualified pleasure."

"Vera and her mother were very useful to us, after all," Mrs. Cleveland answers, with a sigh to the memory of her purse. "They saved me a good deal of money in dressmaking bills and the like. They more than paid for their keeping."

"What a stingy, craving soul you have, mother," Ivy exclaims, impatiently. "But what do you think of my plan?"

"It is capital and quite original. I did not give you credit for so much invention," Mrs. Cleveland answers, smiling at her daughter.

"Shall we go, then?" Ivy inquires.

"Yes, if——" Mrs. Cleveland is beginning to say, when she is interrupted by the swift unclosing of the door, and a man comes into the room, pausing abruptly in the center of the apartment, and fixing his burning black eyes on the face of Mrs. Cleveland.

He is tall, dark, princely handsome, with a face full of fire and passion, blent with "cureless melancholy." His dark hair, thickly streaked with gray, is tossed carelessly back from his broad, white brow, and an air of nobility is indelibly stamped on every straight, aristocratic feature. Mrs. Cleveland springs to her feet with a cry of surprise and terror:

"Lawrence Campbell!"

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## CHAPTER VII.

After that one shriek of surprise and almost terror, Mrs. Cleveland remains silent, devouring the man's face with a gaze as fixed and burning as his own. Ivy, in her corner, is forgotten by her mother, and unnoticed by the stranger.

"Yes, Lawrence Campbell," he answers her in a deep, hoarse voice, that thrills to the hearts of the listeners. "Are you glad to see me, Mrs. Cleveland?"

"Glad!" she shudders, in an indescribable voice.

"After these long years," he pursues, speaking under the spur of some deep, overmastering agitation, "I have come back to curse you, traitorous, false-hearted woman, and to make atonement."

"Atonement!" she falters, with a start of fear.

"Yes, Marcia Cleveland, atonement," he bursts out passionately. "Tell me, where is the dear, true [Pg 19] angel-wife whom I was led to believe false and unfaithful to me, through your heartless machinations. At last I know the truth, at last I know you, devil that you are! You maligned the truest, purest, gentlest woman that ever lived! Your own sister, too—the beautiful, innocent child that was left to your charge by her dying parents. God only knows what motive you had for your terrible sin."

She glares at him with fiery eyes from which the momentary fear has fled, leaving them filled with the mocking light of a wicked triumph.

"*You* should have known my motive, Lawrence Campbell," she bursts out, passionately. "When I first met you in society, the plain, untitled English gentleman, I was a young, beautiful, wealthy widow, and by your attentions and visits you led me to believe that you loved me.

"Then Edith came home from her boarding-school, and with her baby-face and silly school-girl shyness won you from me. You married her, and the very torments of the lost were mine, for I loved with a passion of which she, poor, weak-natured creature, could never dream. Did you think I could tamely bear the slight that was put upon me? No, no, I swore revenge—a deep and deadly revenge, and I have had it; ha, ha! a costly cup, full to the brim and running over!"

She pauses with a wild and maniacal laugh. The man stares at her with starting eyes and a death-white face. The enormity of the wrong that has been done him seems to strike him dumb.

"I have had a glorious revenge," she goes on, wildly, seeing that he cannot speak; "you fell an easy prey to my plan of vengeance through your foolish and ridiculous jealousy. Through the efficient help of a poor, weak fool who loved me I made you believe Edith false and vile, and taunted you into deserting her! Have you suffered? Ah, God, so did I! I was on fire with jealousy and hate. Every pang I made you and Edith suffer was like balm to my heart. I parted you, I came between your wedded hearts, and made your life and hers a hell! Aye, and your child's, too—ha, ha, I made her weep for the hour in which she was born!"

She tosses her white arms wildly in the air, and laughs low and wickedly with the glare of malice and revenge in her flashing, black eyes. She is transformed from the handsome, clever woman of the world into a mocking devil. Even Ivy, who knows her mother's heartlessness as none other know, stares with distended eyes at the infuriated woman. She involuntarily recalls a verse she has somewhere read:

> "Earth has no spell like love to hatred turned,
> And hell no fury like a woman scorned."

"My child," the man breaks out, with a yearning heart-hunger in his melancholy eyes. "She lives then—my child, and Edith's! Oh, God, will she ever forgive me the wrong I have done her mother? Speak, woman—devil, rather—and tell me where to find my Edith and her little one!"

"Little one!" mocks Mrs. Cleveland, scornfully. "Do you forget, Lawrence Campbell, that seventeen years have come and gone since you deserted Edith and her unborn child?" [Pg 20]

"No, I am not likely to forget," he answers, with the bitterness of remorse in his low voice. "The child must be a woman now. But I will atone to Edith and her child for all I have made them suffer through your sin. I am rich, now, and I have fallen heir to a title in my native land. Edith will be a countess, our child a wealthy heiress. And I will make them happy yet. My heart is young, although my hair is gray. I love my wife yet, with all the fire of youth. Tell me where to find them, Marcia Cleveland, and for that one act of grace, I will forgive you all the black and sinful past."

He pauses, with his hollow, burning eyes fixed eerily upon her, waiting her reply. The autumn winds wail sharply round the house, the chilly rain taps at the window pane with ghostly fingers, as if to hint of those two graves lying side by side under the cold and starless sky of night.

"Tell me," she says, putting aside his questions scornfully. "How did you learn that I had deceived you?"

"From the dying lips of your tool—Egbert Harding. He was in London—dying of the excesses brought on by a fast and wicked life. At the last he repented of his sins, afraid to face the God whom his wicked life had outraged. He sent for me and confessed all—how he had lent himself to your diabolical plan to dupe and deceive me. He swore to me that my beautiful Edith was as innocent as an angel. I left him, poor, frightened, despairing wretch, at his last gasp, and came across the seas to seek for you and my wronged wife. Tell me, Marcia, for I can wait no longer; my heart is half-broken with grief and suspense. Where shall I find my wife and child?"

"*In their graves*!" she answers, with the hollow and exultant laugh of a fiend.

Lawrence Campbell reels backward as if some invisible hand had smitten him across the face. He throws up his thin, white, quivering hands in the air, as though in the agonies of death. But in a moment he rallies himself and looks at the tormenting fiend with lurid, blazing eyes.

"You lie!" he exclaims, hoarsely. "You are false to the core of your heart, Marcia. I will not believe you. God, who knows how much I have suffered, would not afflict me so cruelly. I ask you again—where are they?"

"And I tell you they are *dead*!" she answers, hoarsely. "If you will not believe me, go to Glenwood. You know our family burial-plot. There you will find two new-made graves. Ask the sexton whose they are, and he will tell you Mrs. Campbell's and her daughter Vera's. Your wife died three nights ago—died of a broken heart, while I, her sister who hated her, was dancing at a ball! Your daughter, Vera, died the night before last by her own hand—died the death of the suicide! Ha, ha!" she laughed, sneeringly, "have I not had a glorious revenge for my slighted love?"

"I will not believe you—I cannot. It is too terrible," Lawrence Campbell moans, with his hands pressed to his head, and a dazed look in his great, black eyes. [Pg 21]

"You may, for it is true," exclaims Ivy, coming forward into the light, with a wicked triumph in her pale-blue eyes. "If you will not believe my mother, go to the graveyard and see, as she bade you."

He lifts his eyes and stares at her a moment, a white, dizzy horror on his face. The next moment

he reels forward blindly, like some slaughtered thing, and falls in a white and senseless heap upon the floor.

"You have killed him, too, mamma," Ivy exclaims, exultantly.

The heartless woman, turning around, spurns the fallen body with her foot.

"A fit ending to the tragedy," she utters, cruelly. "Ring the bell for a servant, Ivy."

In a moment a white-aproned menial appears in the room. Mrs. Cleveland looks at him frowningly.

"John, who admitted this drunken fellow into the house?" she inquires, sharply.

"I did, madam. He said he was an old friend of yours," the man answers respectfully. "Is anything wrong about it, madam? He seems," bending over him, "to be dead."

"Dead drunk," the woman utters, scornfully. "Drag him out of the house, John, and throw him into the street."

The man stares in consternation.

"It's pouring down rain, ma'am," he exclaims, deprecatingly, "and pitchy dark. Hadn't I best call the police?"

"Do as I bid you," Mrs. Cleveland storms. "Throw him into the street, and leave him there. And mind how you admit such characters into the house again, or you may lose your place!"

She stands still with lowering brows, watching the man as he executes her orders, dragging the heavy, unconscious form from the room, and along the hall to the door.

When the lumbering sound has ceased, and the heavy clang of the outer door grates sharply on the silence, she draws a deep breath of relief.

"Now I know why you always hated Vera and her mother so much," Ivy exclaims. "Why did you never tell me, mamma?"

"It was no business of yours," Mrs. Cleveland answers, sharply.

"Oh, indeed, we are very lofty!" Ivy comments, impudently.

Mrs. Cleveland makes her no answer. She has sunk into the depths of a velvet-cushioned chair, and with lowered eyelids and protruding lips seems to be grimly brooding. Her form seems to have collapsed and grown smaller, her face is ashy white.

"You are a smarter and wickeder woman than I gave you credit for," Ivy resumes, curiously. "So, then, the tale you told Leslie Noble about Vera's dissipated father was altogether false."

"Yes," her mother mutters, mechanically.

But presently she starts up like one in a panic.

"Ivy, we must go away from here," she exclaims, in a strange and hurried voice. "I am afraid to stay."

"Afraid of what?" Ivy queries, impatiently. [Pg 22]

"Of Lawrence Campbell's vengeance," the woman answers, fearfully. "It is a fearful wrong I have done him, and he will strike me back. We must fly—fly from his wrath!"

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## CHAPTER VIII.

The unconscious man who has been so heartlessly thrust forth in the bleak, inclement night, lies still upon the wet and flinty pavement, his ghastly face upturned to the uncertain flicker of the street lamps, his eyes closed, his lips half parted as if he were, indeed, dead. No one is passing, no one notes that the form of an apparently dead man has been hustled out of the inhospitable gates of the stately Cleveland Mansion. None care to be abroad this wet and windy night. The chilly rain beats down into the still, white face, and at last revives him. He drags himself wearily up to his feet, and clinging to the iron spokes of the ornamental lawn fence, stares up at the dark, gloomy-looking building which now, with closed and darkened windows, appears dreary as a tomb. He shudders, and his eyes flash luridly in the darkness.

"May the curse of God light upon her," he murmurs, distractedly. "She robbed me of everything, and laid my life bare and desolate. My heart is a bare and empty ruin where the loathsome bats and shrieking night birds of remorse flap their ebon wings in the haunted darkness. Edith, Vera, my wronged, my murdered darlings—would God that you might have lived to forgive me for the madness that ruined your lives, and broke your tender hearts!"

No answer comes to his wild appeal from the wide and limitless spaces of the black night. Those two whom he adjures so despairingly, lie still "under the sod and the dew," deaf to his yearning calls, though he cry out ever so loudly to them, from his sore and tortured heart.

And at last, tormented with doubts, and longing to know the truth, for he cannot trust the oath of the false Marcia Cleveland, he flings himself into a passing car that goes toward the cemetery, fired with the wild resolve that he would never believe her wicked assertion until he can prove its truth—not until looking into the coffin, and calling on her loved name, he shall know that his wife

is surely dead, because she is dumb to the wild and yearning cry of his heart.

A wild resolve—worthy of a madman. But Lawrence Campbell is scarcely sane to-night. Remorse and despair have driven him wild.

Gold—potent gold—what will it not buy? It opens the gates of the cemetery to the wronged, half-maddened husband and father, it throws off the heavy clods that lie between him and the face he yearns for. Quick and fast fall the rapid strokes of the spade, the dull thud of the fresh earth thrown out on the soft grass is continuous.

At last the sexton, pausing to take breath and wipe the beaded dews from his hot brow, utters a smothered cry of dismay:

"What was I thinking of to blunder so? I have made a great mistake, sir. This is the daughter's grave, not the mother's." [Pg 23]

"No matter—go on with your work. Let me see the face of the child that I never beheld in life," Lawrence Campbell answers, resolutely.

Seeing how useless would be remonstrance the sexton bends to his task again. In a few minutes the earth is all out, but it requires the united strength of both men to raise the casket and lay it upon the upper ground.

"Now the lid—have it off quickly," groans the wretched man; "and the lantern. Bring it near that I may look on my dead."

Eagerly he kneels on the ground and scans the beautiful white features of the dead. A groan burst from his lips:

"It is *she*, my wife, my lost Edith, still young and beautiful as when I wooed her to be my own! Ah, even time and death could not efface that surpassing loveliness!"

But the sexton answers, compassionately:

"Ah, sir, it is not your wife, but your daughter. Your wife had grown older and sadder. Her bonny locks were mixed with gray; I used to see her here on many a Sabbath when she came to weep by her parents' graves. This, sir, is your daughter, with her mother's face."

"My daughter, with her mother's face!" he cries, and stoops to press a long-lingering kiss on the white brow beneath the careless rings of sunny hair. He starts back with a loud cry: "My God!"

The sexton trembles with apprehension.

"My dear sir, let me beg you to be more prudent," he whispers. "What if we should be discovered?"

But Lawrence Campbell's face is transfigured with a trembling hope and joy.

"I believe that I am sane," he exclaims, "I do not believe that I am dreaming. Yet when I kissed Vera's brow it felt warm and moist like the flesh of the living. Tell me, am I right?"

The sexton wipes his grimy hand to press it on the fair, girlish brow. He bends his ear to the delicate lips that still retain the warm, natural coloring of life. A smothered cry breaks from him.

"You are right, Mr. Campbell. Her flesh is warm and moist, her color is life-like and natural, and she breathes faintly. Oh, wonderful—most wonderful! She seems to be in a deep trance-like sleep. How terrible—how terrible to think of! Your daughter has been buried alive."

"She lives!" the father echoes, in wild thankfulness.

"She lives and we must carry her to my cottage as soon as possible. She must not awaken in this dreadful place. It would frighten her into real death," answers the sexton.

They lift the slight form out of its grim receptacle and bear her to the sexton's secluded cot where he lives alone, his wife having died a few months previous. They lay her down on his clean bed in the warm, cozy room; and still her strange, deep slumber is unbroken.

"I will watch beside her," says Mr. Campbell. "You must go back, restore the empty coffin to the grave, and throw in the earth again." [Pg 24]

"You do not wish that this discovery shall ever be known, then?" the sexton asks, gravely.

"No—at least not now," Mr. Campbell answers, after a pause of silent thought.

A moment later he adds, wistfully:

"My wife's grave—you will open that too? Who knows but that she, too, may be only sleeping?"

"It is scarce probable, sir, but I will do it to satisfy you," the sexton answers, moving away.

The dawn of a new day is breaking when he returns, having just finished his weary task. Lawrence Campbell starts up from his weary vigil by his daughter's silent form.

"You promised to come for me, and I waited and waited!" he cries, reproachfully. "You did not do as I bade you."

The old sexton's face is ashen gray as if with the memory of some recent horror.

"Oh, sir, I swear to you, I kept my word," he cries, "but—but—oh, Mr. Campbell, I spared you in mercy that dreadful sight! You would not have known her, you could not have borne to see how death had effaced her beauty. You must remember her as she was—not as she is."

Lawrence Campbell's despairing moan is echoed by a low and fainter one.

Vera's dark eyes open slowly, her lips part in faint, shivering sighs.

"Quick—the wine!" exclaims the sexton. "Pour a few drops between her lips."

Lawrence Campbell obeys gladly, and Vera's lips part thirstily to receive the potent medicine. She lifts her white hand to her brow as if to clear away the shadows that cloud her brain.

"I have been asleep, and my dreams were strange and wild," she murmurs. "I thought I had found my father. You, sir, look at me lovingly and kindly. Can it be——"

"That I am your father—yes, my precious Vera," he answers, pressing a father's holy kiss on the sweet, wistful lips.

Her dark, dreamy eyes look searchingly up into the handsome, noble face.

"Ah, I am so glad," she murmurs, "and you are good and true and noble. I cannot understand why you went away from mamma, but I can tell by your face that you are not the bad and wicked wretch that woman pretended."

"Mrs. Cleveland?" he asks, a spasm of rage and hatred distorting his pallid features.

"Perhaps it will be best not to excite the young lady by talking to her just at first," the sexton interposes, anxiously and respectfully. "She must be very weak, having taken no nourishment for so long. I will go out and prepare a little warm broth for her."

"You must lie still and rest, darling," Lawrence Campbell whispers, pouring a little more of the stimulant between her pale lips—paler now from exhaustion than they were when she lay [Pg 25] sleeping in the coffin, and with a faint sigh of assent she closes her eyes and lies silent, while the sexton goes out on his kindly meant errand.

The moments pass, Lawrence Campbell sits still with his head bowed moodily on his hand, his thoughts strangely blended, joy for his daughter's recovery, despairing grief for his wife's loss, and unutterable hate for Marcia Cleveland all mixed inextricably together. All that he has lost by that woman's perjury rushes bitterly over him. In the stillness, broken only by the crackle of the fresh coals upon the fire, and the monotonous ticking of the clock upon the mantel, he broods over his wrongs until they assume gigantic proportions.

And Vera—so strangely rescued from the coffin and the grave—she is very silent also, but none the less is her brain active and her mind busy. One by one she is gathering up the links of memory.

Her strange marriage, her mother's death, her terrible defeat in the triumph she had anticipated over the Clevelands—all come freshly over her memory, with that crowning hour in which wounded to the heart and filled with a deadly despair, she had crept away to die because she could not endure the humiliation and shame of the knowledge she had gained.

"I remember it all now; I could not decide upon the right vial, and by chance I took the wrong one. It was the sleeping potion. How long have I been asleep, and how came I here?"

Unclosing her languid eyes, she repeats the question aloud:

"Father, how came I here?"

He starts, nervously, at the unexpected question.

"My dear, you must not ask questions," he answers. "At least—not yet."

"But just this one, father. It keeps ringing itself in my head. I am filled with wonder. I drank a vial of what I imagined contained death, and lay down on my bed to die. But I only slept, and my dreams were wild. Then I awoke in this strange room, and saw you looking at me so kindly, and I knew you in my heart for my father. My wonder is so great that I cannot rest. Suspense is worse than knowledge. Only tell me how I came to be here?"

He looks at the beautiful, eloquent lips and pleading eyes, looking so dark with the purple shadows around them, and the pale, pale face.

"I must not tell her the truth," he said to himself. "She looks too slight and frail to bear the shock of hearing it. She need not ever know that she had been buried alive, and rescued out of the blackness of the grave. The horror of it would be enough to unhinge her reason."

"The last that I remember," she continues, "I was lying on my bed at Mrs. Cleveland's, waiting for death to come. I awoke here in this strange place. How did it happen?"

"I had you conveyed here in your sleep," he answers. "My dear, I see that you have all of woman's proverbial curiosity. But there is no mystery here. The simple truth is, that I went to Mrs. Cleveland's to seek my wife and child. I found that your mother was dead, and you were locked in [Pg 26] a strange, narcotic sleep, almost as deep as death. I had you conveyed here, and watched over you until you awakened from your long slumber. That is all, my dear little daughter. Now, can you rest satisfied?"

The dark eyes seek his, still wistfully, and with dawning tenderness.

"Father, you do not know how I love the sound of your voice," she murmurs. "It does not excite nor weary me. It is full of soothing, calming power. It falls on my thirsty, yearning heart like the dew upon flowers. I wish that you would talk to me. Nothing you can say would weary me so much as my own tumultuous thoughts."

He sighs, and smooths back the soft waves of gold that stray over the blue-veined temples.

"What shall I talk of, little one?" he inquires.

"Tell me where you have been all these long years, father, and why you never came for mamma and I when you were so unhappy?" she sighs.

Tears that do not shame his manhood crowd into his dark, sad eyes.

"Vera, you will hate me when I tell you that it was a mad, unreasoning jealousy, aroused and fostered by Marcia Cleveland, that led me to desert my innocent wife, and you, my little child, before you were born," he answers, heavily.

Vera's dark eyes flash with ominous light. She lies silent a moment, brooding over her mother's terrible wrongs.

"I have been a lonely wanderer from land to land ever since," he goes on, slowly. "God only knows what I suffered, Vera, for I could never tear the image of my wife from my breast, although I believed her false and vile. But I was too proud to go back to her. I never knew how she was breaking her heart in silent sorrow for me, her life made doubly wretched by the abuses of the false sister who hated her because I loved her. At last I was recalled from my wanderings. I had fallen heir to a title I had never dreamed of inheriting, and which only filled me with bitterness. I reflected that, but for Edith's falsity, she might have been my countess; as fair a lady as ever reigned in my ancestral halls."

"Poor mamma, leading her slavish life in Mrs. Cleveland's house," the girl murmurs, in vain regret.

"Poor martyr to the sins of others," the man echoes, heavily.

"Yet you came back at last," Vera murmurs. "Had you repented of your hasty desertion?"

"I had learned the truth, Vera, through the dying confession of Mrs. Cleveland's weak tool. I had learned how terribly I had been deceived, and that I had deserted my angel wife for naught. Vera, did she curse my memory when she lay dying of a broken heart?"

"She never named you either in praise or blame, father. I had some vague impression that you were dead. I knew no better until I overheard Mrs. Cleveland telling some one that you had deserted my mother before I was born, and that you were a low, drunken, brutal wretch, who had abused and maltreated her from the first." [Pg 27]

"Oh, my God, my God! that such demons should walk the earth!" the man groans through his clenched teeth.

He rises and walks up and down the floor, struggling with his strong, overmastering agitation.

"Vera, we three—you and I, and our lost loved one—have been wronged as, it seems to me, never mortals were before. My heart is on fire with rage and hate for the devil who has so blasted our lives. It seems to me that I can never rest until I strike back. Vera, shall we not avenge ourselves?"

His dark, passionate eyes fill with the fire that rages in his soul. Vera looks up at him, half-fearfully.

"How, father?" she queries, slowly.

The heavy gloom deepens in his night-black eyes.

"How—I cannot tell!" he says, hoarsely. "But I will bide my time. I will wait and watch. Edith's wrongs shall not go unavenged."

The beautiful young face on the pillow softens and saddens.

"Mother was very gentle and forgiving," she murmurs. "*She* would have said, leave it to Heaven."

"She was an angel—I am but human," he answers. "Vera, we must work together for vengeance. The time will come when we will make Marcia Cleveland bite the dust—when she shall curse the stars that shone over her ill-fated birth."

So the wronged man raves, and Vera's passionate heart is kindled into flames by his burning eloquence. She is with him heart and soul, loyal to the core of her woman's heart.

Strange, that when she tells him the story of her short, sad life she should hold one secret back. The words die on her white lips when she tries to tell him. A passionate shame fills her heart. Oh, the bitter pain, the deep humiliation of the thought that she is Leslie Noble's wife. Leslie Noble whom she scorns and despises. Have they told her father the truth? she wonders.

No, for presently he says, tenderly:

"Do not think that all my thoughts are given up to vengeance, Vera. I shall care for you very tenderly, darling. And if you should ever marry, I pray God that your wedded happiness may not be blighted by such a terrible wrong as mine."

Her heart gives a great throb of relief. He does not know. He never shall know by her telling, she resolves.

The day comes soon when they kneel hand in hand by Edith's grave to bid her good-bye before departing for England's shore.

"Edith, my darling," he whispers to the dead heart below, "the human vampire has escaped me this time. She has fled from my vengeance, and left no trace behind her. But let her beware, for I but bide my time. The bloodhounds of hate are howling behind her, and sooner or later she will

be brought to bay. Farewell, my murdered darling. Remember that I only live to avenge your wrongs, and to protect your child!"

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## CHAPTER IX.

[Pg 28]

No one had created such a sensation in London for several years as did Lady Vera, the Earl of Fairvale's only child, when she was presented at court. She was just nineteen, and a perfect beauty. She was more American than English in style—tall and slenderly formed, with a stately grace all her own, with large, dark eyes, and black brows and lashes, with hair of a magnificent, dark-golden shade, and well-formed, aristocratic features. Then, as the crowning charm to her brilliant loveliness, she had inherited from her English ancestry a dazzling complexion of lilies and roses.

People who studied and admired Lady Vera most, said that they could not quite understand the expression of her face. It was too intense for one so young. It was full of passion, tempered by the gravest thought.

The young English girls had dimples and smiles for everyone, but Lady Vera was different. She had the sweetest, most radiant smile in the world when you saw it, but that was so very seldom. She seemed to be thinking all the time—thinking deeply, even when she danced or sang, or conversed. And her favorite flowers were the beautiful, velvety pansies, whose very emblem is thought.

Yet when you looked into the Earl of Fairvale's face, you ceased to wonder at his daughter. The shadow on her face was reflected from the cloud on his. His dark, handsome face was a study. Where Lady Vera seemed to be thinking, his expression was that of one brooding—brooding all the while on one subject, and that not a pleasant one.

It was with some difficulty that he met the requirements of society. When spoken to suddenly sometimes, he would start and look bewildered as if his thoughts were far away. Ladies admired him immensely, although he was very inattentive to them. The dark, sad, melancholy face had a peculiar charm for them. They said he reminded them of Byron's heroes.

The earl was very fond of his daughter, and very careful of her. His eyes followed her everywhere, but their expression was always sad and melancholy. No one knew that every time he looked at her, he remembered how he had wronged her mother, and that his heart was breaking with remorse and grief, as well as with the consuming fires of a baffled revenge.

His story was not generally known. He had succeeded to the Earldom of Fairvale through a series of unexpected deaths, and though everyone knew of handsome Lawrence Campbell's accessions, little was known of him personally beyond the rumor that he had married an American lady, who had died and left him one only child, his beautiful and worshiped Vera.

Lady Vera had many admirers. Aside from her personal charms, the fact that she would succeed to the title and estates of Fairvale, cast a flattering prestige around her.

She was the same to all who came to woo—cool, courteous, gently indifferent. After awhile they began to say that the earl's daughter was very proud. Ordinary people were not to her fancy, [Pg 29] evidently. She must be waiting for a duke or a prince. Poor Lady Vera! Who was to know the bitter secret, the ceaseless dread that ached in the fair breast, that rose and fell beneath the knots of velvety pansies that were her simple and favorite adornment?

Vera has seen and learned a great deal since that night when her father's mad frenzy had been the means of saving her from the horrors of a dreadful death.

She has traveled, she has had masters and governesses; luxuries of which she never even faintly dreamed, have surrounded her and become daily necessities. Pleasure has wooed her softly to its flowery paths, love has been lavishly laid at her feet. But through it all a loathing remembrance of Leslie Noble has poisoned her peace.

"Where is he? Does he know where I am? Will he ever come to claim me?" she often asks herself, never dreaming that he of whose coming she is so terribly afraid believes her dead, and that he has erected a costly marble monument over the spot where her remains are supposed to rest.

Her father's mistaken kindness has kept from her the knowledge of her deadly peril and her opportune rescue, little dreaming in what an untoward hour the startling truth shall come to her.

And she, in her sensitive pride, has held her peace over that ill-fated marriage by the bedside of her dying mother—the poor, heart-broken mother who had erred so fatally, when, with weak, human foresight she had tried to plan for the future well-being of her helpless child.

"Oh, mamma, dearest," she moans, when alone in her silken *boudoir*, she recalls the wretched past, "how terribly blind and mistaken you were. Oh, to be free from these fetters that chafe and fret and gall so terribly!"

"Shall you never marry, Vera?" her father asks her one day.

It is the day after she has refused Lord Greyhurst, one of the finest and wealthiest young noblemen in London.

The deep color flows into the girl's fair cheeks.

"I think not, father," she answers, gravely. "I have no wish to marry. I have never met anyone that I could love."

Earl Fairvale is well pleased.

"I am glad to hear you say that, my dear," he answers. "I have no wish to lose my daughter. And, after all, so much sorrow comes from love, one is best without it."

Lady Vera is very glad to hear him talk so. He will never urge her to marry, and she may keep her secret always—always, *unless*—dreaded possibility—Leslie Noble should return to claim her.

"But he will not. Why should he? He never cared for me. Yet how strange that he should have let my father take me away without one word. He must indeed have been glad to be rid of me," she muses.

The earl and his daughter are staying with Lady Clive for the "season." She is an American, and the daughter of a famous American general. She is very happily married to Sir Harry Clive, baronet. Loving everything American with intensest love, she falls an instant victim to Lady Vera's charms. [Pg 30]

"Your mother was an American—so am I," she says, vivaciously; "so I claim you on that score. Do you like England, Lady Vera, and English people?"

"Yes," Vera answers, in her grave way.

"And," Lady Clive goes on, in her bright, airy fashion, "do you intend to marry an Englishman or an American?"

"I shall never marry at all," Lady Vera says, with a face of extreme disgust.

"Never! Ah, my dear, you are too young to decide such a momentous question. Only wait and see," cries Lady Clive, who has a match laid out in her mind for Vera, but who is far too wise to give her a hint of it.

"I shall never marry," Vera repeats, calmly. "I do not even like to think of such things as love and marriage. Dear Lady Clive, let us talk of something more interesting. You promised to take me into the nursery, and show me your little children—did you not?"

"Yes, and we will go now," her friend answers, leading the way; but to herself she says, wonderingly: "What a strange girl. At her age I did not think a set of noisy children more interesting than love and marriage."

The grave young face grows brighter than Lady Clive has ever seen it as Vera watches the beautiful little children at their playful sports. She even smiles when they caress her, and gives them the flowers from her bosom in payment for kisses.

"She loves children dearly," Lady Clive says to herself, well pleased. "How strange that she should be so set against marriage. She is an odd girl, but I think I shall live to see her change her mind."

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## CHAPTER X.

Lady Vera having gained the *entree* to the nursery, pays it daily visits, always finding herself vociferously welcomed by the three small dwellers therein.

And one day she finds the youthful trio in a hubbub of excitement.

"Our uncle from America is coming over to visit us," they triumphantly announce to their friend.

"You seem to be glad," Lady Vera answers, kindly.

"Oh, we are," they laugh. "Aren't you glad, too, Vera?"

"I do not know. I do not like Americans much," says Lady Vera, with a distinct remembrance of the Clevelands and Leslie Noble.

"Oh, but you will be sure to like Uncle Phil. He is awfully jolly, and he is a soldier, too. He has a sword and a gun and has promised to teach me to shoot. I am going to be a soldier, too," cries out Mark, the second son.

"And when is this terrible soldier coming?" Lady Vera inquires, with languid interest.

"We do not know exactly, but very soon," they tell her. "He came about this time last year. Mamma had a letter from him this morning." [Pg 31]

"You have not told me his name yet," Lady Vera continues.

"He is Captain Philip Lockhart, and his father, our own grandpapa, is General Lockhart," answers Hal, the heir, while little Dot claps her small hands gleefully, crying out:

"Uncle Phil will bring us lots of bu'ful playt'ings from New York. He always does."

But though "Uncle Phil" remains the favorite topic of the nursery for several days, Lady Clive quite forgets to tell her guest that she expects her brother.

Lady Vera scarcely gives it a thought. In the expected arrival of Captain Lockhart she takes not the slightest interest.

So it happened that when Vera runs into the nursery one evening—having promised the children a peep at her ball dress—she comes upon an unexpected tableau. A man on his knees, hammering at the lid of a big box, three hopefuls gathered around him, and chattering like magpies; the prim, white-aproned nurse vainly endeavoring to command silence.

Before Vera can beat her instantly-attempted retreat, the little "Philistines are upon her."

"Here she is," they cry. "This is Vera, of whom we have been telling you. Isn't she pretty, Uncle Phil?"

"But she doesn't like Americans," adds one *enfant terrible*.

"I am sorry for that," says Captain Lockhart, rising hastily, and giving Lady Vera a soldier's stately bow. "Cannot you persuade her that I am of some other nationality, my dears?"

The ease and lightness of his words and manner carry off some of the embarrassment of the meeting. Lady Vera gives him a bow, and a slight little smile, sweet and transient.

"I am sorry to have interrupted you," she says. "I am going now, directly."

But her swift, upward glance has given her a glimpse of a tall, soldierly form, and a handsome-featured face, with dark-blue eyes, and dark-brown mustache, while short, curling locks of deepest brown cluster about a finely-shaped head—"every inch a soldier."

Our hero, on his part, sees a vision of dazzling beauty—dark eyes, golden tresses, scarlet lips, a slim yet daintily-rounded figure in costly lace, with knots of purple, golden-hearted pansies. Around the slender, stately column of the white throat a necklace of pansies formed of dark, purple amethysts with diamond centers radiating fire—a birthday gift from her father.

"Pray do not go," Captain Lockhart says, persuasively, with the winning tongue of a soldier. "The children have been eagerly expecting you. Do not damp their pleasure. Rather let me withdraw."

"No, no," Lady Vera says, hastily, as he crosses to the door, her haughtiness melting for the moment under his chivalrous manner. "We will both stay—that is, I can only give the children a moment. I am going to a ball."

"So am I, directly, with my sister and Sir Harry. It is very strange Nella did not tell me she had a young lady guest. I am," smiling under the brown mustache, "puzzled over your name." [Pg 32]

"It is Vera Campbell," she answers, with a slight flush.

"*Lady* Vera," pipes the prim nurse from her corner, obsequiously.

"Lady Vera," he says, with a bow and smile; then: "Thank you for the favor. Mine is Philip Lockhart."

"Captain Phil," shouts Mark, anxious that his uncle shall abate no jot of his soldierly dignity.

"He has brought us a great big box," Dot confides to Lady Vera, triumphantly at this moment.

"Which I will leave him to open. My maid has not finished me yet," fibs Vera, and so makes her escape, leaving Captain Phil to the tender mercies of his small relatives, who give him no peace until the heavy box is unpacked, and its contents paraded before their dazzled and rejoicing sight.

Meanwhile Vera secures her opera-cloak, and goes down to the drawing-room, where the earl and Sir Harry are waiting for the ladies.

"Nella will be here in a moment," explains Sir Harry. "She has gone to hurry up her brother, over whom the children are having no end of a jollification. Oh, I forgot, you may not know whom I am talking about. Lady Clive's brother arrived this evening, and will accompany us to Lady Ford's ball."

Vera bows silently, and presently Lady Clive sails in, proudly, with the truant in tow. Evening dress is marvelously becoming to the handsome soldier. Involuntarily Vera thinks of Sir Launcelot:

> "The goodliest man that ever among ladies sat in hall,
> And noblest."

"Lady Vera, this is my brother, Captain Lockhart," Lady Clive begins, with conscious pride; then pauses, disconcerted by the "still, soft smile" creeping over either face.

"We have met before," Lady Vera explains, with, for her, unusual graciousness. "Met before! Not in America?" cried Lady Clive, bewildered.

"Oh, no," her brother answers, and Lady Vera adds, smiling: "In the nursery, ten minutes ago."

So there is only the earl to introduce, and then they are whirled away to Lady Ford's, where Captain Lockhart meets a score of last season's friends, and to the surprise of Lady Vera, who is prejudiced against almost anything American, he develops some of the graces of a society man, even playing and singing superbly in a full, rich tenor voice.

"Yet, why should he have selected that old, *old* song: 'The Banks of Allan Water?'" Lady Vera asks herself, scornfully, "and when he sang:

> "'For his bride a soldier sought her,'

why should he have looked so straight at *me*? It was not an impertinent look, I own, but why

should he have looked at me at all?"

But even to her own heart, Lady Vera will not own that her great vexation is directed against herself because she has blushed vividly crimson under that one look from Captain Lockhart's blue eyes, while her heart has beat so strangely—with annoyance, she thinks. [Pg 33]

"I foresee that I shall hate this American soldier," she muses, "and no wonder at all when I shall be forced to see him every day. I wish now that we had not accepted Lady Clive's invitation for the London season."

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## CHAPTER XI.

The day after Lady Ford's ball dawns cheerlessly. It is cool, and the air is full of floating mists. The gentlemen determine to go out anyhow. The ladies elect to remain at home. The glowing fire in the library has more charms than the bleak, spring air.

"I am not surprised at Nella," says Captain Lockhart, leisurely buttoning his overcoat. "*She* was raised in America, and our ladies do not walk much. But I have been told that English ladies walk every morning, whether rain or shine. Are you false to the tradition, Lady Vera?"

The color flies into her cheek at his quizzical glance, but she will not tell him what she sees he does not know—that she has been raised in America, too.

"I suppose so," she says, a little shortly, in answer to his question.

"Suppose you come with us for a turn around the square, my dear?" suggests the earl.

"So I will," answers Lady Vera, determined to have Captain Lockhart see that she is quite English in her habits.

She comes down in a moment covered almost to the pink tips of her ears in rich velvet. To her dismay Earl Fairvale strolls forward in a fit of absent-mindedness with Sir Harry, leaving her to be accompanied by the American soldier. She sees no other course but to accept the situation.

"It is only for a few minutes at the worst," she thinks to herself.

So she walks on by his side, looking so pretty with the nipping wind kissing her cheeks into a scarlet glow, that Captain Lockhart can scarcely keep the admiration out of his eyes.

"The loveliest girl I have ever seen in my life," he mentally decides. "But, by Jove! as cold and proud as an iceberg!"

"So you do not like Americans?" he says to her, regretfully, as they turn a corner.

"No," curtly.

"Ah, but, Lady Vera, is that fair?" plaintively. "You do not know us, yet you condemn us without a hearing. Mere English prejudice—is it not?"

She looks around at the handsome face, full of fire and life, and the sparkling blue eyes. The thoughtful gravity on the lovely face grows deeper. The dark eyes flash.

"Captain Lockhart, you are talking of what you do not understand," she says, impatiently.

"I beg your pardon, Lady Vera," he answers, flushing, "I spoke from the merest impulse. I thought —since you are so very young—you could not know my country well." [Pg 34]

Lady Vera blushes, but holds her peace. Of course, somebody will tell him her story soon—tell him that her mother was American, and that she herself had spent seventeen years in his own native land. At least he shall not hear it from her. She has a vague notion that it would please him to know it, that the blue eyes whose sparkle she has already learned to know, would light with pleasure at the knowledge.

Those eyes, how bright and keen they are. They seem to read one's thoughts. Lady Vera finds her gaze drooping from them as they never drooped before mortal man's before. Why? she asks herself.

"It is because he is so bold," she decides, vexedly. "He seems to be trying to read one's inmost thoughts. I will show him that I am not afraid of him."

Thereupon she lifts the dark eyes bravely to give him a cool society stare, but in an instant they waver and fall before the glance they have surprised in his. Just so the blue eyes had turned on her last night, when he sang:

"On the banks of Allan Water,
When the sweet spring tide did fall,
Was the miller's lovely daughter,
Fairest of them all!
For his bride a soldier sought her,
And a winning tongue had he,
On the banks of Allan Water
None so gay as she."

"Why do you stare at me *so*?" she breaks out, angry with herself, and with him.

He flushes, startled by her *brusquerie*.

"I beg your pardon—I did not mean to be rude," he answers, quietly. "But, Lady Vera, a man must be blind not to look at *you*."

"Why?" she asks, still sharply.

"Because I think God made all beautiful things for the pleasure of men's eyes," he answers, firmly, yet respectfully.

"Impertinent!" Vera says to herself, indignantly, and looks another way.

"Do you lay an embargo on my eye-sight as far as you are concerned, Lady Vera?" he continues, after a moment.

"Yes," she replies, with her head still turned away.

"Then I shall try to obey you," he answers, calmly. "I will not even see you when I can help it, but you must forgive me for saying that if I should never see you again I shall never forget a single line of your face."

"I hope he is not making love to me," Lady Vera says to herself, uneasily, then laughing at herself. "Of course not; I dare say he has a sweetheart in his own land, some dear, sweet, angelic creature, like Ivy Cleveland, perhaps."

They speak no more, and when they have gone once around the square, Captain Lockhart leaves the earl's daughter at the door with a low bow. She goes into the house, her cheeks tingling with [Pg 35] an odd kind of shame.

"I was rude, *perhaps*," she thinks, a little uneasily. "What must he think of English manners? But then why did he look at me so? I felt so—so strangely."

To Lady Clive, who is trifling over a bit of fancy work, she says, presently:

"Why did you not tell me you expected your brother?"

Lady Clive glances up under her long lashes at the flushed face, a gleam of mischief in the blue eyes so much like her brother's.

"It was just like me—to forget it," she exclaims. "But then I knew you would not be interested. And, besides, I knew he would not be in your way. Phil is only a plain, blunt soldier—not at all a ladies' man."

"I thought he seemed like *that* last night," Lady Vera answers, turning the leaves of a book very fast, and not knowing how ambiguous is her answer.

"Like *what*?" her friend inquires.

"A ladies' man," Vera answers.

"Did you? Oh, yes, when he is thrown among them he tries to make himself agreeable, but he does not fall in love, he does not run after them. When he was with us last season, Lady Eva Clarendon made a dead set at him. Phil was very civil at first—sang with her, danced with her, played the agreeable in his careless way, you know. But when he found she was losing her heart to him, he drew off, terrified—seemed to think she would marry him, willy-nilly—and went away to Italy, then back home."

"I should have thought it would have been a grand match for *him*," Lady Vera answers, with unconscious emphasis of the pronoun.

Lady Clive's head goes up, slightly.

"For *my* brother? Not at all, Lady Vera," she answers, with a slight touch of stiffness in her voice. "Philip met the Clarendons on equal ground. He is wealthy—that is the first and greatest thing with people, you know—our great-uncle left him a fortune. Next, he is well-born, and the general, our father, is famous over two continents. As for Lady Eva's title, that would not weigh a feather with my brother. He comes from a land, you know, where native worth and nobility take precedence over all."

And having thus blandly squelched Lady Vera's arrogance, the American lady bends smilingly to her lace work again. Lady Vera only smiles. She cannot feel offended.

"I deserved it all," she thinks, soberly to herself. "Oh! why do I suffer my hatred of the Clevelands and Leslie Noble to make me venomous and unjust to every American I meet? I have offended this kind friend of mine, and been rude to her brother all through my spite against those wicked people. I wish he would forgive those ridiculous words I said to him. Not look at me, indeed. How silly! He will think me wondrous vain."

But Captain Lockhart does not forget. When they meet at dinner again Vera glances at him shyly [Pg 36] several times across the silver and crystal and flowers, but the blue eyes are always on his plate, or on someone else's face—never on hers. What though she is lovely as a dream in pale-blue satin and gleaming pearls? Captain Lockhart is serenely unconscious of the color of her robe, or the half-repentance in her starry eyes.

"I cannot blame him," she admits to herself, "I acted like a silly child."

The days go by, Captain Lockhart and the earl's daughter are merely civil—they seldom seem to see each other. Each absorbed in the engagements of the gay season, each drifting further apart in the whirl, there is no time for pardon or reconciliation. Lady Vera finds no time for the nursery

now save when the soldier is out. Yet she is ever listening for one step, and the color flies into her cheek when she hears it.

Lady Clive is perplexed and sorry because her brother and her favorite do not take to each other.

"I thought they seemed made for each other," she complains, to Sir Harry. "And I thought I had managed them so cleverly. But they scarcely seem conscious of each other's existence."

"I hope you are not turning match-maker, Nella," Sir Harry Clive replies, laughing.

Earl Fairvale sees nothing. Day by day he grows more gloomy, more self-absorbed, and goes less into society. The only interest in his life outside of his adored daughter, centers in the occasional letters that reach him from America. But after each one he grows more sad and gloomy, losing flesh and color daily. Only Vera knows that the vengeance that is the object of his life is so long delayed that the strain on his mind is killing him. For though the most skilled detectives in the world are watching and working, they can find no trace of the secure hiding-place where Marcia Cleveland dwells untroubled by the vengeance from which she has fled.

Lady Vera's roses pale when she sees how her father is breaking down—how the mind is wearing out the body, even as the sword wears out the scabbard.

"Father, even if you found out her hiding-place, what could you do? What form could your revenge take?" she asks him, mournfully, as she has done many times before.

"I cannot tell—but some way would be opened. I should find some vulnerable point at which to strike," he answers, moodily.

She twines her fair, white arms about his neck, and presses her fresh young lips to his clouded brow.

"Father, this long brooding over your revenge, this hatred, nourished in your heart, is sapping your life," she sighs. "I beg you, for my sake, to give it up, dear father. Give it up, and leave it to Heaven!"

He looks at the beautiful, tearful eyes and the sweet face, pale now with its sorrow.

"Vera, you come to me with your mother's face, your mother's voice, and ask me not to avenge her ruined life, her broken heart, her mournful death," he answers, bitterly. "Child, you know not what you ask. What can you know of the pangs I have endured? Have you forgotten, too, the indignities heaped upon you in your young, defenseless life?" [Pg 37]

The dark eyes filled with smouldering wrath.

"No, father, never!" she cries; "but it is all past. Mother is safe in Heaven, you and I are together. Let us forget those wicked ones. Surely God will punish them for the ruin they have wrought."

"I will not listen to you, Vera," he says, putting her from him, resolutely. "I have sworn to break Marcia Cleveland's heart if it be not made of stone. If I fail—listen to me, darling—if I fail, I shall bequeath my revenge and my oath to you in dying."

She pales and shivers through all her slight young frame, as if some dim foreboding came to her of the nearing future—that future in whose black shadow her feet already tread, it comes so near.

"I shall bequeath it to you," Earl Fairvale repeats, gloomily; "you will lack no means to accomplish it if only you can find out the serpent's lair. You will be Countess of Fairvale. You will inherit great wealth, and an enormous rent-roll. With wealth you can do almost anything. If I fail you will take up the work where it dropped from my hand in dying—you, Vera, will avenge the dead."

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## CHAPTER XII.

One of Earl Fairvale's favorite amusements was riding on horseback. He had a passion for fast horses. He might often be seen mounted on some spirited and superb animal, riding in the "Row" by his daughter's side, who was herself a finished horsewoman.

Sometimes he drove a four-in-hand. Often he might be seen tearing along at a wild and break-neck pace on some fiery-looking horse that ordinary people would shudder to look at. But the earl did not know the name of fear. He seemed to take a reckless delight and gloomy satisfaction in those wild, John Gilpin-like races, at which others trembled with dread. He laughed at the fears of his daughter and her friends, and disregarded their entreaties.

Sir Harry Clive came home one day, his fine face clouded with anxiety.

"The earl has bought a new horse," he said. "It is a beautiful creature, black as night, glossy as satin, clean-limbed, superb, but with the most vicious eye conceivable, and a fiery temper. They call him King."

"I suppose there is no danger to the earl," said his wife. "He has a marvelous control over his horses. They seem to obey the least touch of his hand or sound of his voice."

"This animal he has now is not like to be tamed so easily," Sir Harry answers, gravely. "It is said that he threw his last master and killed him. Indeed, Nella, you could not imagine a more devilish-looking creature than this beautiful King. I told Fairvale that its true name ought to be the Black Devil, for I am sure he looks like one." [Pg 38]

Lady Clive shudders.

"Has the earl tried him yet?" she inquires.

"He started out upon him an hour ago," Sir Harry answers. "There were a score of us who tried to persuade him not to mount the fiery creature. But he laughed at our fears, and went off in gallant style. King tried to prevent him from mounting, but he succeeded in first-rate style. Yet I doubt," gloomily, "if he ever returns alive."

"What will Lady Vera say? She has been so anxious over him, so nervous of late," sighs Lady Clive.

"You need not tell her," he answers. "No need to alarm her needlessly. After all, our forebodings may be vain. Fairvale is the most fearless and accomplished rider I ever saw. He may even conquer King."

But even then the loud and startling peal of the door-bell rings like a wild alarm through the house.

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Sir Harry's fears have had only too good a foundation. They have picked up the earl from the hard and flinty pavement, where the maddened brute had flung him, and brought him home bleeding, senseless—mortally injured, all the surgeons agree.

And Lady Vera? The shock of the awful tidings had almost rent her heart in twain. Passing from one swoon into another, she lies on her couch, white and horror-stricken, shuddering sighs heaving her breast. At last they come to tell her that the awful stupor is over. He is conscious, and has asked for her.

"How long?" she asks, faintly, for they have told her that his hours are numbered.

"Calm yourself, for he cannot bear the least excitement."

But when Vera goes into his presence, and sees him lying so marble-white, with the black hair tossed back from the high, pale brow, and the eager, asking eyes fixed upon her anguished face, a great, choking knot rises into her throat—it seems as if she will choke with the violence of her repressed emotion.

"Father!" she wails, with a world of grief in that one word, and falls on her knees by his bed-side.

"I am going from you, dear," he answers, with the strange calmness of the dying. "The black river of death yawns at my feet. The pale and mystic boatman is waiting to row me over. Already the cold waves splash over me. Vera!"

"Father," she answers, placing her hand in the cold one feebly groping for it.

His hollow, dark eyes roll around the room.

"Are we alone?"

"Alone," she answers, for all the kindly watchers have withdrawn, leaving father and child to the sweet solace of this last moment together, undisturbed by alien eyes.

The dark eyes seek hers—sad, wistful, full of vain remorse.

"Vera, I was reckless, mad, defiant of fate. I have thrown my life away, my poor, blighted life. Can you forgive me, my poor, orphaned girl?" [Pg 39]

Only her stifled sobs answer him.

"I did not mean it, Vera. I was tormented by my burning thoughts, and I only sought diversion. I thought I could hold the fiery brute in check. But the devil threw me. No matter; I am to blame. I was too reckless. But you forgive me, darling?"

She kisses him because she cannot speak.

"I have lost my life," he murmurs, sadly; "lost it before my work on earth was done. My daughter, you recall what I said to you so short a while ago?"

She shivers, and lifts her dark, foreboding eyes to his face.

"Yes, father."

"Bring me the Bible from yonder stand, dear. You must swear a solemn oath."

The beautiful young face quivers with nameless dread and fear.

"Oh, father," she prays, with lifted hands and streaming eyes, "leave it to Heaven!"

The dark eyes, fast glazing over with the film of death, grow hard and stern.

"Vera, child of my martyred wife, will you be false to your father's dying trust? Will you refuse to obey his dying commands?"

"No, father, no," she weeps.

"Then place your hand on this Bible, my darling."

Silently she obeys him, the pale, chill light of the waning day glimmering in on her ghost-like, pallid face, and the dark eyes full of pain and despair.

And the voice of the dying man rises strangely on the utter stillness.

"Swear, Vera, swear by all your hopes of happiness, that you will punish Marcia Cleveland through her dearest affections, that at any cost to yourself you will avenge your mother's wrongs!"

A gasp; the words die on Lady Vera's parched tongue.

"Speak, my little countess. Repeat my words," he urges, anxiously.

With a terrible effort she murmurs them over:

"I swear, by all my hopes of happiness, that I will punish Marcia Cleveland through her dearest affections; that at any cost to myself I will avenge my mother's wrongs!"

She glances down at the loved face for his smile of approval. An icy hand seems to clutch her heart. Her father has died as the last words left her lips—died with a smile of triumph on his marble-white face!

One piercing cry of anguish, and the Countess of Fairvale falls lifeless across the still warm body of the dead.

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## CHAPTER XIII.

Long days of illness for Lady Fairvale follow upon the tragic episode of her father's death.

Nights and days go by like utter blanks to her, with only slightly recurring intervals of consciousness. It has been a great shock to her, this swift and terrible rending apart of the last filial tie earth holds for her. Near kindred she has none. Her father's death has seemed to leave her utterly alone on earth. It is true there is some distant cousin and heir-at-law who would, no doubt, take it as a favor if she would die and leave him title and estates, but him she knows not. [Pg 40]

"There is no one living who has the least claim upon my affection," she thinks, forlornly, to herself that day, when, with agonized heart she bends to press the last farewell kiss on her father's marble lips; but even with the words a sudden memory stabs her heart and crushes her senseless to the floor with the silent whisper of one name—Leslie Noble!

That feared and dreaded name has power to blanch poor Vera's cheek and drive the blood from her heart at any moment.

"What if, dazzled by my wealth and title, he should come and claim me?" is her dreadful thought, never dreaming of that stately monument in fair and flowery Glenwood, on which Leslie Noble has caused to be inscribed the simple name of:

"VERA,
WIFE OF LESLIE NOBLE.
Died, —— —th, 18—; aged 17."

thus trying to atone to the dead in some slight measure for the pitiful, unmanly cowardice that had driven her desperate.

But after that terrible brain fever, that great struggle between the opposing forces of life and death, Vera lies still upon her couch with wide, dark eyes that look out from her small, white face drearily upon the world—the great, wicked world in which, though she has so much wealth and power, she cannot claim so much as a single true friend.

"Unless Lady Clive be one," she muses, "and—and," but then she stops, and takes herself to task because she has so strangely thought of Captain Lockhart just then.

"Where can he be?" she wonders. "Perhaps he has taken himself off to livelier quarters. The house must have been as dull as a tomb while I lay so ill. I wonder if Lady Clive will ever forgive me for spoiling her 'season' like this."

She propounds this latter question gravely to Lady Clive herself, who responds with an encouraging smile, and the gay little answer:

"I will try."

But when she sees how pale and wistful is Countess Vera's lovely face, she folds her in her arms and kisses her.

"My dear, do not give a thought to *that*," she says. "There is nothing to forgive, believe me. I am very glad that you were with us when you fell sick. I have nursed you with all the love and tenderness I could have given a sister."

Why should Countess Vera's heart beat so fast at the thought of being Lady Clive's sister, and why should her pale cheeks flush, and the grateful words falter on her lips?

"We all love you," her friend goes on kindly. "The children have been dolorous over you. 'When will Vera come and see us again?' they ask every day. Have you looked at the pretty bouquets they sent in for you this morning?" [Pg 41]

Lady Vera smiles assent. Fresh flowers are brought to her room every morning, and they tell her the children send them. But there are only three children, and always four bouquets. Vera asks no questions but she knows that the fourth one is always the largest and sweetest. To-day it is of

crimson rose-buds, mixed with heliotrope and pansies, for there is always some blending of her favorite flower.

"You do not know how much we miss you from our home circle," the charming Lady Clive resumes, vivaciously. "You must not leave us when you get well, dear. Make your home with us until you get settled for life. You will be so lonely if you try to live alone with a chaperon. Won't you promise to stay?"

"I will think of it," Lady Vera answers, gratefully, while tears rise to her dark eyes.

Lady Clive comes to sit with her often, sending away the prim nurse, and installing herself in her place. She chats vivaciously, retailing bits of society gossip, telling of all the great people who have left cards of condolence for the young countess, of the lovers who are all *desoles* over her illness; of Sir Harry's regret and the children's clamorous despair. But, strange to say, she utterly forgets the existence of her brother, Captain Lockhart, or, perhaps, deems the subject uninteresting to her guest.

He has gone away, Lady Vera tells herself; yet she, in some vague way, feels that he has not. She hears a step in the hall outside her door sometimes—a manly step that is not Sir Harry Clive's, but which has a firm, remembered ring in it that has power to send the warm blood flying from her heart to her face.

When she is well enough to sit up in her white dressing-gown, lying back in a great, cushioned arm-chair, the children are admitted to see her. They spend a noisy five minutes with their friend, then the nurse bundles them out, closing the door on their clamorous tongues, but not so quickly but that Countess Vera catches Mark's disgusted dictum in the hall:

"Oh, Uncle Phil! Vera isn't a bit pretty any more. Her face is all white and thin, and her eyes are *so* big."

So he is here. Her subtle intuitions had been right.

Impulsively she turns to the prim old nurse.

"Open that door, and ask Captain Lockhart to come in here."

He comes, eager, smiling, filled with wonder, yet outwardly calm.

"You are very kind; you permit me to share the children's treat," he says. "May I——" then he pauses, confused.

"Look at me? yes, do," she says, crimsoning painfully. "I want you to tell me—is it true what Mark said—that I am not pretty any more?"

The blue eyes meet hers with the old, strange look that always made her heart beat against her will.

"Mark is a little dunce," he answers, smiling. "He has no eye for anything but roses. I assure you, Lady Vera, that you are as beautiful in your pallor and delicacy as you were in health. More [Pg 42] beautiful to me," he adds, his voice falling slightly lower "because now you are kind."

"Kind!"

She arches her dark brows slightly in surprise.

"Yes," he answers. "Did you not know how I have been longing for a sight of your face, Lady Vera? But I dared not ask, and now you allow me to see you of your own free will. You cannot guess how much I thank you."

His voice trembles with feeling. The countess, blushing in spite of herself, tries to make light of it all.

"I did not think of *les proprietes* when I called you in here," she stammers. "My vanity was so alarmed by Mark's terrible speech that I forgot everything. I think you must go now."

But he lingers.

"Won't you come down into the library?" persuasively. "We could all amuse you there. You could lie on the sofa with a warm shawl over you, and we would read aloud to you, or sing, or play—whatever pleased you most. It must be dull for you here with your sick fancies. Will you come?"

What an atmosphere of cheerfulness he has brought into the sick-room.

Lady Vera's heart that has lain numb and chill, and hopeless in her breast so long, seems to warm itself to life again in the sunlight of his smile.

"I will go, if Lady Clive thinks it prudent," she declares.

Lady Clive—that astute general—on being consulted, puts on the gravest face over her well-pleased mind, and declares that Lady Vera may venture to-morrow, perhaps, and so gives Captain Lockhart twenty-four hours of the pleasures of anticipation, which philosophers declare exceed those of reality.

With to-morrow begins a love-idyl, one of the sweetest ever enacted, perhaps, and the most innocent, for Lady Vera is unconscious of it all, nor dreams that love is near. Captain Lockhart is no bold nor intrusive lover. He does not weary Lady Vera with his company or attentions, oftener than not leaving her to the companionship of his sister. But when he enters the room it is always brighter for his coming; when he reads, the volume gains a new interest; when he sings, she lies with closed eyelids, and wonders why she had ever fancied she would dislike this pleasant,

agreeable gentleman, with his handsome face, his scholarly mind and chivalrous manner.

"It is very pleasant having such a friend," she thinks, within her innocent, unconscious heart. "I was so lonely losing dear papa, and having not one true heart to turn to in my sorrow."

A remembrance of her oath of vengeance comes into her mind, and a troubled look sweeps over the fair, young face. It weighs upon her like a burden—the legacy of hate her dying father has left her. How shall she ever keep her vow?

"Shall I go to America and seek my enemies who are so securely hidden away that even detectives cannot find them?" she asks herself. "Or shall I lie passive and wait? and when found, how shall I strike Marcia Cleveland's cruel heart?"

Alas! poor Vera, if you only knew the dreadful truth. If you only guessed how, in wounding your enemy's heart, you must fatally stab your own, you might pray to die now while the pulses of life are low, ere life became a living death. Well for us that: [Pg 43]

"Heaven from all creatures hides the book of fate."

And the pretty idyl goes on. Lady Vera's morbid thoughts are drawn out of herself, and lifted to a higher plane by Philip Lockhart's cheerful, active mind. The weeks round into a month, and she is almost well again. The color and roundness of youth have come back to her cheek, the light of a strange, new, unconscious happiness is dawning in the darkness of her eyes.

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## CHAPTER XIV.

Far away from the spot where Countess Vera broods over her oath of vengeance, in far America, away in the green heart of the langourous south, is the white marble palace where Mrs. Cleveland and her daughter dwelt, hidden from the knowledge of the man they had wronged, and who had sworn to bring home to them the ruin they had wrought.

To-day, a lovely morning in the autumn of that summer in which the Earl of Fairvale died, Mrs. Cleveland comes out on the piazza of her stately southern home, with a frown upon her brow. Behind her, in the magnificent saloon she has just quitted, high words are raging.

"You never loved me, or you would do as I wish you," wails the weak voice of Ivy to her husband, as, dissolved in tears, she flings herself upon a costly sofa.

"I begin to think I never did, but all the same you and your mother have ruined me by your cursed extravagance. I have not a thousand dollars to my name in bank. This place will have to be sold and we can live on the proceeds a little longer, perhaps," Leslie Noble answers, in a sharp, high-pitched voice, as he strides up and down the floor, cursing within his heart the weak fancy that had led him to marry this shrewish creature.

"Ruined! I do not believe one word of it!" Mrs. Noble breaks out, starting up and glaring at him with her pale, blue eyes. "It is a falsehood you have trumped up to keep from taking mamma and me to Europe where our hearts are just breaking to go! You know very well we have not spent a fortune in the little year and a half we have been married. We couldn't have done it."

"We *have* done it, anyhow," he answers, sullenly. "It was no difficult manner, considering the way in which you and your mother have forced me to live. Furniture fit for a palace, jewels costly enough for a queen, entertainments costing thousand of dollars, recklessly repeated over and over. We are at the end of the line at last, and you may yet have to take in washing for a living."

"You brute!" she exclaims, flashing him a glance of wrath and scorn. "To begrudge us the pleasant time we have had! I did not know you could be so mean and stingy! Of course I knew that your bachelor uncle in Philadelphia—the one you are named for—would leave you his money when he died. I wish he would die now. He's mortally slow about it. I should think he must be a hundred years old." [Pg 44]

"Good God, Ivy! what a heartless and mercenary woman you are!" her husband cries, stormily. "That poor old man, my uncle, who never harmed living soul, how dare you wish for his death? Upon my soul, I am tempted to write to him to leave his money to some orphan asylum or art gallery just to disappoint your hopes."

"You would not dare!" she sobs, hysterically.

"Try me too far, and see what I will not dare," he answers, threateningly, and she stops her sobbing and looks up, fearfully, at the dark, handsome face bent sternly upon her with two smouldering fires in his gloomy black eyes.

It is not as handsome and refined a face as Leslie Noble could boast of two years ago. There are lines of dissipation on it. There is a certain hardness and coarseness upon it, as if engendered by ill-nature and the free indulgence of evil passions. Association with such a woman as Ivy Cleveland would naturally bring that look into a man's face. Coarse, selfish, and unprincipled herself, she has dragged the man's weak, easily-moulded nature down upon a level with her own.

"When I married you, Ivy," pursues Mr. Noble, "I desired to take you to Europe on a bridal tour, but you and your mother, for no earthly reason that I can imagine, declined to go. You refused my offers to take you to my own home in Philadelphia, preferring, as you said, the sunny south for a

home. Now you have changed your minds, and declare American life monotonous and unendurable, and fancy you would like to figure in the courts of Europe. You had just as well cry for the moon. You have recklessly dissipated your own property and mine, and must bear the consequences. I cannot afford to take you abroad, and I do not desire to be badgered about it any longer."

"You shall hear about it day and night until I get my wish," Ivy cries, with passionate defiance. "Sell this house and all our fine furniture if you choose. It will bring enough with what you have in bank to afford us a brilliant season in London. Then by the time we return old Noble will have died, perhaps, and left us his fortune."

"Did I not tell you I will not have Uncle Leslie's death counted on so coarsely?" cries Mr. Noble, furiously. "You are a perfect harpy."

"And you are a brute!" Mrs. Noble retorts. "Aren't you ashamed to call your wife such names? and you pretended to be in love with me when you married me, you cruel, unfeeling wretch!"

"You dropped your mask as soon as I made you my wife, and showed me what you really were," Leslie Noble answers, with bitter anger and scorn. "I was only a tool for you, and a stepping-stone to power. Your mother's money was well-nigh exhausted, and you married me so that you could squander mine. Then, too, you have the most horrible temper in the world. Do you think [Pg 45] any man could continue to love such a woman?"

"How dare you talk to poor, dear Ivy so cruelly?" Mrs. Cleveland exclaims, stepping back through the low, French window, and glaring at her son-in-law with tigerish hate in her keen, black eyes. "You have frightened her into hysterics, you unfeeling wretch!"

"I would thank you not to interfere between me and my wife," he answers, stung to defiance by the insolence of both mother and daughter. "You have always thrust yourself into my affairs. You have been the power behind the throne and moved Ivy like a puppet at your will. I wish to Heaven you would go away and leave us to fight our own battles. It would be something to be rid of even one of you!"

A scream of rage from Ivy, who proceeds to roll on the floor in violent hysterics. Such scenes as these are of frequent occurrence, but Mr. Noble has seldom spoken his mind so plainly, especially on the subject of his mother-in-law. There is no telling what might have happened, for Mrs. Cleveland looks furious enough to spring upon the offender and rend him limb from limb, but at this moment there appears upon the scene a messenger with one of those yellow-covered envelopes which carry joy or sorrow to so many hearts.

"A telegram," Mr. Noble exclaims, and tears it hurriedly open.

As he reads, a look of sorrow, strangely blended with relief, comes out upon his features. His wife, forgetful of her sham hysterics, springs up and regards him, intently.

"A telegram! From whom? And what does it mean?" she exclaims.

"It is from my lawyer," Mr. Noble answers, bitterly, "and it means that the devil takes care of his own so well that you will be able to gratify your latest whim. My uncle is dead and has left me his whole fortune."

"Glorious news!" Mrs. Cleveland and her daughter echo with one accord.

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## CHAPTER XV.

Some hints of autumn are in the soft, warm airs that blow through the smoke and heat of London. The fashionable season is over, and the gay butterflies of fashion have begun to seek "fresh fields and pastures new." Lady Clive begins to think of flitting with the rest.

It has been settled that the Countess of Fairvale shall remain with the Clives for the autumn and winter months at least. She is in mourning for her father, and is quite settled in her mind at first that she will go home to her ancestral castle and spend the period of retirement in strict seclusion with a proper chaperon. But the Clives will not hear of it. Lady Clive is afraid that she will mope herself to death.

"Besides, I shall be so lonely," she declares. "Philip is going back soon to his own home, and we shall have no young people with us at all if Lady Vera leaves us, too. My dear, do say that you will [Pg 46] stay. We are not going to be very gay this season. Sir Harry and I want to take the children down to our country home, where they may roll in the grass to their hearts' content. Let us invite two or three sweet young girls, and as many young men, to go down with us, and we can have such a charming time, with picnics and lawn tennis, and simple country pleasures. Then, after awhile, we will go to Switzerland and climb the Alps. What say you, my little countess?"

Lady Vera, so ardently pressed, yields a gentle assent, and the party of "sweet, young girls" and eligible young men is immediately organized, Captain Lockhart promising to go down with them and remain a week before he returns to America.

So in the late summer they go down to Sunny Bank, as the Clives call the large, rambling, ornate pile of white buildings that is the sweetest home in all Devonshire.

The children go mad with delight over the fragrant grass and the autumnal flowers. The young

people begin to pair off in couples, and one day Vera goes for a walk with the American soldier.

She is looking her fairest and sweetest. A dress of soft, rich, lusterless black drapes her slender figure superbly, and the round, white column of her throat rises lily-like from the thin, soft ruche of black around it, her face appearing like some rare flower beneath the shade of her wide, black Gainsborough hat. No wonder that Captain Lockhart's dark blue eyes return again and again to that delicately lovely face.

> "It is no wonder," said the lords,
> "She is more beautiful than day."

They walk slowly down the green, country lane, bordered with oak and holly. The flowers are beginning to fade, and the air is sweet with their pungent fragrance. The sky is deeply blue, with little, white, silvery clouds sailing softly over it. The sun is shining sweet and warm as if it were May. Little birds are singing blithely for joy as if the spring-time had come again.

"Do you know that this is the first time I have walked by your side since that day last spring, when you were so cruel to me?" he asks, breaking a long interval of silence that has been perilously sweet.

"Cruel?" she says, lifting to his the half-shy gaze of the dark and dreamy eyes.

"Yes, cruel, for you forbade me even to look at you," he answers, smiling now over that past pain in the eager elation of the present. "Ah, Lady Vera, you did not know then, perhaps, what a cross you laid upon me—that I loved you even then so dearly——"

"Hush!" she cries, in such a startled voice that he pauses and looks around to see what has frightened her.

"What is it, Lady Vera? Has anything alarmed you?" he asks her, anxiously.

"Nothing, but that I am tired. I will sit down here on this mossy log, and rest a moment," she answers, sinking wearily down, a sudden paleness chasing the roses from her cheeks. Captain Lockhart throws himself down on the short, velvety, green turf at her feet. There ensues a short silence, broken only by the hum of the busy insects, the song of the birds, and the soft rustle of a passing wind in the leaves overhead. [Pg 47]

There is some embarrassment in their silence. Her cry of alarm has been so sharp and sudden that he does not know how to return to the interrupted subject. And yet his heart is so full of it.

He looks into the lovely, spirited young face, and he cannot keep the words back any longer.

He turns to her suddenly, and tells her the story of his love in burning words, whose eloquent fire brooks no check nor remonstrance. His face glows under its soldierly brown, his blue eyes darken with feeling, his voice trembles with passion, but when he pauses, Lady Vera, who has heard him through with tightly clenched hands and a strangely blanched face, can only falter:

"You love me, Captain Lockhart? I thought—that we were only friends."

The frightened, wondering voice falls like ice upon his heart.

"Only friends," he echoes, "when I have loved you since the first hour I saw you. Oh, Lady Vera, do not grow so pale! Is it strange that I should love you? Others have been as wild and presumptuous as I have. Others have come down before the fire of those dark eyes, slain by their beauty. I know you have been cold, indifferent to all, even to me at first. But when you thawed to me at last, when you were kindly and friendly——"

"Yes, that was all," she interrupts him, in a kind of frantic haste. "I was kind and friendly, that was all. I meant no more, believe me."

The soldier's blue eyes look at her with a keen reproach before which her own glance wavers and falls.

"Lady Vera, you are no coquette," he exclaims, "and yet I could swear that you have given me encouragement to hope that you would love me. Do you remember the beautiful poems of love I have read to you, with my very heart on my lips? Do you remember the songs I have sung to you, and the dreamy twilights when we sat and talked together? Do you remember how you have worn the flowers I brought you? You have blushed and smiled for me as you did for no other, and you are no coquette. Oh, my darling, surely you will love me?"

As he talks to her, the color goes from white to red, and red to white in her beautiful face. Her lips quiver, the tears spring into her eyes.

"You are blaming me," she says, incoherently, "but you have no right. I know nothing of love. I thought we were only friends. I am so sorry."

"Do you mean to say you do not love me, that you did not know I loved you, and was seeking you for my wife, Lady Vera?" he asks, with forced calmness.

"Yes, I mean all these things," she answers, looking at him with such wide, frank, innocent eyes that he can find no room for doubt.

He is puzzled for a moment. [Pg 48]

"I have deceived myself," he sighs, inly. "I thought she was learning to love me."

"Lady Vera, I have been too hopeful," he says, manfully. "I have been thinking of love while you dreamed only of friendship. But now that you know my heart, will you not suffer me to woo you

for my bride? I love you so dearly I am sure I could make you happy."

Ah! the fathomless pain that comes into the dark eyes into which he gazes so tenderly. He cannot understand it.

"I shall never marry, Captain Lockhart," she answers, in a low, pained voice. "There is no use to woo me. I can never be yours."

"Never!" he echoes, with despair in his voice.

"I shall never marry anyone," she repeats, mournfully.

He looks at her with all his passionate heart in his eyes.

"Never is a terrible word, Lady Vera," he answers sadly. "Only think how I love you. I have never loved anyone before in all my life, and I shall never love anyone again. You are my first and last love. Only think how terrible it is, how cruelly hard, for me to give up the hopes of winning you for my own. You are so beautiful and noble, my dark-eyed love. I have dreamed of kissing your small, white hands, your fair, white brow, your golden hair, even your beautiful, crimson lips. I had thought to win you for my very own, and now you strike dead every hope by that cruel word, *never*. Oh, my darling, you are too young to say you will never wed. What can you know of the needs of your own heart? Let me teach you to love me."

"Ah, if he only knew the fatal truth," the tortured young heart moans to itself, in the silence of its great despair. "If he knew that I am already bound by a tie that I hate and loathe."

But she speaks no word, only to look up at him with pained, dark eyes, and reiterate:

"I am very sorry I have caused you pain, Captain Lockhart, but I shall never marry."

He rises and looks down at her with his handsome face grown strangely pale and grave, his blue eyes dim and heavy.

"So be it, Lady Vera," he answers, folding his arms across his broad breast. "You know what is best for you, but, ah, lovely one, if you could know how sweet were the hopes you have slain this hour you could not choose but weep over my saddened life."

She put up her white hand imploringly.

"Forbear, Captain Lockhart. You cannot guess what pangs are aching in my breast or you would spare me your reproaches. Be pitiful and leave me."

"Not here," he says, looking up and down the flowery lane. "Let me take you back to the house, Lady Vera. We cannot trust these autumnal skies. It may rain at any moment."

"As you will," she answers, wearily, and rising, retraces her steps by his side. But this time they speak no word to each other and the fair young countess flies up to her room, and flings herself down on her couch to weep such tears as have never rained from those lovely eyes before, for a great happiness and a great sorrow have come into her life, as it were, together. [Pg 49]

"For I love him," she moans to herself. "I love him, but as Heaven sees me, I did not know it. It all came to me like a flash when he was telling me how he loved me. Oh, God, what happiness is possible to me, and yet beyond my reach."

She lies still weeping bitterly, and recalling in all its bitterness that midnight marriage by the side of her dying mother.

"Oh! what a blind mistake it was," she weeps. "But for Leslie Noble I might marry the man I love. I might go back to America with him. I might tell him the story of my oath of vengeance, and he would help me to find my enemy and punish her for her sin."

The day drags wearily. In the afternoon Vera goes down to the library in search of something to read. Gliding softly in she finds it tenanted by Captain Lockhart, who is busy over a fresh batch of papers from the United States. He glances up as she is about withdrawing, and springs to his feet with courteous grace.

"Pray do not let me frighten you, Lady Vera. I will take my budget of papers, and be off," he exclaims.

"No, I do not wish to disturb you," she answers. "I am in search of something to read myself."

"Pray take your choice from among my papers," he replies, gravely, but kindly, and half-listlessly Lady Vera turns them over and selects one at random.

Captain Lockhart places a chair for her and returns to his reading, thinking that the best way to place her at her ease. His heart yearns over the beautiful, pale, suffering face, but he does not dream of her sorrow, and he has no right to comfort her, so he turns his glance away, and, looking round again a little later, sees that Countess Vera has quietly swooned away in her chair, and that the American newspaper has slipped from her lap to the floor.

With a startled cry that brings Lady Clive rushing into the room, he springs to his feet. Lady Vera's swoon is a long and deep one, and they wonder much over its cause, but no one dreams that the American newspaper has caused it all. Yet the listless gaze of the unhappy girl roving over the list of deaths in a Philadelphia paper has found one line that struck dumb, for a moment, the sources of life in their fountains. It was only this:

"Died, at his residence on Arch street, on the 19th instant *Leslie Noble*."

# CHAPTER XVI.

Lady Vera waking from her long and death-like swoon, wakens also to a dream of happiness. The terrible incubus that weighed upon her so heavily is lifted from her heart. The loveless fetter that bound her is snapped asunder. Leslie Noble, whose very name has been a shuddering horror to her for more than two years, is dead, and she is free—free! What exquisite possibilities of happiness thrill her heart at the very thought!

She keeps her room that evening, pleading weariness as an excuse for not appearing at dinner. [Pg 50] She wants time to think over the joyful change in her prospects before she meets Captain Lockhart again. She is scarcely herself now. Such a strange, tremulous, passionate happiness is thrilling through her heart as makes her nervous with its intensity. Little shafts of fire seem thrilling through her veins. Love, which she had thought never to experience, has taken up its dwelling in her heart, and every nerve thrills with its unspeakable rapture.

"And I was so blind, I thought it only friendship!" the fair young countess murmurs to herself, with a happy smile playing around her lips. "How happy he will be when I tell him that I love him, and that I will be his wife! It cannot be wrong for me to marry him. I am sure he will help me to my vengeance when I tell him of the oath I swore by my father's death-bed. Dear Philip, how grand and handsome he is! He is the noblest of men!"

Lady Clive, having privately questioned her brother as to Vera's fainting fit, and received no satisfaction, is at her wits' end! Why this terrible swoon, when she had deemed Lady Vera well and strong again?

She wonders even more when the young girl appears at breakfast the next morning. Never had the young countess appeared so enchantingly lovely. Clothed in a delicate, white morning dress, with purple pansies at her throat and waist, and all her glorious golden hair floating loosely about her perfect form, with a blush of happiness on her cheeks, and the shy light of tenderness in her splendid eyes, it seemed to all as if her peerless beauty had received a new dower of glory. All wondered, but none knew that the threatening cloud that had overshadowed her life so long had rolled away, and that it was the new light of hope that made her face so radiant.

"You look unusually well, my dear. There is no trace of your illness left this morning," Lady Clive exclaims, with her usual charming good nature, as Lady Vera glides into her seat.

A blush and smile of acknowledgement from the young girl. She glances shyly under her long lashes at Captain Lockhart, who is her *vis-a-vis* at table. But the handsome soldier, after one slight glance and a courtly bow, does not seem to see her. Miss Montgomery, who sits next him, absorbs his attention this morning. She is a belle and beauty, and has long angled for Captain Lockhart. Seeing Lady Vera so gay and smiling, he resolves not to damp her pleasure by a sight of his own grave, troubled face, so he lends himself assiduously to the coquette's efforts to amuse him, succeeding so well in his plan that she is completely blinded, and murmurs to herself with sudden bitterness:

"He is flirting with Miss Montgomery to show me how little he cares for my rejection. Ah, well, if he is satisfied, I am!"

So the first seeds of pride are sown in her heart by a coquette's petty arts.

> "Alas! how slight a cause may move
> Dissension between hearts that love!"

"I had meant to win him back to my side," she thinks, with a sudden sigh. "I would not have told [Pg 51] him so in so many words, but I thought to let him see that I repented after all, and that—I love him! I fear me I am too late after all. Oh, that he had not spoken yesterday. If only he had waited until to-day!"

After breakfast they organized a riding-party. Captain Lockhart rides by Miss Montgomery's side, the countess goes with Lord Gordon—poor Lord Gordon, who has long been waiting for this chance to put his fate

> "To the test,
> And win or lose it all."

How lovely she was in her sable habit and streaming feather. Though Captain Lockhart rode attentive by Miss Montgomery's side, he could not help seeing her beauty and repeating to himself Tennyson's exquisite lines:

> "As she fled fast through sun and shade,
> The happy winds upon her played,
> Blowing the ringlet from the braid,
> She looked so lovely as she swayed
> The rein with dainty finger tips,
> A man had given all other bliss,
> And all his worldly wealth for this;
> To waste his whole heart in one kiss
> Upon her perfect lips."

"And yet after all, in her quiet, proud way, she must be a flirt," he thinks to himself, with subdued

bitterness. "How bright and gay she appeared this morning, as if careless of my sorrow, and almost exulting in it. I thought she had more feeling. And, indeed, she appeared to smile on my suit, though she was coy and cold at first. See now how charming she is with Lord Gordon. Poor fellow, he has long been seeking a chance to propose to her. Well, he will find it to-day, and she will ruthlessly trample his heart as she did mine yesterday."

Sweet, innocent Vera, how fast the springing hopes of last night and this morning are turning to dead sea fruit upon thy lips.

Lord Gordon speaks and receives his answer. Lady Vera is very sorry to pain him, but she has no heart to give.

Captain Lockhart sees the shadow on the fair, English face of the young lord, and is secretly conscious of a savage satisfaction.

She has refused him, too. She is too cold and proud to love any one, he tells himself.

"Are you really going to-morrow, Lockhart?" Lord Gordon asks him in the drawing-room, that evening.

"Yes, I am really going," he answers, and never dreams of the wild throb Lady Vera's heart gives beneath its silken bodice.

"Why don't you ask me to go with you?" Lord Gordon continues, good-naturedly. "I have long contemplated a tour of the United States. I am *ennuyed* to death. I should like a taste of a different life."

"I shall be glad of your company, and you will be quite likely to have a taste of something different if you go with me," laughs Captain Lockhart. "Father writes me that my regiment may [Pg 52] be ordered out on the plains to fight the Indians next month."

"Ugh! those horrid savages!" the ladies cry, all but Lady Vera.

She raises the black satin fan a little higher before her face, and leans back in her chair, indifferent, to all appearance, but, oh, with such a deadly pain tearing at her heart-strings.

"To lose him like this," she moans to herself, "it is too dreadful. Oh, if I had even ten minutes alone with him, I would make him understand the truth. He should not leave me!"

But Captain Lockhart, stealing a furtive glance at the beautiful face in its high-bred repose, tells himself sadly:

"She is utterly indifferent to what fate I meet. Beautiful as she is, she must be utterly heartless."

"Then if you like to have me I will be ready to go with you to-morrow, Lockhart," Lord Gordon announces, and gives Lady Vera one gloomy glance and heavy sigh.

It is for her sake he is going. Since she is not for him he means to try and forget her.

But Lady Vera, in the keen smart of her own pain is oblivious to his.

She rises and slips through the low, French window out upon the balcony, and sits down in the darkness not heavier than her thoughts.

Presently low voices float out to her from the curtained recesses of the window—Captain Lockhart's and Lord Gordon's.

"Rather a sudden resolution, isn't it, this trip across the water?" in Lockhart's clear, full voice.

"Well, yes," in Gordon's voice. "I'm running away from myself, you understand. I fancy we are sailing in the same boat, eh, old fellow?"

"Yes," Captain Lockhart answers, quietly.

"I thought so. Saw that you were hard hit. What are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing," Captain Lockhart answers, with grim pleasantry. "I am a soldier. I look for wounds upon the field of battle."

"Has she really a heart, do you think?" Lord Gordon pursues. "The fellows raved about her last season in London. She refused Greyhurst and a score of others as eligible. She must be very cold."

"I fancy so," Captain Lockhart answers, dryly. "A beautiful iceberg."

"Few women would have refused you, Lockhart. There was the beautiful Clarendon year before last, and now the charming Montgomery ready to fling herself at your head."

"Spare my modesty, Lord Gordon. You are calling in the aid of your imagination now. Cannot we have some music to beguile the moments of our last evening at Sunny Bank?"

They pass away to another portion of the room.

Lady Vera sits silent, brooding over the words she has heard.

"How coolly they discussed their rejection," she thinks. "Lord Gordon wondered if I had a heart. Captain Lockhart called me a beautiful iceberg. Perhaps he does not care much. How carelessly he said that he was a soldier and expected wounds upon the field of battle. Perhaps he does not [Pg 53] mind it, now that it is over. I remember that one of the poets has written:

"Man's love is of man's life a thing apart,
'Tis woman's whole existence."

The moon comes out and shines upon her, sitting sad and lonely, with her white hands folded across her black dress. Two quiet tears tremble upon her lashes, and fall upon her cheeks.

"If I were a fatalist," she thinks, "I should believe that my life is destined to lie always in the shadow. I have never known an hour of perfect happiness."

No one seems to miss her. In the drawing-room they are singing. Miss Montgomery's pretty soprano blends softly with the soldier's superb tenor.

The pretty, sentimental song dies away into silence presently.

There is some careless talk and laughter. Again the piano keys thrill under the firm touches of a man, and this time Captain Lockhart sings alone, sings with such passion and fervor as Lady Vera has never heard before, sings with his whole heart trembling on his lips, and she feels within her heart that it is his farewell to her:

"I love thee, I love thee,
Far better than wine;
But the curse is above,
Thou'lt never be mine.

"As the blade wears the scabbard,
The billow the shore,
So sorrow doth fret me
Forevermore.

"Fair beauty, I leave thee
To conquer my heart;
I'll see thee, I'll bless thee,
And then depart.

"Let me take, ere I vanish,
One look of thine eyes—
One smile for remembrance,
For life soon flies.

"And now for the fortune
That hangeth above,
And to bury in battle
My dreams of love."

"Does he know that I am here?" she asks herself. "Perhaps he meant me to hear what he said just now. A beautiful iceberg, that is what he thinks me."

Someone misses Lady Vera, perhaps the significance of the soldier's song recalls her to mind; they go out to seek her, the giddy girls, who cannot guess how she has stolen out to bear her pain alone.

"Here she is, hiding from us," they cry. "Come, Lady Vera, it is your turn now to sing."

"I—cannot," she murmurs, faintly.

"No such obstinacy can be tolerated," they reply. "Lord Gordon and Captain Lockhart leave us to-morrow and everyone must contribute to their entertainment to-night. Only one song, Lady Vera, then we will excuse you." [Pg 54]

She hesitates for a moment. Then a thought flashes over her mind.

"He sang to me," she thinks. "Why cannot I sing to him? Surely he must understand me then."

She suffers them to persuade her, and Lord Gordon comes forward to turn the leaves of the music. She shakes her head.

"I will sing some simple thing from memory," she says, and then he takes her fan and retains his place near her on that small pretext. His eyes linger on her beauty, the proud throat and fair face rising lily-like from the somber black dress.

She touches the white keys softly with her slim, white fingers. A plaintive melody rises, a mournful, minor chord; she sings with sudden, passionate fervor, some simple, pathetic words:

"I strove to tear thee from my heart,
The effort was in vain,
The spell was ever on my life,
And I am here again.

"Oh, I have ranged in countries strange,
And vowed no more to meet,
But power was in thy parting glance
To bring me to thy feet.

"We cannot go against love's will
When he has bound us fast;
Forgive the thought that did thee wrong

And be my own at last!"

She glances up. If she can point the words by even one deep glance into her lover's eyes, all may yet be well. But Miss Montgomery, as if in malice prepense, has suddenly risen and leaned against the piano just before the singer's eyes. Captain Lockhart, standing with folded arms across the room, is out of the range of her vision. Lady Vera rises in despair. Her innocent little plan has failed. All hope dies in her breast.

She sits down in a quiet corner, and Lord Gordon insists on fanning her, and showing her a new portfolio of engravings. This is his last evening with her, and like the reckless moth that he is, he singes his wings in the flame of her beauty.

Someone calls him away at last, and the girl's heart gives a great, muffled throb of relief. She is alone for the moment, in the quiet alcove, half hidden by the white lace curtain. Will Captain Lockhart come to her now? she asks herself, with a wildly-beating heart.

He sees her sitting there in her black dress and lily-white beauty, the light shining down on her golden head and star-like face. Some impulse stronger than his pride moves him to cross the room to her side. She glances up with a smile so dazzling in its joy, that Tennyson's lines rush into his mind:

"What if with her sunny hair,
And smile as sunny as cold,
She meant to weave me a snare
Of some coquettish deceit,
Cleopatra-like, as of old,
To entangle me when we met,
To have her lion roll in a silken net,
And fawn at a victor's feet?"

[Pg 55]

He sits down in Lord Gordon's vacant chair, the little stand with the portfolio of new engravings and a vase of roses just between them. The countess takes one of the crimson roses and plays with it to hide her nervousness. She does not think how beautiful her slender, white hands look playing with the red leaves of the rose.

The handsome soldier is for once embarrassed. That smile which she had thought would tell him all has only puzzled him.

"Is she only a coquette, after all?" he asks himself. "Is she trying to draw me into the toils again that she may see how great is her power?"

With that thought he grows cold and hard toward her.

"Lady Vera, do you know that you are very cruel to that poor rose?" he asks.

"Am I? I did not mean to be," she answers, gently, looking down at the torn petals strewing her lap. "I did not really think what I was doing."

"You had better give it to me, I will care for it more tenderly," he pursues.

"Not this, but a sweeter one," she answers, with a beating heart.

Her white hands flutter over the vase a moment, and she selects a lovely scarlet one just opening into perfect bloom.

Bending her head with regal grace, she touches the rose to the crimson flower of her lips and holds it toward him.

Something in the strange significance of the action strikes him oddly. An eager, impetuous speech springs to his lips, but Miss Montgomery, who has seen the rose given, comes hastily up to them, interrupting him.

"Lord Gordon has been telling me of those beautiful new engravings. May I look at them, Lady Vera, if I do not interrupt your *tete-a-tete*?" she asks with sweet unconsciousness.

"Certainly. Pray take my seat," Lady Vera answers with icy coldness, moving away.

Captain Lockhart is about to follow her when the fair marplot claims his assistance in adjusting the stereoscope to the right focus.

Before she releases him the attention of Lady Vera is claimed by Sir Roger Mansfield, who admires her immensely.

She leans back in her chair listening to his lively sallies of wit and humor with a languid smile, in apparent forgetfulness of the episode of the roses.

"It was only a bit of careless coquetry. I was a fool to think she meant anything by it," the captain tells himself, angrily, turning away.

Fifteen minutes later they are all separating for the night, and Captain Lockhart and Lord Gordon make their adieux to the ladies because they must take the early train for London in the morning before the household is astir.

[Pg 56]

Lady Vera stands quietly waiting her turn. She has wished Lord Gordon farewell and *bon voyage* with a smile, and she summons all her pride to bear her up in her parting with Captain Lockhart.

He has left her for the last one, perhaps with some care that hers shall be the last hand he clasps, the last eyes he looks into on leaving England.

"Lady Vera, I have to thank you at parting that you have helped to make my stay in England very pleasant," he says, offering his hand, with his soldierly grace.

No reproaches for the pain she has caused him, the wrecked heart he carries away from the field whereon he was vanquished.

Only the brave, soldierly smile, and the courtly words. He wears the scarlet rose proudly on his breast, though he feels it to be a token of defeat.

Lady Vera lays her hand on his and tries to say something very calm and friendly, but the words die on her white lips.

She is very pale; he cannot help from seeing that. Her voice is very gentle, but so low he fails to catch the words.

She does not look up at him; that is what pains him most. How is he to know that the lowered lids veil the terrible pain in the dark eyes she cannot lift to meet his yearning glance.

Others are looking on, and Vera, Countess of Fairvale, is too proud to wear her heart on her sleeve. The message of the rose has failed, and there is now no other sign to tell him that she loves him and would fain take back the denial of yesterday.

So he goes, wounded by the coldness of her parting, yet wondering a little why the hand that lay a moment in his own had felt so icy cold.

Ah, if he only had guessed the truth. But nothing was further from Captain Lockhart's thoughts than that Lady Vera loved him and longed to let him know the truth.

He carried back with him to his native land the memory of a fair face and a heart that seemed colder than the beautiful iceberg to which he had likened her in the bitterness of his pain.

For Lady Vera, she glides from the room, calm and cold to all outward seeming, but filled with the bitterness of a great despair.

The long night passes in a weary vigil, and the handsome soldier never dreams whose dark eyes watch his departure next morning while the words of his song echo through her heart and brain.

"As the sword wears the scabbard,
The billow the shore,
So sorrow doth fret me
Forevermore."

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## CHAPTER XVII.

Long before the next season began in London, loud-tongued Madam Rumor was talking of the rich Americans who had bought Darnley House, that splendid mansion, from its ruined owner, and refitted it anew with almost princely magnificence, and filled it with troops of obsequious servants who held it in charge while the owners courted pleasure abroad. [Pg 57]

The most ridiculous stories were abroad concerning these people.

They were said to possess unlimited wealth; their diamonds were believed to equal Queen Victoria's; it was confidently reported and universally believed that they owned mines of gold and diamonds in Nevada and California.

If the rumors had been traced back to their source it would have been found that the American ladies themselves had artfully promulgated these reports, but this was not known.

The stories usually came from the servants of Darnley House, and confidently accepted, for are not hirelings always supposed to know the affairs of their masters and mistresses?

Society was on the *qui vive* for the beginning of the season when, it was said, the Americans expected to take possession of their magnificent residence, and astonish the world with their splendor and *eclat*.

Meanwhile the three Americans with whom gossip made so free, were disporting themselves in the delights of leisurely travel, taking in Germany, Italy and Switzerland, in their round of pleasure.

Lady Clive, meeting them in Switzerland, had written thus to the Countess of Fairvale, who contrary to all persuasion had gone home to Fairvale Park to spend the summer quietly with a prim, elderly gentlewoman as chaperon:

"We have some Americans here. You know I usually adore everything that hails from the land of the free, being one of them myself. But, really, I could not fraternize with these people. The man was well enough, but the wife and the mother-in-law—well, dearest Vera, the English language has no term strong enough to express my antipathy. They are abominably rich, I believe. I hear that they have bought and refurnished Darnley House with a view to spending the season in London. If they do you will meet them, as you have promised to come to Clive House for the season.

"Do you care to hear about Philip, poor, dear boy? They sent him out on the plains, poor dear, to fight the Indians, wretched creatures, this summer. He has been wounded in the shoulder, and

promoted to a colonelcy for bravery. Lord Gordon is coming over in time for the hunting season, I hear, but Philip will not promise to get leave and come with him.

"Dear Vera, I wish you would have come with us. I know you are moped to death in your grand, but lonely home, with prim old Mrs. Vance for your duenna. As soon as we go home to Sunny Bank and rest up a little, we mean to take you by storm, Sir Harry, and I, and all the children."

Lady Vera smiles over that last threat. The news is very welcome. She fancies how much brighter Fairvale Park will seem with Lady Clive's happy children chasing the deer in the wide, green park, and gathering the lilies from the peaceful lake. She takes no interest in the story of the rich [Pg 58] Americans, but later on a letter comes to her from New York, which, oddly enough, instantly recalls Lady Clive's letter to her mind.

The letter is from the New York detective whom her father had employed to track his enemy to her hiding-place. Lady Fairvale having retained him in her employ, he writes, briefly and respectfully:

"I have traced the Clevelands at last only to lose them again. They have been living in Florida all the while. The daughter has married a rich man, and this summer they came to New York, and soon after sailed for England. I learn that they are now traveling in Switzerland with great *eclat*, so that your ladyship will scarcely fail to hear of them."

Lady Vera is walking slowly by the beautiful lake, brooding deeply over this letter. She does not see the white lilies nodding their heads among the broad, green leaves, nor the soft breeze dimpling the placid water into tiny laughing wavelets. She is thinking of Lady Clive's story of the rich Americans, to whom she had conceived an antipathy.

"They must be one and the same," she tells herself, "but I cannot write to Lady Clive and ask her, because she is traveling all the while, and gives me no address. But I shall see them in London, as they will be there for the season. And so Ivy has married since her old lover, Leslie Noble, died. I wonder whom she has beguiled into taking her? Whoever he may be, I pity him, being tied to such a shrew! Well, well, the time for my vengeance is near at hand. What shape will it take, I wonder?"

A wind, colder than that which ruffles the lilies on the lake, seems to chill her graceful form, as she recalls the words of her vow:

"I swear, by all my hopes of happiness, that I will punish that woman through her dearest affections—that, at any cost to myself, I will avenge my mother's wrongs! They are rich, arrogant, prosperous. How can I hurt them?" she muses. "What blow can I strike at their stony hearts that will avenge the wrongs of the dead? Shall I tell the world the story of my mother's wrongs and mine? Marcia Cleveland and her cruel daughter would only laugh me to scorn if I did. Yet I must think of some plan to humble them. I am bound by my oath to the dead. All is blank before me yet; I cannot see one step before me to the accomplishment of my task. Would it be wrong to ask God to help me to punish those wicked and cruel women?"

What form will her vengeance take? Day and night the lonely young countess broods over that puzzling question. She forms a hundred schemes and abandons them all. Some of them are too dreadful. Her pure, delicate nature recoils from them. She grows pale and thin brooding over this vexing question. It banishes for a time even the remembrance of Captain Lockhart from her mind. She scarcely eats or sleeps. Long hours she wanders by the quiet lake, up and down, up and down, like a sentry on his post, heedless of Mrs. Vance's remonstrances on her pale and altered looks.

"You live too much alone, I fear," the kind chaperon remonstrates. "It is not well for the young to [Pg 59] live so quiet and isolated a life as you are doing, my dear. You should accept the invitations of the county families, and entertain them in return."

"I am in mourning," Lady Vera objects, wearily.

"But I do not mean for you to be very gay, my dear Lady Vera. If you would even invite some young lady of your own age to come and visit you it would be so much livelier for you. There is Miss Montgomery, for instance. She is at Sir William Spencer's. I dare say she would come if you invited her."

"I detest Miss Montgomery," Lady Vera replies, with unusual pettishness.

"Someone else, then; anyone whom you could like," Mrs. Vance suggests.

"There is no one," Lady Vera answers. "I expect Lady Clive soon. We shall have a little gaiety then. I will have no one else before that."

"I do not think you are well, Lady Vera. You have lost your color, you are growing thin, your eyes look large in your face. Will you not consult a physician?" Mrs. Vance goes on, resolutely.

"No; for I am perfectly well," Lady Vera answers, impatiently. "Pray do not take up idle fancies about me, Mrs. Vance."

So the good lady, sighing, desists, and Countess Fairvale "gaes her ain gait."

The bright days of September wane and fade, and October comes in bright and sunny.

Every day now Lady Vera looks for Lady Clive to come. Her spirits grow brighter at the thought.

Sitting in the grand drawing-room one pleasant evening, with Mrs. Vance nodding placidly in a corner, and the soft breeze fluttering the lace draperies at the open windows, she touches the keys of the grand piano, pouring out her sad young soul in plaintive melodies. Song after song

thrills out upon the air, each one sadder and sweeter than the last, as though

"The anguish of the singer made the sweetness of the strain."

Very beautiful looks Lady Vera in her thin, black robe, with knots of pure white pansies at her throat and waist, very beautiful and girlish still, though she is almost twenty, and a woman's sorrow is written all over her lovely, mobile face, that rises like some fair, white lily above her somber robe.

Memory is busy at her heart to-night. She has forgotten the Clevelands for a little while, and is thinking of her princely-looking soldier lover far away beneath those American skies where her own young life was passed.

She loves him still. In vain the nobles of her father's land sue for her favor.

All her heart is given to that untitled lover who comes of a land

"Where they bow not the knee,
Save to One unto whom monarchs bow down."

Almost unconsciously she touches the keys and sings one of our best loved songs: [Pg 60]

"On the banks of Allan Water
When the sweet spring-tide did fall,
There I saw the miller's daughter,
Fairest of them all!
For his bride a soldier sought her,
And a winning tongue had he;
On the banks of Allan Water,
None so gay as she!

"On the banks of Allan Water,
When brown autumn spread his store,
There I saw the miller's daughter,
But she smiled no more!
For the summer grief had brought her,
And the soldier false was he;
On the banks of Allan Water,
None so sad as she!"

"Nay, nay, Lady Vera, a libel on the soldier," a voice cries over her shoulder.

She springs up wildly, with a startled cry:

"Captain Lockhart!"

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## CHAPTER XVIII.

It is Philip Lockhart, indeed, towering above her, tall, broad-shouldered, handsome, as if her yearning thoughts had embodied themselves. Lady Vera cannot keep the joy out of her voice and face.

"Is it really you?" she cries, touching him gently with one soft, white hand, her dark eyes moist with gladness.

"It is really Philip Lockhart," he laughs. "I am *avant-coureur* for Nella, who will descend upon you to-morrow, bag and baggage, with all the little imps. Will you pardon me, Lady Fairvale, for my impudence in entering by the open window? Your sweet music tempted me."

"The pleasure of seeing you so unexpectedly might well condone a greater offense," she answers, smiling.

Then she blushes deeply, for the beautiful, dark-blue eyes look down into her own, gravely and thoughtfully.

"Thank you," he answers; "I had grave doubts of a welcome, and you set my mind at ease. The truth is I came down with Lord Gordon to Sir William Spencer's for the hunting, and Nella desired me to call and apprise you of her meditated descent upon your fold."

She freezes over so suddenly and subtly that he is mystified.

"Pray sit down, Colonel Lockhart," with the coolest courtesy. "All this while I have kept you standing."

He accepts the offered chair and his altered position brings in range of his sight Mrs. Vance dozing blissfully in a luxurious arm-chair.

"My companion," Lady Vera explains.

The blue eyes look at her pleadingly, with a half-smile in them.

"Pray do not disturb her dreams on my account. I shall be going directly." [Pg 61]

She sits down listlessly enough on the piano-stool facing him. Some of the first glow of brightness has faded from her face, showing him the subtle change six months has made in it. The once bright cheek is pale and clear, the dark eyes look darker still by contrast with the dark purple shadows lightly outlined beneath them. He marvels, but dares not speak of it.

"I am very glad Lady Clive is coming; I have been expecting her some time," she observes.

"I thought you were glad to see me at first," he answers, plaintively, "but now you have frozen over again."

"You took me by surprise," she replies, with dignity. "I thought you were not coming to England this winter. Lady Clive wrote me something like that."

"I did not intend to come; I knew it was wiser to stay away. 'A burnt child dreads the fire' you know. But something drew me against my will. It was like your song, Lady Vera:

> "'I strove to tear thee from my heart,
> The effort was in vain;
> The spell was ever on my life,
> And I am here again.'"

The warm color flies into her face again. The lines recall that night when she had tried to show him her heart, and the caprice of a coquette had come between them. She asks, with irrepressible pique:

"Was Miss Montgomery glad to see you?"

"Glad? Why should she be?" he asks her, wondering if that strange discord in her voice can really be pique and jealousy. Spite of Lady Vera's pride, it sounds marvelously like it.

"She liked you, I thought," she answers, flushing under the steady fire of his eyes.

"Did she? I am sure I did not know it," he fibs, unblushingly. "I never thought of any other save you, Lady Vera. You were my only love. I have carried the rose you gave me ever since that night when we parted so coldly."

He comes nearer to her side, and taking the withered rose from his breast, holds it out before her gaze. She looks up and sees the old, warm love-light shining on her from the deep blue eyes. The sight makes her brave to speak.

"Yet if you had understood the message of the rose, we need not have parted at all," she falters, low and softly, with crimson blushes burning her lovely face.

"Vera, my love, my queen!"

He has bowed on one knee before her that he may look into the dark eyes so sweetly veiled beneath the drooping lashes. A rapture of happiness quivers in his voice.

"Lady Vera, tell me, do you mean that you repented after all? Did you find that my devotion had not been lavished in vain, and that you could give me love for love? Was that the message of the rose, my beautiful darling?"

No answer from the sweet, quivering lips, but that swift, quickly withdrawn glance from the dewy eyes tells Lady Vera's story plainer than words to her lover's heart. [Pg 62]

The rose has carried its tender message at last, in spite of a hundred Miss Montgomerys, and if the sleepy chaperon should open her placid eyes now she would be shocked beyond recovery, for Colonel Lockhart, with all the boldness of a soldier, has drawn his darling into the shelter of his arms, and pressed the golden head close against the brave and loyal heart that beats for her alone.

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## CHAPTER XIX.

Imagine Lady Clive's delight when she learns that her brother is to marry her favorite, Lady Vera.

"It is what I most wished upon earth," she says, "but I had despaired of ever having my heart's desire. You never acted much like lovers, you two."

"You see I never intended to marry, so I did not encourage lovers, then," Lady Vera explains.

"And *now*?" Lady Clive inquires, with a roguish twinkle of her bright, blue eyes.

"*Now* I have changed my mind," the countess exclaims, evasively.

"Lovely woman's divine prerogative," laughs her friend. "But do you know that malicious people will say that you have quite thrown yourself away in marrying a plain, untitled American?"

"I am quite indifferent to what they will say," the young countess replies, serenely. "I shall have secured my own happiness, and that is the main point. For the rest, I am not anxious over titles. You know I am part American myself."

"Yes, I know, but this is the first time I have ever heard you allude to it," Lady Clive replies. "I fancied you were ashamed of the Yankee strain in your blood."

The sensitive color rushes warmly into Lady Vera's cheek.

"I was," she admits, "but I had no need to be. My mother was one of the fairest, sweetest, and purest of America's daughters. Yet I had a prejudice against the people of her native land and mine, a girl's prejudice that made me unjust to the many because I hated a few. Some day I will tell you about my life in America, Lady Clive, and you will understand me better, perhaps."

"Shall you go back to the United States with Phil, or shall you prefer a life in England?" Lady Clive inquires.

"We have not settled that yet," the young girl answers, blushing.

Her face has grown very thoughtful as she speaks. A moment later she asks, in an altered voice:

"Who were those American people whom you met in Switzerland, Lady Clive?"

Lady Clive seemed to reflect.

"You mean those vulgarly rich people?" she inquires.

"Yes."

"My dear, I have quite forgotten what they were called. I have such a poor memory for names. [Pg 63]
But no matter. You will see them in London this winter," Lady Clive replies.

And again the vexing question which she has forgotten since yesterday, recurs to Lady Vera's mind:

"What form will my vengeance take?"

But no faintest idea comes to her of the terrible truth. If anyone were to whisper it to her in these first hours of her great new happiness, it would surely strike her dead. The shock of pain would be too great for endurance.

But fate withholds the blow as yet, and some golden days of peace and happiness dawn for Lady Vera.

With Lady Clive's arrival she inaugurates a little reign of gaiety that rejoices the heart of Mrs. Vance. She gives and receives invitations. Colonel Lockhart rides over daily to spend long hours by his lady's side, reading, singing, talking to each other in the low, sweet tones of lovers. Lord Gordon consoles himself with Miss Montgomery, who secretly confides to him that she "cannot imagine what Colonel Lockhart sees in that haughty Lady Fairvale."

"She is beautiful," Lord Gordon answers, loyal to his old love yet.

"I do not admire her style. She is too slim—too American in her looks," Miss Montgomery rejoins. She is inclined to *embonpoint* herself, and envies every slender woman she sees.

Lord Gordon does not dispute her charge. He is too wise for that. But in his heart he wonders why Lady Vera had reconsidered her rejection of his friend, and wishes that he had been the happy man blest by her preference.

Lady Vera, on her part, has quite forgotten the coquette's existence in her serene, new happiness. Philip is her love, her lord, her king. She forgets all else save him who holds her heart. The light comes back to her eyes, the roundness and color to her cheek. She is dazzlingly lovely in the new beauty that love brings to her face.

The days pass, and they begin to talk of going up to London. The lovely fall weather is over, and mists and rain obscure the sky. They are glad to huddle around the glowing fires in the luxurious rooms, and Lady Clive's thoughts begin to turn on the subject most dear to the fashionable woman's heart—new dresses.

"Vera, you will lay aside your mourning, dear, I hope," she says. "Do you know that those black dresses make you look too sad and thoughtful for your years? Do send Worth an order for something brighter—will you not?"

"I will have some white dresses, I think," Lady Vera promises.

"Some of those sweet embroidered things!" Lady Clive exclaims, enthusiastically. "She will look lovely in them—don't you think so, Philip?"

"She looks lovely in anything," answers the loyal lover, and Lady Vera shivers and represses a sigh. Now and then a shadow from the nearing future falls darkly over her spirit. The memory of her vow of vengeance falls like an incubus over her spirit. What will Philip say to this strange vow [Pg 64]
of hers, she asks herself over and over.

She gives Worth *carte blanche* for the dresses, and in a few weeks they go up to London, already filling up with fashion and beauty. No one knows how regretfully Lady Vera looks back upon the happy hours she has spent at Fairvale Park with her happy lover. They see that her face is graver, but they do not guess her thoughts. How should they? No one dreams of that oath of vengeance bequeathed her by her dead father. No one knows how often she whispers to herself in the still watches of the wakeful nights:

"Soon I shall be face to face with Marcia Cleveland, and must punish her for her wicked sins. How shall I strike her best? What form will my vengeance take?"

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Invitations began to pour in upon them as soon as they were fairly settled at Clive House. Lady Clive decides to attend Lady Spencer's grand ball.

Sir Harry objects.

"There will be a crush," he says. "Lady Spencer always asks everybody."

"Precisely why I am going," responds his vivacious wife. "Crowds always amuse me. Besides, we will see almost everybody who will be here for the season."

"Your countrymen, those rich Americans, will be there," Sir Harry insinuates, maliciously.

"I can stand that, too," Lady Clive retorts. "I am not to be daunted by trifles. Besides, I want Philip and Vera to see those people."

Lady Vera says not a word, but her heart beats high, and there is some little triumph mingled with her thoughts.

"Will Mrs. Cleveland and her daughter know me?" she asks herself. "Will they recognize the poor girl whom they injured and insulted so cruelly in the wealthy and honored Countess of Fairvale?"

She selects one of her loveliest dresses—a silvery white brocade, trimmed with a broidery and fringe of gleaming pearls. No jewels mar the rounded whiteness of her perfect arms and stately throat. The waving, golden hair is piled high upon her graceful head, with no ornament save a cluster of velvety white pansies.

"They say that my enemies' jewels are almost barbaric in their splendor. I will show them that I am lovely enough to leave my jewels at home," she tells herself, with some little girlish triumph.

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## CHAPTER XX.

At Darnley House on the night of Lady Spencer's ball, all the devices of art and the aid of two well-nigh distracted maids are called in to beautify Mrs. Leslie Noble for her *debut* in London fashionable society. Her small, pale, faded face is rejuvenated by *rouge* and powder, the hair- [Pg 65] dresser furnishes a tower of straw-gold puffs to crown her own sparse locks, and add dignity and hight to her low stature. Her dress is a *chef-d'œuvre* of the Parisian man milliner—palest blue satin, with diaphanous, floating draperies of blue embroidered crape. A magnificent diamond necklace clasps her small throat. Bracelets of diamonds shine on her wrists, diamonds blaze in her hair, diamond clasps hold the azure draperies in place. From head to foot the small blonde sparkles with splendor, and her weak soul thrills with vanity. She is determined to create a sensation, and to have the incense of admiration poured at her shrine.

When she has fretted and worried through the process of dressing, and slapped the face of one maid, and scolded the other one into floods of tears, she sends for her mother to come into the dressing-room.

There is a little delay, and then Mrs. Cleveland sails in, gorgeous in crimson brocade and rubies, her black eyes shining with triumphant satisfaction at her own really fine appearance. But Ivy, absorbed in her own self, has no admiration to spare for her mother.

"I sent for you, mamma, to ask you how I look," she says. "These stupid women have worried me into a fever. They can do nothing right. Tell me, do you think any of these proud, titled dames will outshine me in the ball-room to-night?"

Mrs. Cleveland's glance roves critically over the resplendent figure. All the appliances of wealth and art cannot hide the fretful, ill-natured look on the small, thin face, nor the shrewish light in the pale-blue eyes.

"Your dress is faultless—I do not believe anyone will be more magnificent than you," she answers; "but try to look more complaisant, do, Ivy. You have no idea how that fretful look mars the beauty of your face. Remember you will have some formidable rivals to-night. The grandest and most beautiful women in London will be at Lady Spencer's ball."

"I am as pretty as any of them," Mrs. Noble cries, irascibly. "I don't see why I am to be cautioned against my looks so much. An angel would lose her temper. There was Leslie to-day, telling me to look for my laurels, for the beauty of last season would be there, and carry all before her?"

"The Countess of Fairvale—yes, I have heard that she would be there," Mrs. Cleveland answers. "I am quite curious to see her. She is as lovely as a dream, they say, a dark-eyed blonde with golden hair."

"Leslie saw her portrait at Delany's—the great artist, you know," Mrs. Noble answers. "Would you believe he had the insolence to tell me she reminded him of that wretched creature—Vera Campbell?"

"*She* had dark eyes and fair hair, you remember," Mrs. Cleveland answers, carelessly.

"Yes, but the idea of comparing her to a great beauty like this Lady Fairvale—that girl who was no better than a servant!" Mrs. Noble cries, indignantly.

"Well, well, there is no use to be jealous of the dead. Vera Campbell was beautiful, certainly, but [Pg 66] Leslie never cared for her, you know," Mrs. Cleveland answers, impatiently.

"Precious little he cares for me, either," her daughter complains. "He pretended to love me once, but he has dropped even the pretense long ago!"

"What does it matter? You are his wife, and spend his money all the same," Mrs. Cleveland answers, heartlessly. "Come, Ivy, if you mean to attend the ball to-night, it's time to be off. For Heaven's sake, smooth those ugly frowns off your face before we reach Lady Spencer's, or people will think you old and ugly in spite of your diamonds."

Ivy's pale eyes flash with rage at the cool reminder, but she is wise enough to know that her mother is speaking for her good. She dabs on a little more pearl powder, takes up her white satin cloak lined with snowy swan's-down, and with a fond, farewell glance into the mirror, turns to go.

"You need not fear for me, mamma," she says, summoning a smile to her painted lips. "I shall be as bright and smiling as the Countess of Fairvale herself. But I wonder where Leslie can be! He drank so much wine at dinner that I am afraid he is in no condition to attend us."

A door opens suddenly to her right, and Mr. Noble appears in full evening dress, his face somewhat flushed, but looking otherwise none the worse for the wine his wife deplores. He looks ungraciously at his resplendent wife.

"So you have got on all your war-paint," he sneers. "How ridiculously over-dressed you are, Ivy. You make one think of a jeweler's show-window. A pity you could not have bored a hole through your nose, and hung a diamond there, too."

"A pity you drank enough wine at dinner to make you a drunken boor," she retorts angrily.

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## CHAPTER XXI.

Dazzling vistas of gorgeous rooms; a blaze of light and flowers everywhere: men and women in festive attire; over all, the throb and swell of the gay, sweet, maddening dance-music.

Lady Spencer's ball is in full blast, and as Sir Harry Clive predicted, it is a "crush." But after all everyone seems to be enjoying it, even Mrs. Noble, who, in a conspicuous position, and surrounded by a small circle of diamond-admirers, deems herself an acknowledged belle, and gives herself pleasant and coquettish little airs, accordingly.

"I have seen no one any prettier than I am," she confides to her mother, in a delighted whisper. "If that Lady Fairvale is here she cannot be a very great beauty. Doubtless she has been greatly overrated. I fancy that girl over there in the pink satin and opals must be she. You observe she has fair hair with dark eyes."

"No; for that is Lady Alice Fordham, I am told," Mrs. Cleveland answers. "I do not think the beauty has arrived yet."

"Staying late in order to create a sensation," Mrs. Noble sneers, then returning to her own admirers, forgets the distasteful subject for awhile in airing her own graces with the laudable intent of aggravating her husband, who has retired to a distant part of the room in supreme disgust. [Pg 67]

But suddenly in Mrs. Noble's vicinity an eager whisper runs from lip to lip, all eyes turn in one direction, a lady and gentleman advancing down the center of the room are the cynosure of all eyes—Lady Fairvale and Colonel Lockhart. Mrs. Noble catches her breath in unwilling admiration.

For surely since Adam and Eve were paired in the Garden of Eden, no more beautiful pair had been created than these two!

Colonel Lockhart, to humor a whim of his sister's, appeared in the splendid and becoming uniform of a colonel in the United States Army. His martial form and handsome face appeared princely in his becoming garb, and his fine, dark-blue eyes were sparkling with pride and happiness as they rested on the lovely girl who hung upon his arm with all the confidence of first, pure, innocent love.

"She is as lovely as a dream," Mrs. Cleveland had said to her daughter, and Ivy, with a gasp of envy, is fain to acknowledge the truth.

Tall, slenderly formed, with

> "Cheek of rose and brow of pearl,
> Shadowed by many a golden curl,"

with dark eyes radiating light beneath the drooping, ebon lashes, with neck and arms moulded like the gleaming white marble of a sculptor's masterpiece, and guiltless of all adornment; with that silvery robe sweeping about the stately form as if the mist of the sea had enveloped her, Lady Vera looks and moves "a queen," gracious, lovely, smiling, as if the shadow of a great despair were not brooding over that golden head.

"Not a jewel, scarcely a flower, and yet more perfect than an artist's dream," Mrs. Cleveland whispers maliciously to her overbearing daughter.

But Ivy forgets to be angry at the little thrust. She stares at the beautiful vision, pale to the very lips.

"Leslie was right," she murmurs, like one dazed. "She frightens me, she is so like—so like that dead girl, Vera. Do you not see it, mamma?"

"Yes, but why should a mere chance likeness frighten you?" Mrs. Cleveland retorts, with subdued scorn.

Lady Vera has not seen her enemies yet. A group of admirers has closed around her, and for a little while she forgets that she will meet here the heartless and vindictive woman who destroyed the happiness of her parents. Her lover claims her hand for the dance, and she passes from their sight a little space.

Colonel Lockhart is radiant with joy and pride. The hum of admiration that follows his darling everywhere is music in his ears.

"My darling, do you see how every eye follows you?" he whispers, fondly.

But Lady Vera laughs archly in the happiness of her heart.

"You are mistaken. They are only admiring your uniform," she retorts, gayly, and the soldier [Pg 68] thinks to himself that surely the smile upon the crimson lips is the gladdest and sweetest that ever rejoiced a lover's heart.

But it fades suddenly, the glad, sweet smile, and the blush upon the rounded cheek.

The dance is over, and they are lingering together by a stand of rare and fragrant flowers.

Suddenly the blush and smile fade together. A strange, stern look comes into the dark eyes, she drops the rose that her lover has just placed in her hand.

"Vera," he asks, looking anxiously at her, "what ails you, dear? You have grown so grave."

She looks up at him with strange eyes, from which the light and joy of a moment ago have faded as if they had never been.

"Philip, who is that woman over there, in the crimson brocade and rubies?" she asks, indicating the person by a slight inclination of her head.

His glance follows hers.

"That woman—yes, someone told me awhile ago that she was a countrywoman of mine, a Mrs. Cleveland. The one next her, in the diamonds, is her daughter."

Lady Vera is silent a moment, gazing steadily at the unconscious two.

She has recognized them instantly, and only asked the question to "make assurance doubly sure." Some of the bitterness in the heart rises up to her face. Her lips curl in scorn.

Colonel Lockhart regards her anxiously, puzzled by the inexplicable change in her face.

"What is it, Vera? Do you know these people?" he asks.

"How should I know them?" she asks, trying to throw off the weight that has fallen on her heart.

"Are you ill, then? These flowers are too heavy and sweet, perhaps. Shall I take you away?" he inquires.

"Not yet," she answers.

She continues gazing steadily at Mrs. Cleveland and her daughter. To her heart she is saying over and over:

"I am face to face with my enemies at last. What form will my vengeance take?"

In a moment that question that she has asked herself so many times is terribly answered.

Watching Ivy with her strange, intent gaze, she sees a gentleman come up to her side.

"Am I mad," she asks herself, with terrible calm despair, "or is it really Leslie Noble?"

Her lover unconsciously answers the silent question.

"You see that dark, handsome man, Vera?" he says. "His name is Leslie Noble. He is the husband of the lady in the diamonds."

She makes him no answer at first. Her eyes are wide and dark with horror. All in a moment she sees plainly the awful answer to the question so often asked of her shuddering heart.

"Vera, indeed you are ill. Let me take you away from the heavy scent of these flowers," her lover pleads.

She starts like one waking from a dreadful dream, and clings to his arm. [Pg 69]

"Yes, take me away," she echoes, in a far-off voice. "There are too many flowers here, and the light hurts my eyes, and the music my heart."

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## CHAPTER XXII.

"My darling, I do not know what to think," Colonel Lockhart exclaims, anxiously. "A moment ago you were so bright and happy—now you look pale and startled, and your words are strange and wild. Has anything frightened you, my darling?"

She lifts her heavy, dark eyes almost beseechingly to his own.

"Philip, please do not talk to me, now," she says. "Do not ask me any questions. Only find me a quiet place away from the crowd, where I may rest awhile. I am ill."

"I do not know where to find such a place, unless I take you into the conservatory. I expect it is quite deserted now," he answers.

"We will go there, then," she replies.

Troubled at heart, and very anxious over his darling, Colonel Lockhart leads her down through the long vistas of fragrant bloom to a quiet seat under a slender young palm tree. There are very few flowers here—only cool, green thickets of lovely, lace-like ferns, watered by the sparkling fountain poured from the lifted urn of a marble Naiad.

"Will this spot suit you, Vera?" he inquires, anxiously.

She bows, and looks at him with her grave, sad gaze.

"Philip, you must leave me here alone for half an hour," she says, "I wish to rest awhile. Then you may come to me."

"You look so ill and pale I am almost afraid to leave you alone," he answers. "May I not remain near you, Vera? I will not talk to you, nor weary you in any way. I will sit silently and wait your pleasure."

"I would rather be alone," she answers, wearily.

"Then I will go, my darling, but I shall be very anxious over you. It will be the longest half hour of my life."

He stoops over her, and taking the sweet white face in his hands, kisses the pale, drawn lips. A stifled sob breaks from her at the thought that in a little while these kisses will be hers no longer.

"You are nervous, dear. Let me send my sister to you," he urges.

"I had rather be alone," she answers.

"Forgive me, dear. I will go, then," he answers, turning away.

The tall form disappears in the green, flowery shrubbery. The echo of the firm, elastic footstep dies away. Lady Vera is alone at last, sitting with folded hands and dark, terrified eyes, face to face with the awful reality of her life's despair.

"Leslie Noble, my unloved and unloving husband, is alive and married to his old love, Ivy Cleveland—how passing strange," she murmurs, hollowly, to herself. "What strange mystery is here? Did he believe me dead, as I did him? Or has he, in the madness of his love for Ivy, recklessly plunged into sin? But if so, why did he bring her here where they must meet me? There is some strange, unfathomable mystery here which I cannot penetrate." [Pg 70]

Alas, poor Vera! the gloom of a subtle mystery wraps thee round, indeed, and the hand that held the key to the secret is cold in death.

Low moans gurgle over her lips, and blend with the murmur of the fountain as it splashes musically into the marble basin. She is thinking of her handsome, noble lover between whose heart and hers a barrier has risen, wide and deep as the eternal Heaven.

"I must part from him, my Philip, my love!" she moans, "for in the sight of God I am Leslie Noble's wife, even though before men he is Ivy Cleveland's husband."

She bows her face in her hands, and bitter, burning tears stream through her fingers. In all the hours when she has brooded over that oath of vengeance made by her father's death-bed, no slightest thought has come to her in what terrible way she must keep her vow, and at what fearful cost to her life's happiness.

"What strange prescience came to my father in dying?" she asks herself, in wonder. "How strangely his words were shaped to fit the awful reality. I must punish Marcia Cleveland through her dearest affections, he said. All her heart is centered on Ivy, and when I claim Leslie Noble from her and cover her head with that awful shame, my father's wishes will be fulfilled. And lest I should falter in my dreadful task, he added that last clause, no matter at what cost to myself. Oh, God! what will Philip say when he learns the truth? The way is plain before me how to keep my vow. I, who loathe and despise Leslie Noble, must claim him before God and man as my husband, and humiliate Ivy Cleveland to the dust. In no other way can I punish Marcia Cleveland and avenge my mother's wrongs."

"In no other way," the fountain seems to echo, as it splashes musically down, and Lady Vera, turning coward now in the face of the terrible future, prays in bitterest agony: "Oh, God! if I could die—die here and now, with Philip's last fond kiss still warm upon my lips, before I have to speak the dreadful words that will doom us to a living death in life."

With an effort she shakes off, presently, the horror and dread and shrinking repugnance with which she looks forward to the fulfillment of her oath.

"Mother, forgive me," she weeps. "Do I not remember all your bitter wrongs and mine, and how often my young heart burned to avenge them? And shall I shrink back now when the flaming sword is in my hand, and I am able to crush your enemy into the dust? No, no! What matter if it breaks my heart? My gentle mother, yours was broken, too. And though I tread on burning plow-shares, I will keep my oath of vengeance."

No faltering; no looking back now. Something of her father's haughty spirit is infused into Lady

Vera's soul. Her dark eyes light with the strange fire that burns on the altar of her heart, and when her lover comes anxiously to seek her, she has recovered all her usual calmness, and greets him with a smile. [Pg 71]

"You are better, dear?" he exclaims.

"Yes, and we will return to the ball-room now," she answers, resting her icy fingers lightly against his arm.

Passing from the subdued light of the conservatory into the glare of the ball-room, they come face to face with Leslie, with Ivy hanging on his arm, flushed and heated from the dance. Lady Vera lifts her head with stag-like grace, and looks steadily into their eyes, but beyond an insolent stare from Ivy, and a glance of warm admiration from the man, they give no sign of recognition. Lady Vera passes on, and Lady Clive comes up to her, laughing.

"My dear, you have seen our country people—the rich Americans," she says. "How do you like them?"

"I will tell you some day," she answers, in a strange tone, yet with a careless smile.

Still later in the evening Lady Spencer seeks out the countess.

"Dear Lady Fairvale, will you allow me to introduce to you our American guests?" she asks. "They are most anxious to know the beauty of the season."

Lady Vera, growing pale as her white robe, draws her slight form proudly erect.

"Pray, pardon my rudeness, Lady Spencer," she answers, coldly. "But I must decline. I do not wish to know them."

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## CHAPTER XXIII.

Society, which likes nothing better than a bit of gossip, commented considerably on the Countess of Fairvale's refusal to know the rich Americans. There were some who blamed her and thought she was over-nice and proud. The American Consul vouched for their respectability, and their style of living attested to their wealth. What more could she desire? Everyone else received them on equal terms. Why did Lady Vera hold out so obstinately against speaking to them? It could only be a girl's foolish whim—nothing more, for she assigned no reason for her refusal.

But it created some little embarrassment at first. People did not like to invite the countess and the Americans together for fear of an unpleasant collision. They could not slight Lady Vera, and they did not wish to offend the Americans. The affair was quite unpleasant, and created some little notoriety.

"And after all, Lady Vera's mother was an American, and she was born in the United States herself. Why should she hold herself above one of her own country people?" said one of the knowing ones.

No one could answer the question, and least of all the Americans themselves, who were secretly galled and humiliated almost beyond endurance by the scorn and indifference of the proud and beautiful young girl.

Mr. Noble was sorely chafed by Lady Vera's course. He had conceived a great admiration for her, and desired to hear her talk, that he might learn if her voice as well as her face resembled his dead wife, Vera, the girl who had committed suicide rather than be an unloving wife. Mrs. Cleveland, who had desired to know her because she was the fashion just then, was very angry, too, but Ivy took it the hardest of all. She considered it a deliberate and malicious affront to herself. [Pg 72]

"The proud minx!" she said, angrily. "In what is she better than I am that she should refuse to know me? I shall ask her what she means by it."

"You will do no such thing," Mrs. Cleveland cries out, startled by the threat. "You would make yourself perfectly ridiculous! We will pass it over in utter silence, and show her that we cannot be hurt by such foolish airs as she gives herself."

"I am as good as she. I will not be trampled upon!" Ivy retorts, venomously. "What! is she made of more than common clay because she has gold hair and black eyes, and a pink and white face like a doll? It is all false after all, I have no doubt. Her hair is bleached by the golden fluid, and her red and white bought at Madame Blanche's shop!"

"People who live in glass houses should never throw stones," interpolates her lord and master, thus diverting her wrath a moment from Lady Vera and drawing it down upon his own devoted head.

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But no one is more surprised at Vera's course than her lover, Colonel Lockhart.

It is when they have gone home from Lady Spencer's ball, and he detains her one moment in the drawing-room to say good-night, that he asks her anxiously:

"Vera, my darling, what story lies behind your refusal to know these people to-night?"

He feels the start and shiver that runs over the graceful form as he holds her hand in his own. She looks up at him with such a white and despairing face that he is almost frightened.

"Oh, Philip," she cries, in a voice of the bitterest pain, "I wish you had not asked me that question yet. Believe me, you will know too soon."

"Then there is a story!" he exclaims.

"Yes," she answers, wearily. "But, Philip, let me go now. I am very tired. You do not know all that I have borne to-night."

He folds the beautiful figure closely in his arms, and kisses the white eyelids that droop so wearily over the sad, dark eyes.

"Forgive me for troubling you, darling," he says, tenderly. "I do not wish to force your confidence, Vera. Only believe me, my own one, every sorrow that rends your heart causes me unhappiness, too."

She lies still against that loyal heart one moment—oh, happy haven of rest, never to be hers! then struggles from him with one last, lingering kiss, and goes to her room and her sleepless couch to brood alone in that dark, dark hour that comes before the dawn, over the terrible discovery she has made.

For Colonel Lockhart the hours pass sleeplessly, too. The shadow of Vera's unknown sorrow lies heavily upon his heart. [Pg 73]

He rises early, and long before the late breakfast hour Lady Vera's maid brings him a sealed note. He tears it hastily open, and her betrothal ring falls sparkling into his hand.

> "Dear Philip," she writes, "I return your ring. A terrible barrier has risen between us that all our love can never bridge over. So we must part. And, oh! believe me, dearest, it breaks my heart to write it. One thing I would ask you, Philip—will you go away from here and save me the sorrow of meeting you again? I can bear my misery and my impending shame far better if I cannot see you whom I have so fondly loved, and must so fatefully resign.
>
> "Your Wretched Vera."

"Has my darling grown mad?" the handsome soldier asks himself, staring almost stupidly at the note and the ring in his hand. "What shame can touch her, my beautiful, pure-hearted one? She is going to be ill, perhaps, and this is but the vagary of a mind diseased."

So he writes back impulsively:

> "Vera, let me see you for even ten minutes. Surely, my darling, you do not mean what you say. What shame can touch you, my innocent love? And why should you wish to send me away? Is it not my right and duty and desire to stand by your side through all the trials of life?
>
> "'Oh! what was love made for if 'tis not the same,
> Through joy and through torment, through glory and shame?'
>
> "Do not ask me to leave you, darling. If indeed sorrow and trouble are near you, my place is by your side. I will wait for you half an hour in the library. Do not fail me, dear. I want to put your ring back upon your finger.
>
> "Your Own Philip."

Lady Vera weeps bitterly over her lover's note.

"Ah, he does not know, he does not dream of the fatal truth," she moans, wildly. "And what can I say to him? I cannot, I will not tell him. I could not do it. I should die of the shame. He will know too soon as it is. And yet I must go to him. He will not be denied. Oh! what shall I say to him, my poor boy?"

Weeping and lingering, dreading to go, the half-hour is almost up before she drags herself to the library where Philip is pacing up and down the floor in a fever of doubt and suspense.

"Vera, my darling," he cries. "Oh, how could you treat me so cruelly?"

She pauses with her arms folded over the back of a chair, and regards him sorrowfully. Colonel Lockhart can see that she has been weeping bitterly. Her tremulous lips part to answer him, then close without a sound.

He goes up to her and takes one white, jeweled hand fondly into his own.

"Tell me what troubles you, Vera," he whispers gently.

"Can you not guess, Philip? It is because I must part from you," she answers sadly.

"But why must you do so, Vera?" he asks, gravely, touched to the heart by her drooping and despondent attitude. [Pg 74]

"I cannot tell you," she answers sadly, with a heavy sigh.

"Perhaps you have ceased to love me," her lover exclaims, almost sternly.

She starts and fixes her dark eyes reproachfully on his face.

"Oh, would that I had!" she exclaims. "This parting would then be easier to bear!"

They regard each other a moment with painful intentness. The marks of misery on her face are too plain to be mistaken, and the wonder deepens on his own.

"Vera, why are you so mysterious?" he asks, anxiously. "If you throw me over like this, I have at least a right to know the reason why."

"You shall know—soon," she answers, almost bitterly.

Then she lifts her eyes to his face pleadingly.

"Oh, Philip, do not torture me," she cries wildly. "We must part! There is no help nor hope for us! A terrible barrier has risen between us! I have a terrible duty to perform, and there is no turning back for me. But, oh, Philip, if I could persuade you to go away now—at once—where you might never hear or know the fatal secret that has come between us! Darling, let me beg you," she falls suddenly on her knees before him, "to take me at my word and put the whole width of the world between us!"

He lifts her up and wipes the streaming tears from her beautiful eyes.

"My darling, you make it hard for me to refuse you," he answers, in sorrow and perplexity, "but do you think I could be coward enough to desert you when trouble and sorrow hung over your head? I am a soldier, Vera. I cannot show the white feather. If sorrow comes I will be by your side and help you to bear it."

"*You*, of all others, could help me the least," she answers, brokenly.

And again his noble, handsome face clouds over with wonder and sorrow.

"I will try, at least," he answers, with sad firmness. "Do not ask me to leave you, Vera, I cannot do it. Oh, darling, are you sure, quite sure, that we need really part? That you cannot be my wife?"

"I am as sure of it as if one or the other of us lay at this moment in the coffin," she answers, drearily.

"And that barrier, Vera, will it always stand?" he asks.

"Always, unless death should remove it," she answers, with a shudder; and with a moan, she continues: "Once I believed that death had already stricken it from my path, and I was so happy, Philip—happy in your love and mine. But the grim specter of the past has risen to haunt me. I can never be your wife. I can never know one moment's happiness in life again."

"She is ill and desperate," Colonel Lockhart tells himself, uneasily. "Surely things cannot be so bad as she represents. She exaggerates her trouble. When I come to know the truth I shall find that it is some simple thing that her girlish fears have magnified a hundredfold. I must not let her drive me away from her. I may be of service to her in her trouble." [Pg 75]

Aloud he says, gently:

"Since I may no longer be your lover, Vera, you will let me be your friend?"

"Since you wish it, but you will change your mind soon," she answers, hopelessly.

"I think not," he answers, lifting her hand gently to his lips, and then she turns away, meeting Lady Clive upon the threshold coming in.

"Vera, my dear, how ill you look," she exclaims. "Has anything happened? Ah, Phil, are you there? What have you said to Vera? You are not having a lover's quarrel, I hope?"

He makes her no answer, but Vera, turning back, throws her arms around her friend's neck, and lifts her pale, beseeching face.

"I will tell you what has happened, Lady Clive," she answers. "I have broken my engagement with Philip."

"Broken your engagement with Philip? Why, what has he done?" Lady Clive exclaims.

"Nothing," Lady Vera answers, meekly as a child.

"Nothing?" the lady repeats, half-angrily. "Nothing? Then why have you thrown him over, Lady Vera? Did you tire of him so soon? I did not know that you were a flirt."

"Hush, Nella, you shall not blame her," her brother exclaims, sternly.

"You see Philip is not angry with me, Lady Clive," Vera says, entreatingly. "Indeed I am not a flirt. I love him dearly, but I cannot be his wife. There are reasons," she almost chokes over the word, "that—that you will know soon. You will see I was not to blame. Oh, Lady Clive, do not be angry with me."

"I will not, dear," answers the gentle-hearted lady, kissing the sweet, quivering lips of the wretched girl. "I do not understand you, but if Philip is not angry with you, neither can I be. Yet I am very sorry that I shall not have you for my sister."

With a stifled sob Lady Vera breaks from her clasp and flies up to her own room. She does not appear at breakfast.

At luncheon she is so pale and sad and wretched-looking that it makes one's heart ache to see her.

At night they attend a ball, from which Colonel Lockhart excuses himself on the plea of indisposition, and at which the rich Americans also fail to put in an appearance.

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# CHAPTER XXIV.

The invitations for Mrs. Vernon's lawn-party had been issued at least a fortnight, and but few people had declined them.

It was well known that she gave charming entertainments, and people were always eager to attend. A lawn-party, too, was so romantic, "too sweet for anything," declared the young women who adored those out-of-door entertainments where the most flagrant flirtations were possible, [Pg 76] and where the plainest faces acquired a certain beauty from the blended light of lamp-light and moonlight, and the flickering leaf-shadows cast by the over-arching trees.

Older people dreaded the night-air and the dew, but to these the drawing-rooms were always open, so that no one dreamed of declining Mrs. Vernon's elegant cards.

Lady Clive was present that evening, her fair and stately beauty, so like her brother's, thrown into perfect relief by a robe of blue and silver, with pale, gleaming pearls around her graceful throat and white arms.

Lady Vera wore white satin and tulle, with water-lilies here and there, a beautiful dress that was most becoming to her, and made her look regal as a young princess.

A flush of excitement glowed upon her cheeks, and her eyes were bright and restless with a strange look of expectancy and almost dread in their beautiful depths.

The constant thought in her mind was:

"I shall see my enemies to-night. What will be the result? They pretend to regard me as a perfect stranger. What shameless audacity. I cannot understand how they can carry it out so boldly. And yet God knows that but for my oath of vengeance I would never speak. Ivy might have my husband and welcome. Yet I would give much to know whose death it was I read in that American paper. Leslie Noble's father, perhaps, though I had some vague idea that he was dead long ago."

Colonel Lockhart is present too, this evening, ever watchful, ever near his darling, though without the least appearance of intrusiveness.

Other lovers take his place by her side, but as usual she is calm and cold to all.

She is done with love and lovers, she tells herself with sad self-pity.

All her future life will lie in the dun, gray twilight of sorrow.

"As the blade wears the scabbard,
The billow the shore;
So sorrow doth fret me
Forevermore!"

It is late in the evening before Colonel Lockhart ventures to address her.

Then something in her glance has drawn him to her side, in spite of his determination not to intrude upon her.

Lady Eva Clarendon and Miss Montgomery are present, and both have laid some claims to his attention. In spite of herself, Lady Vera cannot keep the pain out of her eyes, and Philip, watching her with the keenness of love, is quick to see it. In a moment he is by her side.

"Will you promenade with me?" he asks, deferentially.

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A sudden smile of irrepressible pleasure lights the beautiful face. She loves him dearly, and it is so hard to give him up.

Rising, she lays her white hand on his arm, and they move away together down a quiet path under the shade of the leafy trees hung with gayly-colored lamps, whose checkered light throws [Pg 77] their faces now in brightness, now in shadow.

The scene, the hour, is full of romance. Tall marble vases here and there are crowded with fragrant flowers, whose sweetness makes breathing a perfect delight. The moon is at its full, pouring down a flood of pure white radiance that makes the glimmering light of the lamps seem garish and unnecessary. Soft music rises, blent with the sound of happy voices, and a nightingale has perched itself on a rose tree near by, and is

"Pouring his full heart
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art."

They walk slowly on, speaking little, but with hearts that tremble with mingled pain and pleasure. The presence of each to the other is perilously sweet. In his mind runs the refrain of a song she had sung that evening:

"Beloved eye! beloved star,
 Thou art so near and yet so far."

Suddenly, in turning a curve in the path, they come face to face with a couple walking from the opposite direction—Leslie Noble and his wife.

The small blonde is attired in an elaborate costume of white and green, and the snaky fire of emeralds blaze round her throat and wrists. Her pale eyes glare with a snaky anger, too, as they light upon the beautiful young countess, looking bride-like in her rich, white dress, and the white lace scarf that she has carelessly thrown over her golden hair.

With an impulsive movement Ivy disengages her hand from her husband's arm, and places herself directly in Vera's way, her pale eyes flashing with rage, her head held high, her slight figure drawn erect, making the most of her insignificant stature.

"Lady Fairvale," she exclaims, insolently, "they tell me you refuse to know me or my husband, or my mother. Will you tell me the reason why?"

There is a dead pause, and Leslie Noble tries to drag his wife away, but she defies him.

"I shall not go!" she answers, sharply. "I told you I would do it. I have asked this proud lady the reason of her scorn, and I am waiting for an answer."

Lady Vera faces her a moment in scornful silence, but her pallid cheeks, her intense gaze, and her curling lips, all betray the tumult in her breast. She turns to Captain Lockhart, with a soul's despair in her lovely eyes.

"Philip, will you go away, and leave me alone with this woman?" she asks, pleadingly.

It seems to him that Vera does not know what is best for herself. How can he go away, and leave her to bear the brunt of this coarse woman's fury alone?

"Forgive me for refusing you, dear," he whispers back, "but it is better that I should stay. I cannot leave you without a friend by your side."

A look of futile despair flashes over the lovely face, but she urges him no more. Her eyes turn from his handsome, tender face to meet Ivy's angry, insolent gaze. [Pg 78]

"I ask you again, Lady Fairvale," exclaims the small fury, "why do you refuse to speak to us?"

"Oh, God, give me strength," Lady Vera prays, silently, "to keep the oath of vengeance made to my dying father!"

The memory of her parent's cruel wrongs flashes into her mind and steels her heart. She remembers her mother's broken heart, her father's ruined life, her own joyless, slavish girlhood, driven by these two women who now stand glaring stonily upon her, for Mrs. Cleveland, coming in search of her daughter, has become a sudden and amazed spectator of the curious scene.

"I will tell why I hold myself above you," Lady Vera answers, in a voice that quivers with scornful indignation. "It is because you are false and vile—a guilty woman, and a shameless sinner!"

"How dare you traduce me thus?" Mrs. Noble shrieks, in anger and amazement.

"I dare, because I speak the truth before God," her enemy answers, fearlessly. "How dare you claim to be Leslie Noble's wife, when you know that I, his first wife, Vera Campbell, am living?"

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## CHAPTER XXV.

It was a striking *tableau*, there beneath the over-arching trees that fair, calm, summer night. Lady Vera's beautiful face was all pale with passionate scorn and indignation as she leaned upon her lover's arm. Her enemies had started back as her scathing accusation fell upon them, and they now regarded her with looks of wrath, blent with honest astonishment. Colonel Lockhart's face had turned to a dull, ashen gray, like the pallor of death, but he stood his ground bravely, like the soldier that he was. Lady Vera did not dare to look at him, but beyond one swift, convulsive start, as though a sword had pierced his heart, the arm that supported her did not even tremble. He had steeled himself to bear his pain and make no sign.

"Colonel Lockhart," Mrs. Cleveland exclaims, starting boldly to the front, "I would advise you to take Lady Fairvale home to her friends. She must surely be raving mad. I know not how she came into possession of any facts concerning us, but I swear to you, and can prove my assertion, that Vera Campbell, the first wife of my son-in-law, Leslie Noble, has been dead and buried three years. Is it not so, Leslie?"

"It is perfectly true," he answers, gazing curiously at the beautiful girl who has claimed him as her husband. "If Lady Fairvale be Vera Campbell Noble, then she has risen from the grave itself to claim me, for I saw her buried three years ago, and I erected a costly marble monument to her memory."

"She committed suicide!" Ivy screams out, spitefully. "She died in my mother's house. I saw her lying dead, and I saw her buried."

"Oh, shameless falsehood!" Vera breaks out, warmly. "I did not die, and you know it. The bitter drug with which I thought to end my wretched life, turned out to be only a sleeping potion after [Pg 79]

all. Will you deny, Marcia Cleveland, that Lawrence Campbell came to you that night to denounce you for the falsehood with which you had betrayed him, and to ask, at your hands, his wronged wife and child?"

Livid with rage and fear, the wicked woman stares at her fearless accuser. How has this beautiful countess, with Vera Campbell's face, learned the secret of her past life?

"Lady Fairvale," she answers, "I do not know how you, a stranger, have learned the secrets of my past life, but I will answer your questions fairly and truthfully. Lawrence Campbell did indeed come to me as you assert, but his daughter had been buried that very day in Glenwood. I bade him seek his wife and child in the grave, and he fell down like one dead at my feet. I caused my servants to throw him into the street like a dog, and I know not, to this day, if he be living or dead."

"He is dead," Lady Vera answers, with blazing eyes. "He has been dead almost a year. He lived but for vengeance on you, Marcia Cleveland, and when he died, he bade me swear an oath of vengeance on you. He bade me avenge my martyred mother's bitter wrongs. It is for this I have spoken. Do you think I did not shrink from claiming that craven coward there," pointing a scornful finger, "as my husband?"

Flushing scarlet under her lightning scorn, Leslie Noble advances.

"Lady Fairvale, if indeed you are my wife," he says, "and," insolently, "no man could have a wife more beautiful, will you tell me by what strange chance you were rescued from the grave where I, myself, saw you laid?"

"I deny that I was ever buried," Vera flashes out angrily. "My father told me nothing of that. He declared that he had me carried away from Mrs. Cleveland's in a deep narcotic sleep."

"Is it true that Lawrence Campbell was the Earl of Fairvale?" Mrs. Cleveland demands, looking at Colonel Lockhart.

"It is perfectly true, madam," he answered, coldly.

"And it is true that I am his daughter, whom you and your daughter so shamefully abused and maltreated?" Vera cries. "Do you remember, Ivy Cleveland, how you abused and insulted me? How you struck me in the face that night when my mother lay dead in the house? Do you recall your anger because she had died before the embroidery was finished on your Surah polonaise? Do you remember, Leslie Noble, how you stood by the bedside of that dying saint, and swore to protect and love the unconscious child you married! Ah, well you kept your vow when you plotted with that wicked woman yonder to send me from you to a convent school where I should be tortured to death, so that you should go free. That was her wicked scheme, I know, for she had planned to marry you to Ivy. Now you know why I tried to escape from you into the merciful land of death. But Heaven spared me the commission of that sin. It was not poison I took. I made a mistake in the drug. I lived to drag you down to the dust, Marcia Cleveland; to punish you through your daughter's shame for my parents' wrongs and mine! You understand now why I [Pg 80] would not speak to you, Ivy Cleveland! That man there whom I utterly loathe and despise, is my husband, although I would not bear his name for wealth untold. *You* are a false and sinful woman unfit to mate with the pure and true, knowing yourself to be only the reputed wife of a bigamist!"

The torrent of passionate accusation comes to a sudden end, and Lady Vera, with heaving breast and dilated eyes, looks contempt upon her foes. They stand before her awed and silent for a moment. Her scathing words have carried conviction to their hearts. They know her in truth to be that Vera whom for three long years they have believed to be sleeping under the costly marble that bears her name in Glenwood Cemetery. But they will never admit it. To do that would be to throw up the game and own themselves beaten and vanquished.

A curious crowd of ladies and gentlemen have gathered around attracted by the sound of excited voices. With wonder and dismay they listen to the scathing denunciations that fall from the lips of the beautiful countess. Mrs. Cleveland, fully conscious of the curious eyes, turns around and makes reply to them—not Lady Vera.

"My friends," she cries, with uplifted hands and a face of horror, "surely this beautiful lady has lost her mind. She is stark, staring mad, and for this I can forgive her the insults she has heaped upon my daughter. I believe she is a clever adventuress whom Lawrence Campbell has foisted on the world as his heiress. Vera, the real daughter of the Earl of Fairvale, died three years ago in Washington. She is buried at Glenwood beneath a marble monument that bears her name and age. I swear before God that this is true. This girl here, this pretended Countess of Fairvale, is, without doubt, a clever impostor, who is keeping the Earl's true heir out of his own. Let her disprove this charge if she can. If she be truly Vera Campbell, let her prove that she was resurrected from the grave in Glenwood where my own eyes saw her laid."

A moment of perfect silence follows Mrs. Cleveland's venomous words. Her daughter, who is a coward at heart in spite of all her bravado, has fallen back a pace, allowing her mother to be spokesman, well knowing that not even herself could so valiantly defend her cause.

There is a look of fear and dread on Ivy's face that gives her a ghastly look in spite of her paint and powder.

Lady Vera's words have carried conviction to her heart, and in fancy she sees herself deserted and abandoned by the man whom she believed her husband, and whom she has relentlessly tyrannized over, recklessly dissipating his fortune, and trampling on his heart.

She well knows that every spark of love he ever entertained for her had died long ago, murdered

by her own heartless, unloving course toward him. What more natural than that he should rejoice if his bonds fell from him and left him free from her mother and herself, who had been fastened upon him like human vampires, draining his very heart's blood. [Pg 81]

She glances at him, and that glance does not reassure her. There is a strange expression on his face, and he is not looking at her, but at the beautiful, high-born girl who has just claimed him as her husband, albeit with words of scorn.

Even while she gazes at him in fear and terror he steps forward with a certain craftiness in his eyes, and answers Mrs. Cleveland's angry words.

"You speak too harshly, perhaps, Mrs. Cleveland. I have been impressed, even against my will, by Lady Fairvale's words. She is certainly possessed of knowledge that no one but Vera Campbell could have known. Then, too, she is startlingly like my dead wife, both in voice and person. Although I certainly buried my first wife and raised a costly monument over her grave, I am still willing to investigate the strange charges of Lady Fairvale. Strange things have happened sometimes. The dead have come to life, the lost have been found. 'Let justice be done though the heavens fall.'"

"Wretch! Would you turn traitor to me?" screams Ivy, clutching him violently by the arm, forgetful of all but her fear of losing him.

He gazes down at her in a feigned sympathy and sorrow.

"My poor Ivy. Could you think so meanly of me?" he exclaims. "But think, dear. How could we rest secure with this terrible charge hanging over us? Were it not better that I should take steps to prove the truth or falsity of this fair lady's bold accusation?"

"Take steps—how?" the bejeweled little woman falters confusedly.

"Nothing easier," he answers. "I shall cable to Washington to have my first wife's grave opened. If her remains are found undisturbed, then you are still my wife, Ivy, and this lady's story is an imposture. But if Vera's grave be found empty, I shall be forced to believe that Lady Fairvale is in sober reality the Vera whom, for three years, we believed dead and buried."

He speaks to Ivy, but he looks at Vera. Something in that glance makes her turn pale and flash a glance of silent scorn upon him.

"She is not Vera. She is an impostor whom Lawrence Campbell put into the place of his dead daughter," Ivy screams, impetuously, clinging to him with both hands. "Come away from her, Leslie. She is a false and wicked woman, and we will yet prove her so—will we not, mamma?"

"Yes, it shall be war to the knife between us," Mrs. Cleveland mutters, menacingly, flinging a glance of deadly hatred upon Lady Vera's pale and lovely face. "Come away now, Leslie, and bring Ivy home. She is too slight and frail to bear all this excitement."

Silently obeying the imperious will that has ruled him for almost three years, Leslie Noble moves away with Ivy on his arm, after a courteous bow to Vera, which she returns with a cold stare of contempt.

"Lady Vera, shall I take you away also? You look weary and exhausted," says Colonel Lockhart, in a low voice that shows intense self-repression and emotion. [Pg 82]

She starts and shivers at the sound of his voice.

"If you will be so kind," she answers, sadly, and moving away on his supporting arm she meets Lady Clive and Mrs. Vernon coming toward her. Their grave faces show instantly that they know all. Lady Vera pauses, with a strange, cold smile.

"Mrs. Vernon, I am sure you will never forgive me for my undignified act in creating an excitement and a sensation at your party. I was compelled to keep my oath to the dead. Yet *she* forced it on me. I did not mean to speak—just yet," she falters, incoherently, and Mrs. Vernon, who is the kindest woman alive, presses her hand, and murmurs gently, "Poor darling," while Lady Clive murmurs tenderest words of sympathy and love.

It is too much for Lady Vera—this gentleness and love after the exciting scene through which she has passed. Her forced calmness and self-control give way beneath its softening spell.

She reels dizzily, and only Colonel Lockhart's support prevents her from falling. In a moment he says to his sister, anxiously:

"She has fainted, Nella. What shall we do?"

"Bring her up-stairs into my *boudoir*," replies Mrs. Vernon, promptly and kindly. "We will revive her directly."

But Lady Clive negatives the proposal, decidedly.

"No, we will put her into the carriage and take her home," she says. "She will come to herself, directly. It is a blessed unconsciousness for her, poor girl. Why should we call her back to remembrance too soon?"

So the soldier lifts her in his strong and tender arms, and bears her to the carriage. Lady Clive receives the drooping head upon her lap, and they roll homeward, Lady Vera lying pale and mute between them like some pure, white lily, broken and beaten down by the force of the pitiless storm.

"This is hard lines upon you, Phil," Sir Harry Clive says, from his corner.

"Yes," his brother-in-law answers, in a low voice, and they speak no more until low sighs, rippling over Lady Vera's lips, presage her return to consciousness.

She lifts her head and looks at them, then drops her face in her hands, and bursts into passionate sobs and tears.

Lady Clive folds her white arms fondly around the heaving form.

"Do not weep so wildly, darling Vera," she whispers, gently.

But the heavy sobs only break forth more tumultuously.

"Do not check me," she whispers, "let me weep. Perhaps these tears may save my heart from breaking. There is such a terrible weight on heart and brain, and has been for weary, weary days. Let me weep until I can weep no more, and then I may be calm enough to tell you all my wretched story. Then you may know how to pardon my act of to-night."

So Lady Clive expostulates no more, only holds the slight form closer in her tender arms, reckless of the raining tears that spot and stain her azure satin robe as the burning drops fall on it from Vera's eyes. [Pg 83]

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# CHAPTER XXVI.

When Lady Vera has told all her story to these kind and sympathizing friends with all the fire and eloquence of passion, their indignation bursts forth unrestrainedly. Lady Clive weeps from pure sympathy.

"Now at last I understand Fairvale's strange reticence and melancholy," Sir Harry Clive exclaims. "He was indeed most cruelly wronged, and Marcia Cleveland must have been a fiend incarnate."

Colonel Lockhart alone says nothing. He sits a little apart, his arms folded over his broad breast, his blue eyes cast to the floor, a look of gloom and settled despair on his handsome, high-bred face. The bitter pain at his heart no tongue can tell.

"And all this while you were Leslie Noble's wife," Lady Clive says, with a heavy sigh for her brother's sake.

"But I believed him dead, you know," Lady Vera answers, with one swift glance at the lover she has lost.

"I wish he had been, for your sake and Phil's," pronounces Sir Harry, fervently, and a moan of pain surges over the pale lips of the beautiful girl.

"Ah, you cannot guess with what feelings of despair I learned of him living," she answers. "It seemed to me for one awful moment that a hand of ice clutched my heart, and that I should surely die. It came over me like a death-warrant, at what fearful cost to myself I should keep my oath to my father. But I had sworn to do his bidding. There was no turning back for me when the fatal moment came."

She pauses a moment, then resumes, with a mournful glance at Lady Clive:

"You will never forgive me, I know, for making myself a sensation and a town talk, Lady Clive. By to-morrow all London will ring with my secret. Oh, the pity and shame! But I will not disgrace you further. I shall not remain your guest any longer. To-morrow I am going away."

Then Colonel Lockhart speaks for the first time.

"You must not let her go, Nella," he says, firmly.

"Why?" cries out Lady Vera, startled.

He hesitates a moment. Why should he imbue her mind with the doubts and fears that fill his own? And she asks again:

"Why should I not go away, Colonel Lockhart?"

"Because you will need the protection of your friends," he answers, gravely.

"Do you think I am afraid of my enemies?" she asks, drawing her slight form proudly erect, and looking very brave and beautiful. "They may hate me as they will, but I defy them to harm me!"

"It is not their hatred but their love you have to fear," he answers, significantly.

"Love," she echoes, regarding him blankly.

"Leslie Noble's love, I mean," he answers, with an effort. [Pg 84]

A low and mirthless laugh ripples over her lips.

"I think you have mistaken me," she answers, bitterly. "He had no love for me. Ivy Cleveland held his heart. He only married me for pity's sake."

"It may have been pity, then, but it is something deeper now," Colonel Lockhart answers, gravely. "That man means to claim you, Lady Vera. I read it in the glances he cast upon you."

"Claim me!" she repeats, bewildered.

"For his wife," he answers, bitterly, out of the pain of his heart.

She starts to her feet with a little frightened cry, and flies to Lady Clive as if for protection.

"No, no, he would not dare!" she pants, wildly. "I hate and despise him too much to speak to him, even! I defy him to claim me for his wife! I would sooner die than belong to him! And he—oh, he would not wish it! He loved Ivy, you know."

"Do not pin your faith to that fact, Lady Vera," the baronet interposes gravely. "The lady, whom he claims for his wife now is many years older than you; she is faded, simpering, ridiculous. If he ever loved her, she must have made him rue that folly long since. Besides, she is not his real wife, and you are. Do not forget your great attractions, Lady Vera. You are young, beautiful, wealthy and titled. What more natural than that Leslie Noble should be dazzled by your manifold charms, and desire to claim you?"

She regards him with absolute horror in her lovely, white face.

"I would die before I would suffer him to even touch me!" she cries, indignantly.

"Then you must not leave us, Lady Vera," Sir Harry answers, earnestly. "With all the prestige of your rank and wealth you are so utterly alone in the world that my heart yearns for you as if you were my sister or my daughter. Stay with us and let us guard you from the traps your enemies may set for you."

"Stay with us," re-echoes Lady Clive, warmly, and her brother's speaking eyes reiterate the wish.

But Lady Vera's gaze turns from those eyes, too dearly loved for her peace of mind, and her heart sinks heavily.

"I should not trouble your peace, Lady Vera," he says, hastily, as if divining the thought in her mind. "I am going away."

"I cannot drive you from your sister's house," she answers, sadly.

He comes to her side and takes her hand gently in his strong, warm clasp.

"Be reasonable, Vera," he says, like one speaking to a willful child. "I am a man, young and strong, and capable of facing the world. You are scarcely more than a child, and you need protection from the ills that threaten your tender life. You will stay with Sir Harry and Nella while I will go away. Of course we understand that we cannot go on meeting each other daily as we have done. It would be too hard for both. It is best that we part. That is what you wish yourself—is it not?" [Pg 85]

"Yes, yes," she murmurs, faintly.

"That is best," he says, bravely. "I shall go, then; Nella will have my address, and if you ever need a friend you will send for me—will you not, Vera?"

She bows silently, and with sudden, irrepressible passion, he presses her hand.

"Oh, Vera, I have lost you forever, I know," he says, brokenly, "but—you will never allow Leslie Noble's claim, will you? You will never belong to him, never love him?"

"*Never*!" she answers, with all the pride of the Campbells flushing her face and ringing in her voice.

"Thank you a thousand times," he exclaims. "Leslie Noble is not fit to claim the treasure of your love, Vera. And now, tell me—you will stay with Nella, will you not?"

She glances doubtfully at Lady Clive.

"I could not go into society, you know," she says. "I could not face the world after—after that," and the burning crimson rushes into her face.

"It shall be just as you please about that," her friend answers. "Only say that you will remain with us, dear."

And Lady Vera answers:

"I will stay."

And then the first beams of the early summer dawn peep into the room in wonder at their sad, white faces.

It has been hours since Lady Vera began the telling of the sad story of her early life and her parents' bitter wrongs, and now, as she bids them all a sad good-night, and goes to her room to rest, her heart is breaking with the bitterness of her pain.

"Father," she murmurs, lifting her heavy eyes from her sleepless pillow, "father, I have punished them for their sins, I have shamed them in the eyes of all the world, but my own heart is broken."

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## CHAPTER XXVII.

"Vera, darling, Mr. Noble is in the library, and desires a private interview with you. Here is his card. Shall I say that you will receive him?"

It is several days after Mrs. Vernon's party, and Lady Clive comes suddenly into the pink-hung *boudoir* where the young countess is listlessly reclining on a satin sofa with her white arms

thrown up carelessly above her head.

She looks like some beautiful picture, though her cheek is pale, her lips sad, and slight, dark shadows are visible beneath her melancholy eyes. All her beautiful dark-golden hair is arranged in a rich, picturesque fashion on top of her head, and a few loose, curling tendrils wander lovingly over the broad, white, polished forehead, on which the slender, straight, black brows are so delicately outlined.

She wears an exquisite morning-dress of white muslin, profusely trimmed with rich lace, and a rose-colored ribbon binds her slender waist. [Pg 86]

She starts up with a frightened cry at the words of Lady Clive.

"I will not see him! I will not exchange even one poor word with him! How dare he have the audacity to come here?" she pants, growing paler still with anger, and stamping her slippered foot on the bit of pasteboard which she has cast indignantly upon the floor.

Lady Clive waits until her wrath has somewhat spent itself on the innocent card, then argues, gently:

"I know it will be painful to you, Vera, but might it not be better, just once, to receive him, and find out his business? You will then know what course he means to adopt, and can govern yourself accordingly."

Lady Vera pauses, irresolute. Her bosom heaves with quick, indignant sighs, her dark eyes flash.

"You advise me to receive him—this man whom I hate and despise, Lady Clive?" she says, wonderingly.

"For just once, Vera. And only *now* that you may learn his intentions and be on your guard against his machinations. After this time my doors shall be closed against him as against a pestilence. But you need not take my advice against your will, dear; use your own pleasure."

"You do not know how I dread to enter his presence," the girl cries, with a shudder.

"Decline to see him, then," Lady Clive advises.

"No, I will bear it this once. I will receive him this time, but after this, *never*!" Lady Vera answers, after a moment of painful thought.

"You decide well," Lady Clive comments, approvingly.

"He is in the library, you say," Lady Vera asks, with her hand upon the door.

"Yes. Shall I accompany you, my dear, if you dread to go alone?"

"I am not afraid of Leslie Noble," the fair young countess answers, dauntlessly. "I will face him alone."

She moves along the corridor with a free, proud step, glides down the stairs, and flings open the library door with an unfaltering hand, and her beautiful head held proudly, like a queen's, with defiance in her dark and flashing eyes.

He is waiting for her there in the soft, semi-twilight of the luxurious room, tall, and dark, and handsome, with eager admiration in his eyes as they fall upon the lovely, queenly girl crowned with the dusky gold of her luxuriant tresses.

She comes into the room, and he bows low and courteously before the fair girl, who, but a few nights ago claimed him as her husband, but she does not even bend that haughty head.

"Why are you here?" she asks, with scant courtesy and freezing contempt.

"To claim my wife," is the answer that rises impetuously to his lips, but he restrains himself, feeling that so abrupt an avowal would be poor policy in the face of her raging scorn.

"Lady Fairvale, surely you expected me to call after all that passed *that* night," he answers, in a low, smooth, deprecating voice, fixing his soft, dark eyes pleadingly on her proud face. [Pg 87]

"No, I did *not* expect you to call," she flashes back scornfully. "What can you possibly want of me? Did you not hear me say that night that I scorned and hated you? Why, then, do you presume to intrude yourself upon me?"

"I bring you news, my fair lady," he answers, still calmly and gently, as if not resenting her scorn. "I have cabled to Washington, and yesterday I received a reply."

"A reply," she echoes, faintly, and for a moment there is silence, while he regards her with eager admiration, noting every graceful, womanly charm so becomingly enhanced by the beautiful, white morning-dress. After that interval he speaks.

"Yes, I have received my reply," he answers; "you were right, Lady Fairvale, though God knows what strange mystery lies around your supposed death and your rescue from the grave. But they have opened the coffin in which I swear I beheld Vera Campbell Noble buried, and—*it is empty*. I can no longer doubt that you are, indeed, my wife."

She stares at him with whitened lips, and a shudder of horror chills her heart. Such truth is stamped upon his face that it seems impossible to doubt. Yet she asks herself, with little, awsome chills creeping over all her frame, is it possible that she, Vera, has actually lain in the gloom and darkness of the grave? Has that warm, throbbing flesh, instinct with life and vitality, been closed around with the blackness of the coffin? Has the black earth been heaped upon her living form? What fearful mystery is this?

"Tell me," she says, almost piteously, "is it true that Vera Campbell died and was buried? Will you answer it?"

His face expresses the most honest surprise.

"Are you Vera Campbell, and pretend to doubt it?" he answers. "This is a mystery I cannot fathom. The girl, Vera, whom I made my wife by her mother's wish, committed suicide, and was buried in Glenwood. This I swear by this holy book," lifting a Bible lying on the table beside him, and pressing his lips upon it. "If you would go to America, Lady Fairvale, you would see the monument I erected in Glenwood to the memory of my wife!"

And again there is silence while Lady Vera, standing silently with little thrills of icy coldness creeping over her frame, shudders to herself. So they had buried her while she lay in that trance-like slumber. How had her father resurrected her, and why had he held it a secret?

Wondering at her silence, he speaks again.

"I have answered your question truly and fairly, Lady Vera. Let me ask you one in turn. Are you really ignorant of the fact that you have undoubtedly been buried alive?"

She shivers, palpably. All the warmth of the summer sunshine cannot keep back the icy winds that seem to blow over her like arctic waves.

"I never even imagined anything so horrible," she answers. "I distinctly remember my maddened attempt at suicide. There were two small vials in my mother's medicine chest. One meant death, [Pg 88] the other sleep. I chose the poison, as I thought; drank it, and lay down to die. But I had made a mistake. I fell into a deep, narcotic sleep. I awakened in the dawn of another day and found myself in a small, humble room, watched over by a man who declared himself to be my father. I know no more than this."

"Yet he, undoubtedly, rescued you from the grave and concealed the fact from some motive of his own," Leslie Noble answers. "It was a mistaken kindness on his part. There are those who are ready to doubt your identity on the score of your ignorance of that strange event in your life, Lady Vera—some who would insinuate that you are an impostor and have no right to the title you bear. But I am not one of those carping disbelievers. I am quite convinced that you are really the Vera we believed to be dead so long, and I am ready to acknowledge you and to make reparation and atonement for the unconscious wrong I have done you."

"To make atonement—how?" Lady Vera asks him, with a curling lip and scornful eye.

Her scorn disconcerts him for a moment. His face flushes and his eyes fall, then he rallies, facing her with assumed calmness and humility that but poorly hide the eagerness of his heart.

"In the only way possible, of course," he answers. "By repudiating and putting aside the lady whom I married after your supposed death, and by installing you in your rightful place. Will you come home to me, Vera, my beautiful wife? Darnley House shall open wide its door to receive you, and there is no more beautiful home in London. It is elegant enough for you, even, my haughty princess."

She stares at him speechless with anger and amazement.

"Will you come to me, Vera?" he repeats, half opening his arms and speaking very tenderly.

She retreats before him as he advances. Her face flames with anger.

"How dare you—how dare you?" she pants, brokenly. "I scorn you, Leslie Noble! Surely you know that. Why, you are less to me than the dust beneath my feet."

"I am your husband by your own confession," he answers, sullenly, and with the fire of baffled purpose blazing in his eyes.

"Yes, you are my husband," she answers, with a scorn intense enough to blight him where he stands. "You are my husband, but you have no rights over me that I shall acknowledge, be sure of that. You forfeited all claim on my respect in that hour when you stood tamely by and suffered my enemies to insult and revile me, while you, my husband, uttered no word to defend me from their wicked abuse."

"I was a fool, and blind then," he answers. "I was weakly dominated and ruled by a passion for Ivy Cleveland, which, God knows, I have rued and repented long ago. I know her now for what she is, a selfish, heartless woman, and her mother, a devil incarnate. I have told them that there is no bond between us, and that they must go. If you will forgive me and come home to me, Vera, I will [Pg 89] devote my life to your happiness."

"If that is all you came for, you may go," she answers, icily. "I shall never be nearer to you than I am at this moment. I should never have confessed my secret, I should never have claimed you, whom I hate and scorn, for my husband, but that it was the only way to keep my oath of vengeance to my dying father. But I have done with you now. The greatest kindness you can show me, Leslie Noble, is never to let me see your hated face again on earth."

Leslie Noble's face grows dark with passion and shame. To be defied and scorned by this beautiful girl is something that would make most men cower and feel humiliated, and though this man has had the most of his finer feelings dulled and blunted by his life with the Clevelands, still some faint instinct of shame stirs in him at her words and looks. But rage overpowers it.

"In your supreme scorn for me, Lady Fairvale, you seem to lose sight of one stubborn fact," he answers, in low, menacing tones. "I have been humbly pleading with you for what I may lawfully claim as my right."

"Your right!" she echoes, retreating toward the door as if she could not bear another word.

"Yes, my right," he answers, following and placing himself between her and the door. "Do not go, Lady Fairvale; stay and hear me out. You are my wife; your place is in my home and by my side. What is there to hinder me from taking possession of you?"

There is a dull menace in his look and tone, but Lady Vera's high courage does not falter.

"Would you attempt such a thing against my will?" she inquires, fixing on him the scornful gaze of her proud, dark eyes.

"I have fallen in love with you, Vera, I would dare much before I would give up the hope of winning your heart in return," he answers, doggedly.

The angry color flames into her cheeks.

"Then you are simply mad," she answers. "Have I not told you that I hate and despise you, and that I hope never to see your face again after this hour? Were you the last man on earth, I should never give you even one kind thought."

"Perhaps you have given your love elsewhere," he sneers. "Rumor assigns Colonel Lockhart the highest place in your favor."

"Rumor is right," Lady Vera answers, with calm defiance. "I love Colonel Lockhart, and I should have been his wife had not you reappeared upon the scene. I believed you dead. Tell me who was it that died last year in your native city, having the same name as your own?"

"It was my uncle, Leslie Noble, for whom I was named," he answers, sullenly, and then, quite suddenly, he falls down on his knees before her, and tries to take her hand, but she draws it haughtily away.

"Oh, Vera," he exclaims, in abject despair, "you drive me mad when you so heartlessly declare your love for another man. You have no right to love any other man than me; I am the lord of your [Pg 90] heart and person, yet once more I plead with you, humbly, because I love you, come home with me, Vera, my darling. Be my wife in truth. Let me claim what already belongs to me in the eyes of the law."

"Never!" she answers, decisively. "Rise, Leslie Noble, do not kneel to me. I will have naught to do with you now or ever. I would die before I would recognize your claim upon me. You have my answer now and for all time. Go, and do not trouble me again."

She moves to the door and holds it open, pointing to it with one white, taper finger. She looks so proud, so imperious, so commanding, that against his will he is compelled to obedience.

He moves to the door, but looks back to say with a dark, menacing frown:

"I am going, but do not please yourself with the fancy that you have seen the last of me, Lady Fairvale. You belong to me, and I swear that I will have my own."

With that ominous threat he goes.

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# CHAPTER XXVIII.

Previous to Leslie Noble's visit to Countess Vera he has been the hero of an excited scene at Darnley House.

Since the night of Mrs. Vernon's party, Ivy has been, for the most part of the time, raving in angry hysterics, which Mr. Noble makes no smallest attempt to soothe or soften. In fact, he spends almost all of his time away from home, and a quiet as of the tomb seems to have fallen over the magnificent mansion with its splendid furniture and large retinue of servants. No one calls, no further invitations pour in upon them. Society seems to have tacitly turned the cold shoulder to them in their defeat and disgrace.

The rage, the shame, the humiliation of Mrs. Cleveland's mind no tongue can tell.

From the grave in which he lies moldering back to his kindred clay, her enemy has reached out an icy, skeleton hand, and struck the brimming cup of pride and triumph ruthlessly from her lips.

Through the agency of his child, the beautiful daughter she had hated so bitterly, he had avenged his terrible wrongs. There is murder in Marcia Cleveland's heart as she writhes under the retributive hand of justice. Fain would she grip her strong, white fingers around Vera's delicate throat, and press the life out, or plunge a dagger in her tender breast, or press a poisoned cup to those beautiful lips that had condemned her in such scornful phrases.

On the morning of that day when Leslie Noble has his interview with Lady Vera, Mrs. Cleveland is sitting alone with Ivy in a small, daintily-furnished morning-room that opens from the library.

They are anxiously discussing their situation and prospects, for it is impossible to conceal from themselves that Mr. Noble is dazzled by the prospect opening before him, and that the severance [Pg 91] of the tie that has bound him to the shrewish Ivy is more agreeable to his mind than otherwise.

"Will he desert me, do you think, mamma? He used to love me, you remember," exclaims the fair termagant, trying to whisper comfort to her foreboding heart.

Mrs. Cleveland laughs, a low, bitter, sarcastic laugh.

"You do well to say *once*," she answers, "for whatever love he might have had for you in the past, you have killed it long ago by your foolish extravagance, your violent temper and self-will."

"Who incited me to it all, I wonder?" her daughter cries, turning her head angrily. "Who was it that told me to have my own way and defy him, since being my husband, he was perforce compelled to bear with me? Who but *you*, who now turn around and taunt me with the result of your teachings?"

"Well, well, and I was right enough." Mrs. Cleveland replies, coolly, justifying herself. "Of course I could not foresee how things would fall out, or I should have counselled you to keep your husband's love at all events. He might then have made some fight against this Countess Vera's claim. As it is——"

She pauses with a hateful, significant "hem."

"As it is," Ivy repeats after her, shortly. "Well, go on. Let us have the benefit of your opinion."

"He will be glad of any excuse to shake you off," finishes her mother.

"But he shall not do it," Ivy cries out, furiously, and brandishing her small fist as if at some imaginary foe. "I will stick to him like a burr. I am his wife. The woman that claims him is a hateful impostor. No one will make me believe that Vera Campbell's bones are not lying in the grave where we saw her buried three years ago."

"Perhaps this will convince you," exclaims a loud, triumphant voice, and Leslie Noble, striding suddenly into the room, holds an open paper before her eyes. It is the cablegram from Washington, telling him that the coffin beneath the marble monument is empty—that the bride he buried three years ago has escaped from her darksome prison house of clay.

"Do you believe now?" Leslie Noble demands, with something of insolent triumph in his voice and bearing as the two women crowd nearer and scan the fatal cablegram with dilated eyes and working faces.

Mrs. Cleveland answers, stormily:

"No, we do not believe such a trumped-up falsehood—not for an instant. I see how it is. You have lent yourself to a wicked plan in order to free yourself from poor innocent Ivy, whose greatest weakness has ever been her fondness for you, wicked and treacherous deceiver that you are! You strive for a high prize, in unlimited wealth and the greatest beauty in England. But you will see whether Ivy will tamely endure desertion and disgrace. She declares that she will not give you up, and I shall uphold her in that resolution!"

He stares at her a moment with an expression of fiery scorn and anger, then answers scathingly: [Pg 92]

"I am sorry to hear that Ivy is so lost to self-respect as to wish to still live with a man who is bound to her only by a tie of the deepest dishonor and disgrace. But her intentions or yours can make not the slightest difference in what I am going to do. For more than two years I have been the meek slave of you and of Ivy—driven as bond slave was never driven before the triumphal car of your imperious will! You have recklessly dissipated my fortune, defied my warnings, trampled my wishes under foot, shown me all too plainly for mistake that I was married for my money, not at all for myself. The hour of my release has come at last, and with unfeigned gladness I throw off the yoke that has long been too heavy for endurance!"

They stare at him mutely—Mrs. Cleveland purple with rage, Ivy gasping for breath, and preparing to go off into furious hysterics. He takes advantage of the momentary lull in their wrath to proceed, determinedly:

"You must understand by this, Ivy, that as you are no longer my wife, indeed, never have been, that I will not again recognize you as such, and that an immediate separation is desirable. You have so beggared me by your extravagance that it is impossible for me to follow the generous dictates of my heart which would prompt me to bestow a goodly sum upon you. But I shall give you a check for a thousand dollars, and you may retain your dresses and jewels, by the sale of which you may realize a very neat little fortune. I have no more to say beyond expressing the hope that you will leave Darnley House by to-morrow and seek other quarters. I shall not return until you are gone."

While speaking he has laid with elaborate politeness a folded check by Ivy's elbow, and with a formal bow which includes both ladies in its mocking complaisance, he quits the room and the house, to seek that interview with Lady Vera which we have recorded in our last chapter.

"Deserted! Repudiated! Driven from home!" shrieks out Ivy, finding voice at last, and springing tragically to her feet. "Mamma, what shall we do now? Where shall we go?"

"We will go nowhere," Mrs. Cleveland answers, determinedly. "This is your home, and here we shall stay! I defy Leslie Noble to oust us from Darnley House. It will take something more than a cablegram and the oath of a countess to prove that you are not Leslie Noble's wife. Why, her own denial that she was ever buried proves that she is not Vera Campbell. How could she be ignorant of such a tragic event in her own life? No, no, Ivy, we will not quit Darnley House yet. Leslie Noble is not so easily rid of us as he fondly thinks. Darnley House is not ready to receive Countess Vera as its mistress yet. We will hold the fort."

Mrs. Cleveland is equal to most emergencies.

Confident in this knowledge she settles herself to abide by her decision. But in this case it turns out that she has reckoned without her host.

A week passes. Such a week as Mrs. Cleveland and Ivy have seldom spent, so quiet, so void of callers and excitement as it is. They have commenced by taking their usual daily drive, but before [Pg 93] the week is out they discontinue it. Such curious, insolent glances follow them, such cold, averted looks meet them.

The fickle world that smiled on them its sweetest so lately, has only frowns and shrugs, and whispered detractions now.

Even Mrs. Cleveland's iron assurance quails before the storm of public disapproval, and she decides to hide her diminished head in the luxurious shades of Darnley House.

Of even this solace she is soon bereft.

A freezingly-polite letter arrives from the master of the mansion, desiring to know when they propose to vacate his premises. Mrs. Cleveland and Ivy return a prompt defiance to this inquiry, stating that they do not intend to leave at all.

And now the trodden worm turns with a vengeance.

On the following day all the servants of Darnley House leave in a body, after informing their mistress of their discharge by Mr. Noble. They decline to be re-engaged by Mrs. Noble, and Mrs. Cleveland hints bitterly at bribery on the part of her whilom son-in-law.

On the same day arrives a concise statement from Mr. Noble to the effect that a public sale of the house and its effects is advertised for the third day of that week. He is outdoing even themselves in cool, relentless malice.

"We shall have to go. We have been fairly whipped out by that scheming villain," Mrs. Cleveland groans, in indescribable wrath, and bitterness of spirit, and Ivy, throwing herself down on her satin couch, hurls bitter maledictions on Leslie Noble's name, and wishes him dead a hundred times.

But all their combined rage cannot hinder the course of events. So on the morning of the sale, just as a few curious strangers begin to invade the splendid drawing-rooms, Mrs. Cleveland and her daughter are quietly driven away in a closed carriage.

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## CHAPTER XXIX.

"I shall have to leave London," Lady Vera says, desperately, when rumor has wafted to her ears the story of Leslie Noble's cavalier treatment of Mrs. Cleveland and her daughter. "I am afraid—horribly afraid of that man. His parting threat still rings in my ears."

"You need not be afraid while you are with us," Lady Clive exclaims, vivaciously. "Do you think we would ever let the mean wretch come near you again?"

But Lady Vera, coloring deeply, explains:

"He has other methods of annoying me besides his presence. Already I have received several letters from him, some of a wheedling, persuasive nature, others filled with offensive threats."

Sir Harry looks up from his paper.

"Shall I horsewhip the scoundrel for you, Lady Vera?" he asks, indignantly. "It would give me the greatest pleasure."

She shrinks, sensitively, from this offered championship.

"No, no, for it would only make the affair more notorious. And I am afraid it has been talked [Pg 94] about already—has it not, Sir Harry?" she asks, with a painful blush on her shamed face.

"Yes, rather," he admits, reluctantly.

"And I have been afraid even to look into the papers," she pursues. "I thought it might have gotten into them. Has it, Sir Harry?"

He answers "yes" again with sincere reluctance, and Lady Vera hides her face in her hands a moment, while crimson blushes of shame burn her fair cheeks. She thinks to herself that she would gladly have died rather than have encountered all this.

"But they do not say any harm of you, dear—you mustn't think *that*," said Lady Clive, kindly. "And they all sympathize with you. Your friends call on you every day, only you decline to see them, you know. But every one is so sorry for you, and has cut those people—your enemies, I mean, Vera—quite dead."

"Noble has turned them out of Darnley House, bag and baggage. Had to sell the place over their heads to oust them," says Sir Harry.

"Is it not strange that I should have taken such an antipathy to them when I first met them abroad? Experience has so fully justified me that I shall plume myself hereafter on being a person of great discernment," laughs Lady Clive.

Lady Vera sighs and is silent. Her heart is very sore over the parting with her lover, and the notoriety that the keeping of her oath has brought down upon her. Fain would she bow her fair head in some lone, deserted spot, and die of the shame and misery that weighs upon her so heavily.

"After all I believe I should be safer and happier at Fairvale Park," she says, after a moment. "I have a feeling of dread upon me here. I am growing nervous, perhaps, but I am actually afraid of Leslie Noble. I seem to be haunted by his baleful presence. Yesterday evening when I went for a short walk, I fancied my footsteps were dogged by a man, though I could not make out his identity through my thick veil. But I was frightened homeward very fast by an apprehension that it was Mr. Noble. I should breathe more easily out of London. Could I persuade you, Lady Clive and Sir Harry, to forego the delights of the season, and come down to the country with me?"

Sir Harry gives his wife a quick telegraphic signal of affirmation, and she assents smilingly.

"I am sure I shall be delighted," she declares. "And Sir Harry is usually of the same mind as I am. It must be perfectly lovely now down at Fairvale. And the children would be delighted, I know."

"I am all the more willing to accept Lady Vera's invitation to Fairvale, because I think it necessary that she should examine her father's letters and papers if he has left any," declares Sir Harry, diffidently. "If he has left any confession bearing on the subject of her supposed death and burial, it is most important that she should be in possession of it."

"Why?" asks the young countess, looking at him with a slightly startled air. [Pg 95]

"For this reason," he answers. "In the face of your enemies' confident assertion of Vera Noble's death and burial, and your own denial of it, matters have assumed a strange aspect! Mrs. Cleveland and her daughter declare you to be an impostor whom the Earl of Fairvale has palmed off as his child. There are some who could very easily be brought to believe that story."

"Whom?" Lady Vera asks, wonderingly.

"The person who would be most benefited if such a charge could be proven true—the next heir to the title and estates of Fairvale," Sir Harry answers, gravely.

"Oh, dear!" cries Lady Clive, anxiously, and Vera says, with paling lips:

"You do not mean that—that——"

"I ought to tell you, Lady Vera, what I have heard," he answers, interrupting her incoherent question. "Shall I do so?"

"Yes, pray do," she answers.

"Briefly, then, Raleigh Gilmore, the next heir, has come up to London, summoned doubtless by the vindictive Clevelands, and has been interviewing some eminent lawyers. Seeing that he has lived for ten years or more on his small estate in the country without ever setting foot in London, this present move on his part has a suspicious look. You may apprehend a suit against you at any time, so it behooves you to muster all the evidence you can on this weak point in your history."

Lady Vera sits silent before this new, impending calamity with folded hands, her color coming and going fitfully, her dark eyes fixed steadfastly on the floor. Perhaps she does not realize in all its intensity this new horror. The pain she has already endured has numbed her feelings, or rendered her impervious to future sufferings.

"You understand, do you not, Lady Vera," Sir Harry pursues, calling her attention reluctantly, "that your denial of ever having been buried makes a fearfully weak point in your case, should it ever be contested? All the evidence adduced goes to prove that Vera Campbell Noble really died to all appearance, and was buried. If you are compelled by law to prove your identity with that Vera, you will have to admit that burial, and prove your resurrection. Otherwise—I am telling you this in the greatest kindness, remember, dear Lady Vera—you may be branded as an adventuress and impostor, and ruthlessly bereft of the goodly heritage of Fairvale."

She lifts her heavy eyes from the blank contemplation of the carpet, and looks at him thoughtfully.

"You do not believe me an impostor, do you, Sir Harry?" she asks, sadly.

"Not for an instant," replies the baronet, warmly.

"Do you, Lady Clive?"

"No, indeed, my dearest girl," replies her friend, with an emphatic caress.

"Did Colonel Lockhart, before he went away?" she asks, with blushing hesitation.

"Not at all," Sir Harry answers, decidedly. [Pg 96]

"Then surely no one will believe it," she says, thoughtfully. "You remember Vera Campbell's grave has been found empty."

"Yes, but you remember you may be called on to prove your identity with Vera Campbell," he answers, gravely.

"Leslie Noble unhesitatingly acknowledges me as his wife," she argues.

"I do not know whether that fact would weigh strongly with a jury," he answers, thoughtfully. "To claim you, Lady Vera, so young, so lovely, above all, so wealthy, as his wife, cannot be without its subtle temptation to such a man as Leslie Noble. Rumor says that the Clevelands have almost beggared him by their lavish and ruinous extravagance, and that he hated the woman who bore his name. What more natural than that he should jump at the choice of exchanging his crumbling fortunes and despised partner for rank and wealth, and beauty and youth? Though I do not doubt your identity for one moment, Lady Vera, I am convinced that it could scarcely be proved in a court of law by the oath of Leslie Noble."

As he pauses, coloring, and deeply sorry that it has seemed necessary to speak so plainly to her whom fate has already so rudely buffeted, she looks up at him with forced calmness and self-restraint.

"What, then, do you deem it necessary that I should do in my own defense, Sir Harry?" she inquires.

"In times of peace prepare for war," he quotes, sententiously. "Do not understand me to mean that I apprehend immediate trouble, Lady Vera. Perhaps in my friendliness and interest in you, I have magnified the danger. But I would advise that you be ready in case an attack is made. And the first step I would advise is to thoroughly examine the papers left by your father, the late earl. I can only think that he concealed the truth from you from fear of shocking your sensitive mind too greatly. But I can scarcely credit that he would fail to leave on record the narrative of so strange and important an event in your life. I say, therefore, if such a document be in existence, it is judicious that you should put yourself in immediate possession of it."

Lady Vera, rising impulsively, goes over to this true and noble friend, and presses his hand warmly between both her own soft, white ones.

"Sir Harry, I do not know how to thank you for the friendship you are proving so nobly," she murmurs, tearfully. "But I will pray God nightly to bless you for standing by me so nobly in my hour of trial and sorrow."

"Tut—tut, I need no thanks," the baronet answers, brushing a suspicious moisture away from his eyes. "How can I help being kind to Nella's best loved friend, and her brother's sweetheart? You need not blush, my dear, for I hope Providence may soon translate Leslie Noble to some higher sphere, and give you and Phil leave to be happy. And until then I will do the best I can for your comfort. In furtherance of that end I propose that Nella and the children shall be in readiness to accompany you to Fairvale to-morrow."

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## CHAPTER XXX.

[Pg 97]

Sadly and wearily enough Lady Vera goes to her room and her couch that night. Having disrobed and retired, she dismisses her maid to the dressing-room to complete the packing for to-morrow's flitting. Then, closing her heavy eyelids, she endeavors to woo sleep to her weary pillow.

Strange, shuddering sighs heave the fair breast as she lies there in the dim, half-light of the lowered lamp, with her fair arms tossed above her golden head, and the dark lashes drooping against the pale and lovely cheeks.

Sir Harry Clive's conversation has revived in her sensitive, imaginative mind all her horror of that strange, living entombment through which she has passed years ago, all unknown to herself by reason of her father's tender, shielding love.

"I have lain in the bosom of the dark earth, the coffin-lid has been fastened down upon my living breast, the cold, black clods have been heaped upon me; I have been buried alive. Oh, horrible!" she murmurs, aloud, and to her excited fancy it seems as if the echo of a low, diabolical laugh floats through the room.

She starts up on her elbow with a low and frightened cry.

"Elsie, did you speak? did you laugh?" she calls out to her maid in the dressing-room; but Elsie, absorbed in the prosaic business of packing, does not hear her voice, and in a moment the countess falls back upon her pillow, chiding herself for nervousness.

"It was a foolish fancy, merely," she tells herself. "I must not let my nervous thoughts run on like this through my terror of that mysterious burial. I will compose myself to sleep. The hour is getting late. Perhaps Elsie has finished her work and gone."

Once more she vainly tries to lose herself in sleep, but her heart beats in her ears, her temples throb, some strange, alien, agitating influence controls her mind, banishing rest and repose.

She puts her hands over her ears, in mortal dread of hearing that low, eerie, unearthly cackle of malicious mirth again, and shuts her eyes as if in dread of seeing some strange, unwelcome vision start out from the shadowy hangings of the darkened room.

"Surely I am going mad under the weight of my troubles," she says to herself, half-fearfully. "This sleeplessness, these weird, unearthly fancies must be the premonitions of reason tottering on its throne."

The minutes pass. Gradually Lady Vera becomes conscious of a delicate, subtle odor floating lightly through the room. She does not recognize it as a perfume. It is simply an odor, faintly sickening, yet strangely soothing to her excited senses. Her eyelids fall more heavily. She seems to sleep.

Sleeping, a hideous vision comes to Lady Vera. A dark-robed, creeping figure seems to start from the black shadows at the furthest corner of the room and float across the floor to her bedside.

It is the form of a tall woman, with a hooded head and masked face, but through the small holes of the mask two murderous black eyes glare hatred upon her, the malevolent eyes of Marcia Cleveland.

[Pg 98]

Vera tries to start, to cry out, but she is motionless, dumb, bound hand and foot by the spell of that subtle, sickening drug diffused through the room, and which grows stronger as Marcia Cleveland's snowy handkerchief flutters lightly in her hand.

All this Lady Vera notes in her strange dream, with feelings of unutterable horror and despair. She tries to awake, to open her dazed eyes fully, to utter some sound from her poor, parched lips, but they refuse to obey her will.

And still those murderous black eyes glare with devilish hatred upon her through the narrow slits in the mask.

Surely that evil glare is baleful enough to kill her of itself, Vera thinks despairingly, but even at that instant the woman's hand is drawn backward and upward, and in her murderous grasp glitters the flashing blade of a dagger poised above the bare, uncovered breast of the helpless victim, and this time with a last, vain, frenzied effort to call on God for protection, Vera loses sight and consciousness, and lies helpless at the mercy of her deadly foe.

The flashing steel glitters sharply in the air, nearer and nearer it descends over the victim, in another moment it will be sheathed in her heart, when a sudden cry rings through the room, swift footsteps cross the floor, strong arms seize the body of the murderess from behind and wrench her away from her helpless prey.

The gleaming dagger falls clanking to the floor. A man's voice, passionate, vibrant, intense, cleaves the shuddering air of the night.

"Devil! murderess! If you had slain my darling, that blade should have been sheathed in your own heart a moment later!"

It is the voice of Colonel Lockhart. Elsie, the maid, comes close behind him, and together they bind the would-be murderess with strong cords that prevent her attempted escape.

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## CHAPTER XXXI.

When Lady Vera comes to herself at last with many sighs, and painful moans, she finds Lady Clive and the maid Elsie hovering around her like ministering angels, the latter, indeed, sobbing piteously in the belief that her young mistress is dead. But when the faint breath flutters over the parted lips, and the dark eyes unclose and stare around her with a blank, terrified look, Elsie sobs for joy, and even Lady Clive's bright blue eyes fill with glad tears.

"She is alive, my lady," the maid exclaims, joyfully. "That dreadful woman has not killed her with her vile chloroform."

Lady Vera shivers and puts her hand to her breast, withdrawing it, and gazing at it as though she expected to find it stained with blood.

"I thought she had killed me with that terrible dagger. I saw it gleam in the air above me. And, oh, those terrible eyes! They seemed to burn through me with their intense hate. Did you save me, Lady Clive?" she moans, feebly. [Pg 99]

"No, dear, you owe your life to this brave Elsie," Lady Clive replies, turning an appreciative glance on the neat and pretty girl who was still busy over her mistress.

"Tell me how it was, Elsie," commands Lady Vera.

"You see, my lady," Elsie begins, "I had just finished packing your trunks, and thought I would go and see if you were asleep, or if you needed me before I went to bed. I had been packing very softly so as not to disturb you, and I crept softly in my stocking feet to the archway, and just parted the hangings to peep in at you. Then I saw you lying white as death, and a strange, sickening smell was in the room. I gazed around, and saw a head peeping around a curtain in the corner. The face was masked, and two blazing eyes shone through the eye-holes."

"You may well say blazing eyes," Lady Vera groans. "They seemed to burn through me when they looked down at me. And then, Elsie?"

"Oh, my lady, I was almost frightened to death! I knew that I was too light and small to cope with the robber, as I then thought him, but I had just enough sense left not to cry out, or make a noise. I ran swiftly and silently away out into the corridor where I met a gentleman going up into his room. I begged him to follow me at once, and he did so without a word. And, oh, my lady, we were not an instant too soon!" Elsie covers her face with her hands and shivers at the thought.

"She was about to murder me. I saw and knew all, though I could not move nor speak," exclaimed Countess Vera.

"She was, indeed, about to murder you," returns the maid. "She had crept from her corner and was standing over your bed with a shining dagger raised over you. Your night-dress had become unfastened at the throat, and your breast was bare. She was about to strike when your rescuer ran swiftly in and whirled her away from the bed, and the dagger fell on the floor. Oh, my dear lady, it is horrible how near you came to being killed," cries the faithful maid, bursting into floods of tears at the dreadful thought.

"But for you, my faithful girl, I should now be dead," the countess answers, deeply moved. "You shall be generously rewarded. But now tell me who was the gentleman that so opportunely came

to your assistance?"

Elsie looks embarrassed, but Lady Clive comes to the rescue.

"We did not mean that you should know, dear," she says, "but I might have guessed that you would never rest until you knew. So I will tell you. It was Philip."

Lady Vera turns from deathly white to rosy red at that magic name.

"But he went away," she says, wonderingly.

"I know—he was down in the country visiting a friend. Last night he came in after you had retired, and he expected to go in the morning before you came down."

"Next to Elsie, I owe him my life," Lady Vera says, softly, as if there were a subtle pleasure in the thought, "and that dreadful woman—is she gone?" [Pg 100]

"Marcia Cleveland? No, indeed. She is in the dressing-room, securely bound, and guarded by Philip and Sir Harry."

"I should like to see her," Lady Vera observes, after a moment's thought. "But first, Elsie, I should like my dressing-gown and slippers."

And wrapped in the soft, blue robe, with her splendid, golden hair floating loosely over her shoulders, like a shining veil, Lady Vera enters the presence of her enemy, closely followed by Lady Clive and Elsie, who guard her with nervous care on either side.

Marcia Cleveland, crouching like a baffled tigress, in the bonds they have cast around her, lifts her eyes and glowers with deadly rage and hate at the beautiful young girl.

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## CHAPTER XXXII.

For a moment there is complete silence, while the wicked and vindictive woman glares with all the bitterness of baffled hate and vengeance upon her beautiful foe who had so nearly been her victim.

The Lady Vera speaks in a tone of cold and withering contempt:

"Could you not have been satisfied with the wrongs you have inflicted on me and mine, Marcia Cleveland, without attempting my life?"

"You should have known better than to think I could remain quiescent under your malicious vengeance! Did you think I could stand idly by and see you ruin my daughter's whole life without striking back at you?" the woman answers, sullenly.

"No, for I knew that there was too much of the venomous serpent in your nature," Lady Vera answers, with stinging scorn. "But I believe that even malevolence like yours would have shrunk abashed before such a terrible crime as this which you have attempted. Do you not tremble at the consequences of what you have done?"

"I have done nothing. I have only failed in what would have been a source of pride and joy to me if I had succeeded," Mrs. Cleveland answers, with sullen bravado.

"Infamous wretch!" Sir Harry Clive mutters audibly, while Colonel Lockhart, with a deathly-pale face and blazing eyes, appears to restrain himself with difficulty from springing upon her and tossing her out of the window.

"Should you indeed have been so glad to see me dead?" Lady Vera inquires, with a slight tone of mournfulness.

It seems incredible to her pure mind that this woman, in whose veins runs some slight strains of her own blood, being her mother's half-sister, could so coldly and heartlessly wish her dead—could even attempt to kill her.

"Yes, I should be glad to see you dead," Mrs. Cleveland answers, viciously. "I have hated Vera Campbell and wished her dead ever since she was born. I hated her mother before her. She robbed me of the only man I ever loved, and earned my eternal hate! And if you are really Edith Campbell's child, as you assert, be assured that I hate you, too, and wish you dead with all my heart!" [Pg 101]

"Lady Vera, do not bandy words with the heartless creature! She can only wound you more and more," exclaims the baronet, indignantly. "Let us take her away. She contaminates the air we breathe."

For the first time a look of fear whitens the woman's reckless, daring face.

"Take me away—where?" she mutters, under her breath.

"To prison," Sir Harry answers, sternly, "to answer for your crime."

"Crime? I have committed no crime. I have not harmed a single hair of my lady's head," the woman answers, with sarcastic insolence.

"That is not your fault, woman," he answers, coldly and rebukingly. "You failed in the endeavor, but you shall pay dearly for the attempt. Have you done with her, Lady Vera? We are waiting on your pleasure."

Lady Vera stands silent a moment, regarding the wretched creature groveling on the floor in the cords with which they have securely bound her. In spite of her air of reckless bravado, Vera sees that her face is ghastly pale, and the dew of fear beads her brow. The angry eyes fall for the first time before the young girl's gaze of steady contempt. For a moment the silence continues, then Vera asks, clearly and calmly:

"Can I do anything for you, Mrs. Cleveland?"

"No," she answers, in an enraged snarl, like an angry canine.

Lady Vera continues, calmly:

"Pray understand me. I have no wish to wage further warfare upon you. With the fulfillment of my oath of vengeance my feud against you ended. I despise your hatred and your attempt to injure me, and I have no desire to punish you more than I have already done in obedience to my oath of vengeance. If there is anything I can do for you, speak."

Mrs. Cleveland looks wonderingly at the beautiful, calm, white face of the girl as she stands waiting for her answer.

"Do you mean that you will not prosecute me for this attempt on your life? That you will suffer me to go free?" she inquires in a doubtful tone, in which hope faintly struggles.

"Yes, I mean that, if you wish it—do you?" Vera asks, still quietly.

"Yes, but I hate to take a favor from you," the woman answers, sullenly.

"Do not take it as a favor. Consider that I am heaping coals of fire upon your head," Lady Vera answers, with a slight, cold laugh. "I choose to take my revenge that way. Sir Harry, will you please loose her bonds?"

The baronet looks his disapproval.

"Lady Vera, pray do not give way to such a Quixotic impulse," he urges. "If you do, this woman will live to make you regret it. You owe her no forbearance. I say let her suffer the penalty of the law for her attempted crime."

Lady Clive and Elsie echo his words, but the countess shakes her golden head. [Pg 102]

"It is my wish that she shall go free," she answers, with resolution. "Colonel Lockhart, will you not loose her bonds?"

It is the first time she has seemed to be conscious of his presence. The deep color mantles her cheek as she speaks his name, and lifts a timid, appealing glance to him that makes his heart beat fast in his breast.

"Since *you* wish it, Lady Vera, yes," he answers, with a low bow, and hastens to execute her will, while the baronet, a little chagrined at her willfulness, looks silently on.

A moment and the strong cords that bind her enemy fall to the floor. Mrs. Cleveland rises erect and tall, and faces Vera.

"Do not expect me to thank you for this release," she says, bitterly. "Although I am glad to go free, I hate you if possible even more that you have had it in your power to do me a kindness."

"I expect no thanks," the countess answers icily. "I only desire to be rid of your presence." She lifts her white hand, and points commandingly at the door.

"Now go."

"One moment," exclaims the baronet. "How did you gain admittance to Lady Vera's bedchamber, and conceal yourself there?"

"By my woman's wit," she answers, curtly and decisively.

"Then, perhaps, you can find your way out in the same manner," the baronet rejoins, sarcastically.

"Perhaps so, but I think, on the whole, I should prefer a guide," she answers, with cool insolence.

"I am at your service, madam," Colonel Lockhart says, obeying a pleading look from Lady Vera, and preceding her to the door, followed by Sir Harry.

In a moment more, without word or backward glance, the wicked woman sweeps from the room.

Then Vera, broken down by the fierce strain upon her feelings, breaks down utterly, and weeps on Lady Clive's breast until she is thoroughly exhausted.

"You see it is all for the best to go away to-morrow," she has said to her friend. "Even my life is not safe here against the machinations of my relentless enemies."

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## CHAPTER XXXIII.

It is very lovely down in the country at Fairvale Park in the golden summer weather. A pang goes through Lady Vera's heart as she recalls Sir Harry Clive's warning, and thinks of losing this grand, picturesque place, the only true home she has ever known. Her sweetest, tenderest memories of her father are twined around the spot.

Bereft of this, she must indeed be desolate. Not even one spot of brightness will remain in the cold and cruel darkness that has settled over her life.

Perhaps it is this thought that drives her, as soon as she is at home again, to seek diligently [Pg 103] through her father's papers for some writing bearing on the subject of her supposed death and burial.

Sir Harry Clive has so confidently believed in the existence of some such document, that it is with a pang of the bitterest disappointment she sees the first day pass with no tangible success, though her brain is tired, and her eyes weary with poring over the contents of his desk.

"I have found nothing, although I have closely scrutinized every little bit of paper," she tells Sir Harry, when they meet at dinner, in a tone of sad disappointment.

"You have examined all the papers?" he asks, with disappointment equal to her own.

"All, except an old memorandum-book, which I intend to look over to-morrow," she answers, "though I scarcely think it will result in anything. Do you think it worth my while to examine it?"

"Yes. It is a forlorn hope, at least, and we must try everything. Strange that your father should have neglected so important a duty," the baronet continues, musingly.

"Poor papa! You must remember, his mind was all distraught by grief," Lady Vera answers, with rising tears. "He thought only of his sorrows and his longed-for vengeance on the destroyer of his wedded happiness. We must forgive him for his want of thought."

"You must not think that I am blaming him, dear Lady Vera. Nothing is further from my thoughts," Sir Harry answers, gently, but there is a shade of anxiety on his brow that does not clear away during the evening.

He is full of sorrow for the fair young countess, full of fears that he will not speak aloud, for he has heard far more of Raleigh Gilmore's intentions than he would even hint to Vera or to Lady Clive. He knows that she will have to make a fight for title, name and fortune, and that her case before the law is so terribly weak that there is large danger of her being cast out from her inheritance, and branded as adventuress and impostor.

But of all that is in his mind Sir Harry says nothing. Why should he grieve her more, he thinks, looking at the pale, suffering young face, on whose white and wasted lineaments the traces of sorrow were so plainly and sadly outlined.

> "Upon her face there was the tint of grace,
> The settled shadow of an inward strife,
> And an unquiet drooping of the eye
> As if its lid were charged with unshed tears."

The next day, taking the old memorandum-book, she goes for a solitary ramble. Lady Clive is going for a drive with her children, so she will not be missed.

A favorite resort of Lady Vera's is a silvery little lake on the green border of the wide, level park. Water-lilies with their wide green leaves and waxen-white petals rock softly on the bosom of the lake, and feathery-green willows fringe it softly round. Lady Vera finds a quiet, sequestered seat with her back against a willow tree, and applies herself to her task, turning page after page softly [Pg 104] and unweariedly in the pursuit of her object.

A weary quest. The simple, leather-bound memorandum volume, with plain gold clasps, had been Earl Fairvale's bosom companion in the days when he was simple Lawrence Campbell. Patiently Vera reads on and on, and the morning sun mounts higher in the heavens, the water ripples softly at her feet, the wind sighs in the grass and the willows.

But it is not the most delightful reading in the world, studying the dull entries of an old memorandum-book. Lady Vera's sweet patience begins to flag at last. Her red lips quiver with disappointment and suspense. She shuts the book with one taper finger between the pages and leans her golden head back against the tree, wearily.

"There is nothing here—absolutely nothing," she tells herself, sadly, all unconscious that but one thin leaf intervenes between her and success. "I shall lose all," she continues, with a choking sob; "I have lost my lover and all my happiness. Now I shall have to lose my name, my title, my home, all the lavish wealth to which I have become so accustomed that I shall not know how to do without it. All my life I have seemed to be the foot-ball of fate. Sorrow is ever near me. It is like Philip's song. Oh, how often I recall it:

> "'As the blade wears the scabbard,
> The billow the shore,
> So sorrow doth fret me
> Forevermore!'"

She rests a little, letting the tears steal unchecked down her pale cheeks, while her bosom heaves with emotion—a little while, and then she dashes the blinding drops away, chiding herself for her weakness.

"I am childish and silly; I must remember I have not got to the end of the book yet. Time enough to despond then," she says, bending to her task with renewed ardor and energy.

The dark eyes under the shady fringe of the lashes rove patiently down the page—they finish it,

and find nothing—the white, taper finger turns another leaf, and lo! there at the top of the page, this mysterious entry:

> "Oct. 30th, 188—, Mem. To-day presented Joel McPherson, sexton at Glenwood Cemetery, Washington, D. C., with a check for a thousand dollars, as a slight testimonial of my undying gratitude for his skill and co-operation with me in the act by which my darling daughter, Vera, was restored to me from the grave itself, in which she had been immured alive."

A cry breaks from the lips of the overjoyed girl—the tears start afresh—this time the shining drops of gladness.

"Eureka! I have found it!" she quotes, with a low and happy laugh, and bending her graceful head, she kisses the precious record made by that beloved hand now mouldering into dust.

It is some little time before she grows quite calm. The happy excitement of joy has made her pulse beat and her heart burn. At last, with the book still lying open on her lap, and her head [Pg 105] leaned back against the tree, the tired lids fall over the dark eyes, she relapses into pleasant musings over this happy chance, and so—drops asleep, little dreaming of the baleful presence hovering so near her.

The winds sigh past her cheek, fanning it softly with a touch as soft as a kiss; the silver waters murmur at her feet, lulling her into sweeter, softer slumber. And no instinct warns her of the baleful gaze that watches her through the screen of the bending willows, nor of the stealthy footsteps creeping, serpent-like, nearer and nearer, until the eager gaze peers over her shoulder at the precious page spread open on her knee.

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The sun climbs higher, broad noonday throws a lance of golden light into Vera's shady retreat and shines into her face. She wakes with a start, and springs to her feet.

"I have been asleep! How came I here?" she cries; then suddenly she remembers. "I was looking over papa's book, and I found the record of my burial and my rescue from the grave. Where is it, now? It lay open on my lap when I fell asleep. I hope it has not fallen into the lake."

A hurried survey of the green, mossy bank convinces her that such must be the case. The memorandum-book is nowhere to be seen. Most probably it has been precipitated into the water by her startled spring to her feet on awaking.

"How could I have been so careless?" she cries, in poignant grief and dismay. "I should have gone straight to the house and shown Sir Harry my important discovery. But I remember every word of it just as it was written. Perhaps that will do as well. I will go and seek Sir Harry at once and tell him all."

Carelessly donning her wide-brimmed sun-hat she leaves the spot, little dreaming that she has been ruthlessly robbed of her treasure.

"Are you sure—quite sure that you have not dreamed the whole thing, Lady Vera?" Sir Harry Clive asks her, incredulously, when she told him her story.

The sensitive color mantles her delicate cheek.

"I am perfectly certain of what I have stated," she answers. "It was only after I had found the entry that I fell asleep a few delicious moments. It must have been the greatness of the reaction from suspense and grief to success and joy that caused my sudden, overwhelming drowsiness. I remember that I kissed the precious words a few minutes before I fell asleep. I read them over and over. Listen, Sir Harry, I am quite sure I can repeat every word with perfect accuracy now."

Slowly she repeats:

> "Oct. 30th, 188—. Mem. To-day presented Joel McPherson, sexton at Glenwood Cemetery, Washington, D. C., with a check for a thousand dollars, as a slight testimonial of my undying gratitude for his skill and co-operation with me in the act by which my darling daughter, Vera, was restored to me from the grave itself, in which she had been immured alive."

As she slowly utters the words, Sir Harry jots them down in his own memorandum-book. There is [Pg 106] a puzzled look on his broad, fair, intelligent brow.

"If only you had not fallen asleep," he says, regretfully. "But, dear Lady Vera, this sounds so much like the vagaries of sleep. It seems real to you, I know, but I am almost afraid to pin my faith on it."

"The lake is not deep; I will send one of the servants to dive for the book. I am sure he will find it. Then I shall convince you of my credibility," she answers, quietly, as she leaves the room.

As she has said, the lake is not deep, and several of the men-servants at Fairvale Park are skillful swimmers, but for all that they cannot find the earl's memorandum-book beneath the shallow waves. All trace of it is gone.

"Are you quite sure you carried it down to the lake with you?" the baronet asks, unfeignedly perplexed.

"I am quite sure," she replies, with decision. "It lay open on my lap when I fell asleep."

"Can any one have stolen it?" he asks, unconsciously hitting the truth.

"Impossible," she answers. "I am sure if any one had come near me, I should have awakened. I am a very light sleeper."

"There is something very mysterious about its loss. I am quite confident it did not fall into the lake," muses Sir Harry Clive.

Lady Vera, on the contrary, is quite sure that it did, but she does not urge her belief, feeling a little wounded by his incredulous air, but after a little, she says, thoughtfully:

"I am so sure that what I have told you is the truth and no dream, Sir Harry, that I shall write to this Joel McPherson in America, and offer him a large reward to come to England and explain that strange entry in the lost memorandum-book. What do you think of my plan?"

"It can do no harm," he answers, after a moment's thought, "and it might be a good plan."

"Then I shall lose no time in executing it," she answers, decisively.

The baronet detains her to say, hesitatingly:

"Do not think me officious, Lady Vera, if I suggest that you advertise the loss of the earl's memorandum-book, and offer a suitable reward for its recovery. It is just possible that some strolling tramp has quietly pilfered it while you lay sleeping, attracted by the golden clasps."

"It may be," Lady Vera answers, incredulously, but she duly writes out the advertisement, and it is forwarded without delay to the county papers.

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## CHAPTER XXXIV.

Two days later, Lady Vera, amusing herself under the broad oaks of the park with Lady Clive's children, is secretly drawn aside by Hal, the eldest, with a look of importance on his handsome face.

"Come with me, Vera, away from the nurse and children," he says, with a confidential air. "I have something for you." [Pg 107]

Always indulgent to children, Lady Vera follows the clasp of the small hand, and is led away to a small summer-house out of range of the keen eyes of Mark and Dot.

"Now you may sit down, Vera," announces eight-year-old Hal, with owlish gravity. "I have something to tell you before I give you what I said I had for you."

Countess Vera sits down obediently. It is a bird's nest, or a blue-bird's egg, or some such treasure of the summer wood, she thinks to herself, with a smile, as the little brown hand goes into his jacket pocket.

"This morning, Vera, I went for a walk with Mark and Dot, and the nurse," he begins. "We went down into the wood a little way, it was so cool and green, and the birds sang so sweetly."

"It is surely a bird's egg," Vera says to herself now, keenly approving her own penetration.

But between the boyish fingers now appears the small corner of a yellow envelope, which somewhat quickens her curiosity.

"I went off to some distance by myself, and climbed a tree to look into a bird's nest. Bessie scolded, but I am too old to be bossed by a nurse, papa says, and so I gave her to understand. Don't you think I am getting too tall to mind what Bessie says, Lady Vera?" throwing back his curly head with dignity.

"Much too tall," Lady Vera admits with demure earnestness. "I should say that you would reach quite to her shoulder."

"Oh, quite," says Hal, in an aggrieved tone. "So, as I was telling you, Vera, I told Bess to mind her own business. Then I climbed into a great tree to look into a bird's nest."

"I hope you did not rob the nest and bring me the spoils, Hal," she begins, reproachfully.

"No, indeed," laughed the lad. "You would not have admired them very much if I had. The nest was pretty, but the five little naked birds in it were quite disgusting, I can tell you. Not a feather had grown on them yet, and their gaping mouths seemed as if they would swallow one. I came down pretty quick, and almost landed on the head of an old woman."

"An old woman," Vera repeats, in surprise.

"Yes, a wrinkled, stooping old hag, gathering sticks in the wood. I gave her a pretty start, I can tell you," cries the boy, laughing at the remembrance.

"Ah, then, it is a *souvenir* of the old witch you have brought me," says the countess, smiling.

"You have guessed it, Vera. You must be a witch yourself," cries Hal, in high glee with himself and her. "Here it is, a letter with an elegant yellow cover—a begging letter, of course," he adds, with a ludicrous assumption of wisdom.

A start of repulsion goes over Vera as she takes the coarse envelope in her hand.

She holds it unopened in her hand a moment, wondering at her own nervousness.

"Are you afraid to open it, Vera?" laughs the boy. "Let me do it for you, then. The old hag was very mysterious over it, I can tell you. She bade me tell no one of the letter, not even papa and mamma. You see how clever I was, getting you away from Bessie and the children." [Pg 108]

Lady Vera has torn the coarse envelope open by this time. A half sheet of paper falls out into her hand. On it is clearly and plainly written these lines:

"If Lady Fairvale would gain possession of the lost memorandum-book, let her come down beyond the lodge-gates, half a mile along the road at dusk this evening. Let her come alone and unwatched, or she will accomplish nothing. One will be in waiting who will restore the memorandum-book, and claim the reward."

Thus it ends. Hal looks curiously at her pale, grave face.

"It was a begging letter, wasn't it?" he inquires.

"She certainly wants something of me. I am not sure if she will get it or not. Hal, promise me not to speak of this to-day to anyone—will you, dear?"

"Mum's the word. I can keep a secret, you bet," answers the eldest-born of the Clives, with dreadful slang, acquired, no doubt, in the stables which he visits daily with his father.

"Thank you, dear, that's a good boy. Now let us go back to Mark and Dot," says Lady Vera, putting her yellow-covered letter in her pocket.

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## CHAPTER XXXV.

"Shall I keep the appointment?" Lady Vera asks herself many times that day.

A certain doubt and dread hovers intangibly in her mind. Will she really obtain the lost memorandum-book, or is it only some trap her enemies have set for her?

She longs to consult Sir Harry and Lady Clive, but the warning of the writer deters her.

"She must come alone and unwatched, or she will accomplish nothing."

Lady Vera has a premonition that her friends would by no means permit her to accede to the writer's demands, yet she decides within herself that there is really no danger in doing so.

Sir Harry Clive's theory of the loss of her book is no doubt correct. Some strolling thief, probably the old hag of Hal's story, has pilfered it for the sake of the golden clasps, and now, attracted by the offered reward, is eager to restore it.

After weighing the matter in her mind all day, she decides to keep the appointment. She is most anxious to recover the lost book again, spurred onward to even more eagerness by her desire to prove to the baronet that her strange story is no dream, as he too evidently persists in believing.

Yet, obeying the "still, small voice," that whispers to the heart of danger, Lady Vera decides to take some few precautions for her safety in case that treachery should assail her.

As evening approaches she incloses the letter of her mysterious correspondent in an envelope, together with a small note, saying that she had gone to meet the writer. She seals it and addresses it to Sir Harry Clive. [Pg 109]

A great restlessness comes over Lady Vera as the hour approaches in which she is to meet the unknown possessor of the lost book.

With some trivial excuse to her friends for deserting their company, she retires to her room and summons her faithful Elsie.

Elsie, by the way, has been made happy for life by the settlement upon her by her mistress of a generous marriage portion.

She is engaged to Robert Hill, the gardener, and Lady Vera has taken this method of testifying her gratitude to Elsie by smoothing their path to a speedy marriage.

Now with some little nervousness Lady Vera puts into Elsie's hands the letter addressed to Sir Harry Clive.

"Elsie, I am going out for a little while," she says, with as much calmness and indifference as she can command. "I leave this letter in your keeping. Keep it faithful for one hour. If I return in one hour you may give it back into my hands. If, on the contrary, I fail to be here by that time, you must give it immediately to Sir Harry Clive."

The maid looks at her, a little frightened by the gravity of the charge and by Lady Vera's pale, strange face.

"It will soon be dusk, my lady. It is too late for you to be out alone. If you must go out, take someone with you," urges Elsie.

"Nonsense!" her mistress laughs, reassuringly. "I am not afraid to walk in my own grounds at this hour of the evening; I have done so often before. Do not tell anyone I am out unless the hour elapses before I return. Then you may raise the alarm."

"My lady, I am afraid to let you go like this," objects the maid. "It seems as if you anticipate danger yourself; I am sure it is wrong for you to go."

But Lady Vera at this shows the sterner side of her character, which is seldom turned to her adoring dependants.

"You will obey my orders, Elsie," she answers, haughtily.

"I beg your pardon, my lady," falters Elsie, bursting into tears.

"There, there, Elsie, I did not mean to hurt you," Lady Vera says, melted at once. "But you must not try to hinder me. Give me some light wrapper now to keep the dew off my dress."

Elsie brings a long, dark circular of thin cloth and delivers it to her mistress with many silent forebodings—forebodings destined to be only too sadly realized.

For who can tell how long it will be before the light footsteps of Countess Vera shall echo on the threshold of the palatial home she is leaving so eagerly and secretly, now, to keep her tryst with her mysterious correspondent.

Not Elsie, who weeps so silently, filled with strange, prescient fears.

It is growing dusk indeed as Lady Vera, wrapped in the dark circular, with the hood drawn over her head, flits rapidly along the quiet road. [Pg 110]

When at last in the distance she descries the bent and drooping figure of an old woman, she laughs to herself at the vague fears that have troubled her.

"Poor, harmless old rogue," she says to herself, half pityingly. "One need apprehend no danger from her. A few shillings will buy back my lost treasure and make the old creature happy. I was foolish to fear anything. I am very glad I came!"

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## CHAPTER XXXVI.

Leslie Noble's parting threat to the Countess Vera that he would yet claim her for his own, was not by any means the mere momentary ebullition of rage at her cold and scornful rejection of his overtures. He fully meant to keep his word. He was dazzled by her rank, her prestige, and her wondrous beauty had taken his senses captive even before the time when she had declared herself his wife.

To win her he would have dared and risked much. It would be like mating with a queen and reigning as a sovereign, to share the heart, and home and wealth of this beautiful, titled lady.

Up to the hour when he had sought that memorable interview with Lady Vera at Clive House, Leslie Noble had deluded himself with a vain fancy that if he deserted Ivy, and personally solicited Vera to become his wife, she would not refuse.

Some spark of vanity whispered to him that if she had not had some personal interest in him she would not so readily have claimed him as her husband. He knew himself to be handsome, and he fancied that he had only to repudiate Ivy and acknowledge Vera's claim, to gain full possession of the beautiful girl.

But her cold, scornful, insulting repulse had fairly maddened him, and he had sworn an oath to himself, as to her, that he would eventually possess her.

But how to compass that desirable event puzzled him sorely.

By her own free confession she was his wife, but he was perfectly aware that it would be utterly futile to try to claim her before the law. Her friends were too strong and powerful for him to make open war upon her.

He dreaded that the least move of that nature on his part would provoke a suit for bigamy against himself.

No course remained to him, therefore, but "treason and stratagem." He longed to win her, and yet not altogether by brute force. Some fancy came to him of how sweet it would be to have the love of this beautiful girl, from whom he had recoiled in aversion when Mrs. Cleveland had woven that romance about her low-born, drunken father, but who seemed so desirable now, clothed in all the dazzling externals of wealth, rank, lordly birth, and peerless loveliness. So are we all swayed by the extraneous circumstances of worldly prosperity.

Time and again Leslie Noble cursed himself for his wavering and cowardice that fatal night when his weak words of regret had driven his friendless, forlorn little child-bride to desperate suicide. All he had lost by that fatal wavering rushed bitterly over him. [Pg 111]

"If I had been true and kind to that poor child as her mother wished me to be, I should have reaped a rich reward for my fidelity when the Earl of Fairvale came to seek his child. Why did I not take her by the hand and calm her trembling fears that night by telling her enemies boldly that she was my wife, and I would not see her insulted? Ah, it was my weak fancy for that shrewish Ivy that ruined all! And how cleverly she and her mother played on my fickle feelings! Curses on them both. Vile wretches! They are not fit to live in the same world that holds my peerless Vera!"

So it came to pass that, fostering the passion he had conceived for Lady Vera, and enraged by her queenly scorn, Leslie Noble conceived nefarious designs for abducting the young countess and bearing her to a place of concealment, where alone and undisturbed, he might plead his cause and peradventure win her heart.

It was the foolish reasoning of a madman, and in truth Leslie Noble was half mad with the violence of his passions, while the bitterness of his disappointment only urged him on to fresh endeavors.

Lady Vera little guessed how her footsteps were dogged and her movements watched by this man whom she so loftily despised. She did not know that when she left London and retired to her country home for greater security from her enemies, that this lover, more ruthless than any foe, had followed her to her own neighborhood, and was playing the spy on her movements, eager to carry out his base design.

She little knew that it was Leslie Noble who had stolen the book from her lap when she fell asleep by the lake that sunny day.

In the advertisement that followed, the crafty wretch saw the accomplishment of his wicked purpose.

It was he who, in the guise of an old woman, had given little Hal that crafty letter for Lady Vera.

It was he who waited now in the cheap and common garb of an old and poverty-stricken crone, to meet the fair young girl who came so innocent and unsuspecting, with almost a smile of triumph on her lips as she thought of meeting Sir Harry Clive with her recovered treasure; thus Leslie Noble waited, like a great, poisonous, black spider weaving his web for his innocent prey.

She comes swiftly along the narrow footpath with a light, graceful step, wrapped in the long, dark circular cloak, and holding up with both hands the sweeping train of the delicate dinner-dress from contact with the dust and the dew.

The deepening twilight enfolds her in its dim, shadowy light, and lends a mysterious aspect to the bent figure of the old hag, who grasps with both hands the head of a thick, knotted stick, while she waits, with eyes bowed sullenly to the ground, for the lady's coming.

"Are you the person who sent for me?" Lady Vera asks, gently, as she comes to a pause opposite this forbidding-looking figure. [Pg 112]

The hooded head of the old hag is slowly lifted in the darkness of the falling twilight. The eyes that regard her so intently are shielded by great goggle-glasses.

"Yes, if you are Lady Fairvale," is the answer, in a muffled voice, with a strange croak in it.

"I am Lady Fairvale, and I have brought the reward I offered," the countess answers, anxiously. "Have you the memorandum-book?"

"Yes, I have it," gruffly.

"Then pray let me have it at once," Lady Vera exclaims, with some impatience. "It grows late, and I must hurry back to my waiting guests."

"In a moment, lady," the strange voice says, wheedlingly. "You see, I was afraid to trust you wholly. I suspected treachery, so I hid the book in the hedge a little way back here. Walk on with me a pace, and you shall have it, my lady."

"Go on, I will follow you," answers the girl.

She gathers the trailing skirts of her dress in her hands again, and walks on after the bent form hobbling painfully with the aid of the stick. It is growing very dark.

A cloud has come over the sky. The deep stillness and loneliness of the spot are broken suddenly by the impatient neigh of a horse.

With a start, Lady Vera turns her head. In that moment, two strong arms clasp her as in a vise, her hood is drawn over her face to smother her agonized shrieks, and the old woman, grown suddenly tall and erect, and strong, bears her forcibly to a carriage that has been waiting, hidden behind a hedge.

Her abductor springs in beside her, closes the door, and they are whirled away through the falling night, while a dexterous sprinkle of chloroform reduces the miserable girl to unconsciousness.

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Meanwhile, Sir Harry and Lady Clive, repairing to the drawing-room near the dinner-hour, wonder and speculate upon the absence of their hostess.

She is not wont to keep them waiting, but to-day the great dinner-bell clangs twice over, and no swish of silk in the hall, no hastening footsteps announce her coming.

"What can keep Lady Vera?" the lady wonders, aloud. "Usually she is here full half an hour before the time. She is never long at her dressing. I wonder——"

There is a sudden, quick step outside the door, and Sir Harry interrupts her with:

"Here she is now."

The door is opened, but it is only Elsie, the maid, who enters the room. Elsie, with her pretty face all pale with fear, her cheeks wet with tears, in her hand Lady Vera's letter.

"Sir Harry," she utters, in a broken voice, "my lady went out into the grounds an hour ago. She gave me this letter for you in case she did not return within the hour. The time is past, and I have hastened to obey her." [Pg 113]

A chill premonition of danger thrills his heart as he breaks the seal. She has written only a few brief lines, but they are startling in their nature.

> "I HAVE gone to meet the writer of the inclosed note. If I do not return in an hour you must suspect danger and have search made for me."

That is all. When he has read the contents of the yellow envelope a groan bursts from his lips as he hands it to his wife.

"It is a trap, and she has walked innocently into it, poor girl. Doubtless her foes have murdered her ere this," he exclaims, in deep agitation.

"God forbid," Lady Clive exclaims, bursting into frightened tears.

There is no thought of dinner now. Sir Harry musters the whole force of men-servants, and himself at their head, they sally forth to the rescue of their betrayed mistress.

A beating summer rain has commenced to fall, and the night is pitchy dark, save for the occasional flashes of lightning that flare with blue and lurid fire against the black and stormy sky. They divide into separate forces and search frantically till the day-dawn. But all trace of Countess Vera is swallowed up in the blackness of the stormy, mysterious night.

In the early dawn, a telegram flashes over the wires to Colonel Lockhart in London:

"Come quickly. Vera has been abducted."

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## CHAPTER XXXVII.

In an obscure but respectable street in London, Mrs. Cleveland and Ivy had hidden themselves away in cheap and shabby lodgings, the better to husband the small hoard of money that remained to them of all their departed wealth and grandeur.

"I will never consent to sell my jewels and dresses, never!" the repudiated wife declared, firmly, the ruling passion still strong even in her defeat and disgrace. "For when Leslie finds that Vera will not live with him, and when Mr. Gilmore's lawyers prove her to be the adventuress and impostor that she is, he will return to me, and I shall be his wife again. We will return to America, where no one knows anything of our trouble, and then I shall need my fine dresses and jewels again."

"But what if we come to want in the meantime?" Mrs. Cleveland inquires grimly.

"You may sell your rubies. They are worth a thousand pounds, at least, and the proceeds will keep us comfortable for some time," Ivy answers, with cool insolence.

So, with the dread of selling her beloved rubies before her eyes, Mrs. Cleveland proceeds to practice economy with a vengeance, living in the cheapest style with a view to lengthening to its utmost capacity the check that Leslie Noble had contemptuously thrown them at their last interview.

But the wily widow has her own schemes and plans for the future, though she imparts none of them to Ivy, whose selfishness and insolence have begun to disgust even the wicked and crafty woman who bore her. Ivy always contrived to make herself a despised burden to anyone who had aught to do with her. Even her mother was sensible of that patent fact. [Pg 114]

In these days of their disgrace and humiliation, the deserted wife shut herself into her shabby chamber, incessantly bewailing her hard fate, and upbraiding her mother for her long-ago sin which had been the means of bringing down this vengeance on her daughter's head. Not that Ivy regretted the wrong that had broken the hearts of Lawrence and Edith Campbell, but she was exceedingly wroth that the consequences had recoiled upon her own devoted head.

While she nurses her woes in the seclusion of her small, hot chamber, Mrs. Cleveland is maturing her plans for the future in the shabby-genteel parlor where she is interviewing a visitor—no less a person than Raleigh Gilmore.

Mr. Gilmore, after a calm, dispassionate view, does not appear like a man who would honor the title and estates from which he is desirous of ousting the present fair incumbent, Lady Fairvale. He is tall and thin, and stoop-shouldered, with shaggling, gray hair, gray, ferret eyes, and a coarse face on which nature has stamped "villain" too unmistakably for cavil. So much the better for her purpose, the woman thinks to herself as she reads the cunning features like an open book.

The first purport of their interview having been discussed, the visitor proceeds to the second.

"When I received your letter advising me of your ability and willingness to furnish evidence to oust that adventuress from Fairvale and leave me in possession, you hinted at a reward which you should exact in return for your valuable services," he observes, regarding her closely under

his shaggy, overhanging, gray eyebrows.

"Yes," she remarks, with a cool, self-possessed bow.

"I should be glad to know the amount of the sum that will compensate your aid," Mr. Gilmore pursues, as eagerly as if he already held the vast wealth of Fairvale within his close, penurious grasp.

A slight, mocking smile glances over the wily widow's handsome, well-preserved face.

"You are a bachelor, I have heard," she answers, in a significant tone.

"Yes; I have never liked women well enough to tie myself to one," Mr. Gilmore retorts, with grim frankness.

The widow tosses her head.

"I am sorry for that," she says, audaciously; "I had hoped you would like my looks, for I must tell you frankly, that the reward I claim is to share your good fortune *in toto* as your wife."

He stares at her, growing pale in his angry amazement.

"There will be a kind of poetic compensation in such a marriage," Mrs. Cleveland pursues, coolly enjoying his rage. "I loved Lawrence Campbell, but my half-sister stole his heart from me. By [Pg 115] rights I should have been his wife, and in course of time, Countess of Fairvale. No reward will satisfy me except to step into Vera Campbell's place and reign absolute sovereign where she has queened it so long. You see I do not offer to take away anything from you, only to share it with you."

"But, Mrs. Cleveland—madam—I have already explained to you that I am prejudiced against women. I do not wish to marry," protests the old bachelor, finding voice after his first surprise.

"So you reject me?" she inquires, with an air of chagrin.

"Yes, decidedly yes," he returns, nervously. "Be pleased to name some other reward."

"I have already explained to you that nothing will satisfy me except to be Countess of Fairvale. I wish to ride rough shod over Vera Campbell's heart, and in no other way could I be revenged so well as in taking her own place. Since you deny me this small grace I decline to help you to the earldom, and all that we have said about it goes for nothing," returns the widow, with the utmost frankness.

Anger almost gets the better of Mr. Gilmore for a moment, but crushing back the words upon his lips, he looks steadily at the speaker in blank silence.

"You do not find me very bad-looking, do you?" she inquires, with an air of unruffled good nature.

"On the contrary, I think you decidedly handsome and well-preserved. I never expected to be courted by so fine-looking a woman. Do you consider me handsome, madam?"

"Not at all. You are abominably ugly," she replies, after a calm scrutiny of his face. "If I marry you, it will not be for any personal merit you possess, only as a stepping-stone to power."

"You are very candid, but since you have the balance of power in your hands, you can afford to speak freely. Madam, I offer you my heart, hand and fortune. Will you accept them?" he exclaims, in grim displeasure.

"Are you in earnest?" she inquires.

"Never more so. You have left me no alternative," he answers, bitterly. "But I warn you, I shall not make a very loving husband."

"Nor I a loving wife. But I accept you as I said just now, as a stepping-stone to power," she replies, with provoking coolness.

He rises to depart.

"It is settled, then," he observes, with forced complaisance. "You will help me to the earldom, and I will pay you by making you my bride. When shall the wedding be?"

"On the day when you take possession of Fairvale's title and estates," she answers, promptly. "*Au revoir*, my charming bridegroom."

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## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

Ere Lady Vera fully recovers consciousness again, she has reached her destination, the ruins of a once fine old mansion in the heart of a dense wood near the sea.

She opens her eyes in a large and lofty upper chamber to find herself lying in a high, old- [Pg 116] fashioned, four posted bed, with faded hangings of crimson velvet. Two waxen candles in silver candelabra on the tall, carved mantel shed a soft, steady light through the room, and by their aid Vera deciphers the features of a stout, middle-aged woman, in cap and apron, who is bending over her, bathing her face and hands with aromatic vinegar.

The beautiful girl springs up to a sitting posture with a cry of fear and indignation, and with outstretched hands repulses the woman.

"Do not touch me, wretch!" she cries. "How dared you bring me here, away from my home and friends? You shall suffer for this."

But the woman only smiles as if at the ravings of a spoiled child.

"My lady, you are mistaken," she answers, not unkindly. "It was your husband who brought you here. I am only your maid. I am here to wait upon you."

"I have no husband," Lady Vera answers, with a cold thrill of fear creeping around her heart.

"Oh, my lady, don't go for to say that," the woman answers, cajolingly. "Such a kind, handsome man as Mr. Noble is ought not to be denied by his wife. I'm sure it was very good in him to carry you off, and hide you from the people as wanted to put you into a lunatic asylum. The keepers would have abused you dreadfully, my poor dear, but I shall be as kind and patient with you as your own mother. Your husband is that tender-hearted he couldn't bear to see you ill-used."

"So it is Leslie Noble who has abducted me," Lady Vera thinks to herself, with a start. Up to that moment her suspicions had turned upon Marcia Cleveland. "The wretch! And he has pretended to this woman that I am crazy."

The crimson color flies into the captive's face, then retreats, leaving her deathly pale again. She rises and walks up to the woman, who retreats half-fearfully before her.

"You need not fear me," Lady Vera tells her, sadly. "I have no intention of harming you. I only wish to ask you a simple question."

Thus adjured, the woman waits respectfully, humoring the whim of her mistress.

"Look at me," says Lady Vera, lifting the dark fringe of her brilliant, star-like eyes, and fixing a calm, steady gaze on the woman's face. "Do I look like a mad person? You know that lunatics have a wild, dangerous glare in their eyes. Are not mine calm, reasonable, steady?"

"She is one of the cunning ones," the maid mutters to herself, then aloud, soothingly, she answers: "They are beautiful eyes, my lady, so bright and black! No wonder my master adores you, so lovely as you are."

"I tell you I am not mad," Vera cries impatiently, vexed at the woman's stolid persistence in her belief. "I am as sane as you are, and your master is a villain. He has abducted me from my friends and my home, but they will trace me out and punish him for his villany, be sure of that." [Pg 117]

"Come, my dear, do not excite yourself. It will all come well. Sit down in this arm-chair, and make yourself comfortable, while I go and fetch your lunch and a cup of tea. I dare say you have had no dinner, traveling so far."

She wheels forward a large, crimson-cushioned easy-chair, but Lady Vera rejects it with a gesture of scorn.

"Where is the man you call your master?" she inquires, haughtily. "Is he in the house?"

"Yes, my lady. Should you be pleased to see him?" inquires her keeper, deferentially.

"Yes; tell him to come. I wish to know the meaning of this dastardly outrage," the countess answers, indignantly.

The woman withdraws with a bow. The click of a key in the lock informs Lady Vera that she is a prisoner. She paces up and down the floor, a storm of indignation raging in her breast, mixed with a wild hope that her friends will soon deliver her from the trap into which she had walked so unsuspectingly.

Suddenly the key clicks in the lock, and Leslie Noble walks boldly into the room.

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## CHAPTER XXXIX.

For a moment they regard each other silently, Mr. Noble appearing handsome and elegant as usual, having removed the disfiguring toggery that had transformed him into a stooping old woman, and Lady Vera facing him with her slight form drawn haughtily erect, the scorn of an outraged queen flashing in her dark and star-like eyes.

"Coward, villain, how dared you perpetrate this high-handed outrage?" she demands, in a clear, high voice, that trembles with its bitter anger.

For answer he throws himself abjectly at her feet.

"Vera, my love, my darling, my wife, my passionate love must plead my excuse. I loved you and I could not live without you. So I brought you away where I might have some chance to plead my cause with you and win your heart," he answers, weakly, still kneeling there, and gazing at her with adoring eyes.

A scornful laugh ripples over the listener's beautiful lips as she retreats from him to the furthest corner of the room.

"And did you think this craven course could win my heart?" she asks, with stinging contempt. "Was it a manly, a lovable feat to don the rags of a poor and feeble old woman, that you might kidnap a weak girl who hated you? Was it to surrender my heart to the handsome and manly figure you appeared on that occasion?"

He writhes beneath the keen lash of her superb scorn.

"Edward Rochester masqueraded as an old woman, and yet Jane Eyre loved and admired him as her hero among men," he answers, sullenly, rising to his feet.

"There is no parallel between the cases," she answers, icily. "You can bring no precedent from fiction or history that could make me admire *you*, either in your own form or any other. I despise you, I have always despised you, and I warn you that my friends will rescue me out of your power. I left your lying note behind me with directions that I must be sought for if I failed to return. Even now they are searching for me. At any moment I expect them to rescue me." [Pg 118]

He pales at first, then laughs easily.

"You were more crafty than I deemed you, but I am not frightened," he answers. "Do you know where you are? You are thirty miles from Fairvale Park, in the midst of a dense wood. You are occupying the only habitable chamber in a ruined and deserted old mansion, whose owner is in Egypt. The place has the name of being haunted, and no one ever ventures into the vicinity. I have hired the woman you saw just now at an extravagant bribe to remain here to guard and wait on you. I have sworn to her that you are mad, and she firmly believes me. She will regard all you say as the aimless ravings of a lunatic. Now do you believe it likely that you will soon be delivered out of my power?"

She has no answer ready for him now. Despair has stricken her dumb.

"It does not rest with your friends, it does not rest with me to say when you shall go free," he pursues, coolly. "It is all for you to say, Lady Vera. I am ready to make a treaty of peace with you at any time."

"How?" she asks, with white lips.

"You are my wife," he answers. "I love you, and if you will consent to acknowledge my claim upon you, and live with me, I will take you back to Fairvale Park to-morrow."

"And do you think I would purchase freedom upon such ignominious terms?" she asks, with a curling lip. "Live with you, coward to your first wife, traitor to your second? Not for an hour. I would pine to death in this loathsome prison first, and die thanking Heaven for my happy release from the arts of a villain."

"You forget that you are here alone, defenseless, utterly in my power," he answers, pale with anger and shame. "What is there to prevent me from forcing you to do my will?"

Crimson for a moment, then pale as death again, Countess Vera lifts her hand.

"God is here," she answers, solemnly, "God is here, and He will protect me. I tell you frankly," she goes on with vehement emphasis, "I will kill you, or I will kill myself before I will yield to your will. Do not attempt to drive me desperate."

Pale with rage, he thrusts his hand into his breast and withdraws the missing memorandum-book.

Lady Vera's face lights up at that sight.

"So you *did* have it," she cries out, quickly. "You are a thief as well as an abductor of helpless women! Oh, for shame, for shame!"

His face grows black as night.

"As you are in my power, you would do well to moderate your language," he answers, in the low tone of bitter rage. "Beware how you transform my love to hate!" [Pg 119]

"I fear neither your love nor your hate," Countess Vera answers, dauntlessly.

"Perhaps you will pay a heavier ransom for this book than you would have done simply for your freedom—will you not?"

"Is the same ransom required?" she asks, regarding him steadily.

"Yes."

"I would purchase no earthly boon at so terrible a price," Countess Vera answers, shuddering.

"Not even title, wealth and power?" he asks, significantly.

"All three I can claim already," she answers, with a gesture of unconscious pride.

"But if you must lose all without this little talisman?" he inquires, in the same significant tone, and regarding her intently.

"I can do without the talisman, as you call it," she answers, coldly. "Before I fell asleep that day, every word of my father's memorandum was fixed in my memory. I have written to Joel McPherson to come to England and establish my identity with that of the girl who was buried alive in Glenwood Cemetery."

For a moment Leslie Noble stares blankly at his beautiful opponent, dismayed at her calm declaration.

"By Jove! but you are a keen one," he mutters, unable to repress a glance of angry admiration. "You seem to anticipate everything. I did not credit you with such a ready brain. And so you have written to Joel McPherson?"

"Yes," she answers, with a little note of triumph in her voice.

"Yes, and I have written to a friend of mine in Washington to keep the sexton of Glenwood out of

the way by force, or fraud, or bribe; you will never see him in England until he comes by my will," he answers, insolently.

Coldly disdainful, she makes him no reply.

"Do you know what will happen to you if you continue to defy me?" he goes on, angrily. "Raleigh Gilmore is about to begin a suit against you. His aim is to prove you an impostor. Mrs. Cleveland is aiding and abetting him in the endeavor. She hates you so bitterly that she will stop at nothing to drag you down from your high estate. They will succeed, unless Joel McPherson's evidence can be given against them. With the old sexton lies the only real knowledge of that night's mystery, when Vera Campbell was removed from the grave where I myself saw her laid. You alone can never prove that Earl Fairvale's heiress rose from that grave again."

He pauses, but her bloodless lips offer no reply.

"Admit my rights as your husband, Vera, and I will fight with you and by your side for the grand heritage your father left you. I will summon Joel McPherson to your aid and prove your identity beyond all cavil. Deny me and I swear I will be terribly revengeful for your obstinacy. I will join the ranks of your enemies. I will deny that you are my wife. Your defeat will be certain then. Think of yourself penniless, friendless, branded all over England as an adventuress and impostor."

The beautiful face is deadly pale, the hands are clenched until the pink nails cut into the delicate palms. In silent agony she admits to herself that his threats are not at all idle ones. Sir Harry Clive's reluctant communications have prepared her for all this. [Pg 120]

"Well, what have you to say to all this?" he asks of the silent figure before him.

"Nothing. I know that of myself I am utterly powerless. I leave my cause with God," she answers, briefly.

He smothers a curse on his dark mustached lips.

"So you will lose all rather than take me for your husband?" he asks her, in unfeigned amazement.

She lifts her eyes for a moment, and surveys him with a look of steady contempt.

"Have you still any doubt on that point?" she inquires, fearlessly and defiantly. "Let me assure you then that I would rather be a homeless beggar in the streets of London than submit to your loathsome love!"

The look, the tone, the words, fill him with blind, overmastering rage.

"By Heaven, I will make you repent those words!" he exclaims, springing toward her and clasping his arm around her slender waist.

But with one piercing cry of terror Countess Vera puts her hand into her breast and withdraws a tiny, jewel-hilted dagger.

Maddened with fear, she thrusts the keen blade into the arm that holds her so tightly, and with a scream of pain the villain releases her and retreats to the door.

"Oh, Mr. Noble, your arm is all bleeding!" exclaims the woman, entering at that moment with the tea-tray.

"Yes, my wife is in one of her occasional violent fits, and has tried to murder me," he answers, shortly.

"She has a dagger which you must try to get away from her or she may hurt you too. Lock her into the room now and come down and dress my wound for me," he adds, stalking out of the room.

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## CHAPTER XL.

The woman advanced into the room and deposited her tea-tray on the table. A tempting little lunch was arranged upon it in a pretty china service.

"Come, Mrs. Noble, and drink your tea while it is still warm," she said, coaxingly. "I know you are tired and hungry. Will you take a bit of this chicken salad and cold sliced ham? 'Twill do you good."

"I have no appetite, thank you," Vera answers, turning her head aside.

"Well, I'll leave the tray with you while I go and bind up master's wounded arm. Mayhap you'll eat by-and-bye," the woman answers kindly as she goes out, carefully locking the door behind her.

Left to herself, Lady Vera draws a long breath of relief, and turning to a window, draws aside the heavy velvet curtain, glancing anxiously out for any possible prospect of release. [Pg 121]

Alas! her captor's words proved all too true. The first faint beams of dawn rising palely in the east, show her the wide, dense belt of woodland surrounding the ruined mansion in which she is imprisoned.

The wild, tangled garden beneath the window sends up gusts of rainy perfume to her eager

senses. She pushes up the sash and leans out, inhaling the fresh, sweet air, and wondering if it would not be possible to escape through the window from this horrible trap into which her credulity had led her.

Alas! her eager, downward glance shows her that she is in the third story of the house.

She drops the heavy curtain and sinks shivering to a seat, worn and trembling with the terrible experiences of the night. Her thoughts fly to the home from whence she has been so rudely torn.

"Are they frightened? Are they seeking for me, I wonder?" she thinks. "Oh, may God guide them in their search!"

And then she thinks of her lost lover, handsome, manly Philip Lockhart. She knows how heavily the blow will fall on that true, manly, loving heart.

She leans her head wearily down on her arm, and gives herself up to the sad, sweet pleasure of thinking of Philip Lockhart. Gradually a weary sleep steals over her, from which she is awakened by the entrance of her keeper.

"Asleep, dear? I'm sorry I awakened ye," she says, blandly. "Do you feel better of your little fit of temper?"

Lady Vera makes no answer to this kind query.

"Mr. Noble has gone up to London," pursues the maid, glibly. "He left his love and good-bye for you. You gave him quite an ugly cut, so you did, my pretty lady. Won't you let poor old Betsy Robson see the pretty little knife you did it with?" she continues, coaxingly.

Lady Vera lifts her eyes and regards her calmly.

"Betsy Robson, if that is your name," she said, "listen to me a moment. I have a dagger concealed on my person, and Leslie Noble has set you on to take it from me. I warn you that if you make the slightest attempt to do so, it will be at the peril of your life. It is my only weapon of defense against Leslie Noble, and I will never part with it while I am in that villain's power."

"Oh, fie, my lady, why should you be so set against your loving husband?" remonstrates Mrs. Robson.

Lady Vera regards her keenly.

"Are you acting a part, or do you really believe what that man tells you?" she asks, wonderingly. "I tell you Leslie Noble has no claim on me at all. He is a villain who has stolen me away from my home and friends to try to force me to be his wife. I am Lady Fairvale, of Fairvale Park, and if you will restore me to my liberty, Mrs. Robson, I will reward you generously."

The dark eyes, full of bitter tears now, are lifted pleadingly to the woman's stolid face, but the wild appeal only elicits some words under Betsy Robson's breath: [Pg 122]

"Poor soul! He told me she fancied she was some great, rich lady. A pity she is so wild-like. So lovely as she is, too, and might be such a pride to her handsome husband."

Countess Vera turns away her head with a heart-wrung cry.

"Oh, may God forgive you, woman, for lending yourself to this wicked conspiracy against a wronged girl! Surely He who reigns above will send me safe deliverance from my prison-house."

"Poor, pretty creature, raving mad, that she is," comments stupid, yet kind-hearted Betsy Robson.

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## CHAPTER XLI.

The utmost dismay and horror settled down upon the household at Fairvale Park when it was found that every trace of Lady Vera's whereabouts was swallowed up in impenetrable darkness and mystery.

Sir Harry and Lady Clive believed that Mrs. Cleveland was the guilty party who had decoyed her from her home, and they foreboded that the too-confiding girl had been murdered in cold blood by her ruthless foe. Little Hal's story of the woman who had given him the note for Lady Vera in the wood confirmed them in their first suspicions, and they bitterly bewailed Lady Vera's mistaken clemency in letting her would-be murderess go free that night in London.

But when Colonel Lockhart came down from London that evening in response to their telegram, though he was almost distracted by this new and crushing blow to his happiness, the quick instinct of love turned his suspicions unerringly to the truth.

"It is not Mrs. Cleveland who has abducted Lady Vera. I cannot believe it for an instant. She would not have ventured on such a course," he says, decidedly; "Leslie Noble is the guilty party."

"Then what are we to do, Philip?" Lady Clive asks, piteously.

"We must oppose cunning to cunning," he answers, thoughtfully. "I shall return to London to-night and employ a skillful detective to shadow Leslie Noble's every footstep. You may be sure that the wretch has shut Lady Vera up in some obscure place in the hope of coercing her to yield to his wishes. Oh, Heaven, what anguish may not my darling be suffering now while I am powerless to rescue her!"

He walks distractedly up and down the floor, while tears of not unmanly grief gather in his troubled blue eyes.

"But, Philip, you forget that it was a woman who gave little Hal the note for Lady Vera," exclaims Sir Harry, unwilling to give up his theory of Mrs. Cleveland's handiwork in the abduction.

"Leslie Noble may have employed a woman as his tool in the affair, or he may have masqueraded in female attire himself, but I am sure that he is the guilty party," Colonel Lockhart answers, unshaken in his conviction, "But to satisfy your doubts, Sir Harry, we will have a watch set upon [Pg 123] Mrs. Cleveland also. Nothing shall be left undone that can possibly tend to the rescue of Lady Vera from the power of her enemies."

He goes back to London that night.

Sir Harry Clive and his family follow him the next day. Two of the most skillful detectives in London are quietly set on the track of the supposed guilty parties. All London rings with the story of the daring abduction of the beautiful Countess of Fairvale.

At first public opinion was strong against the Clevelands and Mr. Noble, but when it is discovered that all three are living quietly but openly in London, a doubt falls on the first suspicions. An inexplicable mystery centers around that strange disappearance.

The sensation grows all the greater because, simultaneously with her disappearance, Raleigh Gilmore had entered suit against her for the title and estates of Fairvale, alleging that the true heiress had died in her early girlhood, and that the late earl had foisted an impostor on the public as his daughter.

But pending the return of the missing countess, the lawsuit lay in abeyance. Nothing could be done in her absence, and conjecture became rife over the strange circumstances of her abduction. Various opinions were advanced.

Raleigh Gilmore did not hesitate to assert his conviction that there had been no abduction in the case. Lady Vera had simply run away from fear of the threatened suit against her, knowing that she could not defend herself against the prosecution, and ashamed to stay and face the trial where she would be branded as a beautiful and lying impostor whom the late earl had adopted as his daughter.

There was not the slightest likelihood that she would ever return, he asserted, vehemently, and he would have liked to take possession of Fairvale at once, but the strong arm of the law held him back, and meanwhile, Sir Harry Clive engaged the most eminent lawyers to defend the missing heiress.

A man was sent to America to collect information at Washington. No pains nor expense was spared on either side to make the contest a close and exciting one. Raleigh Gilmore found few believers in his cause, and few friends.

But amid all the storm of wonder and conjecture in London, there was one woman whose suspicions had pointed, like Philip Lockhart's, unerringly to the truth. This was Ivy Cleveland. Her jealous instincts had at once settled upon her whilom husband as the abductor of Lady Vera.

Meanwhile the weeks wane slowly with no tidings of the lost one. The blackest mystery enshrouds her fate. The keen detectives are baffled and thrown off the scent by Leslie Noble's inimitable *sang froid*. He leads the careless life of a man about town, never leaving the city, his slightest actions open to scrutiny, no mystery seeming to be hidden under his comings and goings.

But though the detectives begin to hint that they are beating about the wrong bush, Colonel [Pg 124] Lockhart's firm convictions are in no wise altered.

He holds them closely to their duty, though they find nothing suspicious either in the movements of Mr. Noble or Mrs. Cleveland.

But though Colonel Lockhart is outwardly so calm and firm, his noble heart is wrung with despair over the fate of his lost Vera.

"My poor Phil, this terrible sorrow is making an old man of you," his sister sighs, sorrowfully, as she threads her jeweled fingers softly through his hair.

"It is hard lines upon me, that is true, Nella," he answers, with a repressed sigh, as he draws his arm around her waist.

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## CHAPTER XLII.

In spite of his outward *nonchalance* and *sang froid*, Leslie Noble at heart was restless and impatient and consumed by a burning anxiety.

Six weeks had elapsed since he had incarcerated his beautiful prisoner in the ruined old house in the wood, and in all that time he had been afraid to venture back to see her, owing to a keen suspicion he had imbibed regarding the close espionage that was kept upon his movements by the employes of Colonel Lockhart.

The slight flesh wound Lady Vera had inflicted on his arm had entirely healed, and with it had

died out his futile anger against her, giving place again to the weak love that had urged him to that desperate recourse of abducting her.

"I was rash and hasty in my last interview with her," he tells himself, "I should have remembered that love cannot be forced. I must woo her gently, with respectful looks and reverential words. I must sue for her favor humbly, as if she were a queen and I her humble slave. Many a woman has been won by flattery."

The longing came over him to woo her with rich gifts and costly jewels poured lavishly at her feet as if naught were too splendid and costly for his beautiful idol.

Alas! his splendid fortune had dwindled to a wretched competency under the various extravagances of Ivy and her mother.

"Weak fool that I was to allow Ivy to retain those magnificent jewels," he thinks, bitterly. "She ruthlessly sacrificed my fortune to obtain them, and by every right on earth they belong to Lady Vera, who is my real wife, not to the woman who usurped her place."

Fostering these thoughts and feelings ceaselessly in his breast, Leslie Noble at last conceived a dastardly design to possess himself of the jewels which he had at first decided should remain the property of his deserted and repudiated second wife.

Accordingly one morning, when he had ascertained that his mother-in-law was away from home, and not likely to return for several hours, he sent up his card to Ivy, who, after some little delay in arranging her toilet, received him in the shabby-genteel little parlor.

In the trembling hope that she might yet win back the recreant, Ivy had made herself as fair as she could without the assistance of her maid, with whose services her mother's parsimony had compelled her to dispense. [Pg 125]

"Overdressed and daubed with paint, as usual," was Mr. Noble's disgusted, inward comment, but he allowed none of this feeling to appear upon his face. Instead, he threw a glance of deep tenderness and contrition into his soft, dark eyes, and held out his arms, exclaiming sadly:

"My injured wife! Can you ever forgive me the sorrow I have caused you?"

"Oh, Leslie, you have repented!" the lady sobs, throwing herself into the open arms.

And for a while we will draw the curtain of absence over this touching picture of sacred conjugal love and reunion, while we seek others of our friends.

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On the afternoon of that same day Colonel Lockhart received a call from the chief detective.

"I have discovered," he says briefly, "that Mr. Noble has hired a conveyance to take him down into the country about twenty-five miles to-night."

"Well?" Colonel Lockhart inquires, his blue eyes blazing with excitement.

"I have hired a fast trap for myself, and intend to give secret chase to the gentleman," Mr. Sharp replies.

"That is right. I will accompany you," decides his employer, eagerly, and with a springing hope in his breast.

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## CHAPTER XLIII.

It is late noon when Mrs. Cleveland returns to her lodgings, and finds Ivy lounging on a sofa in the shabby parlor, in a state of blissful beatitude.

"You have been out, Ivy?" she exclaims, in surprise, glancing at the elegant carriage dress of brocaded black silk and sparkling jet.

"Yes," Ivy answers complacently.

"Where?" her mother inquires, surprised, for hitherto Ivy has spent all her time in the seclusion of her chamber, bewailing her untoward fate.

"I have been—to the jeweler's," Mrs. Noble answers, with shining eyes, and enjoying her mother's amazement with all the zest of one who has taken new hold on life.

Mrs. Cleveland lifts her kidded hands in real dismay.

"You have never been selling your jewels—oh, Ivy!" she cries.

"Don't be a fool, mother!" cries the dutiful daughter. "Of course I haven't sold them. You know I would die before I would part with my diamonds!"

"Then why have you been to the jeweler's?" Mrs. Cleveland asks, sharply, and Ivy answers, with a little, cunning, triumphant laugh:

"I have left my pearls and diamonds to be reset. You know I have wanted them reset ever since we came to London. At last I have my wish, and they are to be done in truly royal style." [Pg 126]

Mrs. Cleveland stares at the speaker, the color fading from her cheeks and lips, her eyes startled.

"And who is to pay for this last mad extravagance of yours?" she demands, in a low, angry voice.

"Leslie Noble, of course," Ivy answers, laughing in her mother's face.

"She is mad, I fear—stark, raving mad," Mrs. Cleveland exclaims, gazing apprehensively at her daughter.

"Oh, no, I am not, mamma. Leslie was with me at the jeweler's. He has been here and begged my pardon for everything. He does not believe now that Lady Fairvale is his wife. I am going to live with him again."

"Where? At Darnley House?" Mrs. Cleveland asks, almost stupefied at this unexpected news.

"No, for Darnley House is sold, and he cannot get it back. But he means to take another just as fine for me, and I am to choose all the furniture. Oh, mamma, he is so sorry for the bad way in which he treated me. He loves me still. There is nothing strange about that, is there, that you look so incredulous? I was his first love, you know. And he thinks me beautiful still. He is ready to do anything to prove his repentance."

"Did you put him to the test?" Mrs. Cleveland inquires, ironically.

"Yes, indeed! You know how often he has refused to have my jewels reset for me. So I said, 'if you really mean that, Leslie, let me have my pearls and diamonds put into a more elegant setting.'"

"Oh!" groans Mrs. Cleveland, wringing her hands.

"He was delighted at the idea," pursues Ivy, triumphantly, "and proposed that we should see about it at once. We drove down to the jeweler's, taking the pearls and diamonds with us. I selected the design for the settings at a terrible outlay, but Leslie did not murmur. He was glad to be forgiven on any terms."

"Oh!" Mrs. Cleveland groans again.

"Mother, I never saw you act so much like a simpleton!" Ivy exclaims. "Leslie is coming again to-morrow. He wants you to forgive him, too."

"Oh, Ivy, you blind, credulous, silly little fool!" exclaims Mrs. Cleveland, in a towering passion.

"What do mean?" the daughter cries, indignantly, springing to her feet.

"I mean that you will never see Leslie Noble or your jewels again. It was all a plot to rob you of them. He has taken them for Vera, whom he has abducted and hidden away in obscurity."

"He denies the charge, mamma. He believes with Mr. Gilbert that Vera has run away herself. But my jewels—oh, mamma, do you really believe he would rob me of them? Let us go down to the jeweler's and bring them back at once," exclaims Ivy, in feverish terror. [Pg 127]

"I will go with you, but I doubt if we shall find them there. He would no doubt take them away on some clever pretext as soon as he left you. Oh, how foolish you were to trust that villain's exaggerated repentance."

"Let us go," Ivy answers, with feverish energy, tying on her bonnet, and hurrying her mother from the room.

The sequel proved Mrs. Cleveland right.

Leslie Noble had already taken away the jewels on the shallow pretext of his wife's change of mind. Poor Ivy was driven back to her lodgings, this time in real genuine hysterics.

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## CHAPTER XLIV.

"This is no time for hysterics, Ivy," Mrs. Cleveland tells her daughter sharply. "You would do better to rally your strength and calmness, and consider what you are to do to get back your jewels."

Ivy struggles up to a sitting posture, her pale-blue eyes all drowned in tears over the loss of her diamonds—the golden calf of her vain heart's worship.

"If you have nothing to do but ridicule me, you had better leave the room," cries Ivy, flushing to angriest crimson. "I thought you were going to suggest something to help me."

"That would be hard to do," Mrs. Cleveland answers, with an irrepressible angry sneer.

Never in all her life has she been so angry with her silly, petted daughter.

Ivy bursts into petulant sobs again, bewailing her fate in having such a hard-hearted mother and wicked husband.

"I will go and see Mr. Noble, if you wish me," Mrs. Cleveland announces, after a moment's pause.

"Oh, pray do, mamma," her daughter cries out eagerly. "Perhaps you may get them back for me, if you manage him right. Leslie used to be quite under your thumb."

"That was long ago," Mrs. Cleveland answers dryly. "But I will do the best I can to remedy your dreadful mistake."

Still in her street dress, she has only to tie on her bonnet and depart on her mission.

Ivy, after hearing the door close behind her, lies down again, with a sigh of relief and a sensation of hope in her breast. She has great faith in the diplomatic powers of her mother.

After waiting in suspense an hour or two she falls asleep easily on the corner of the sofa and dreams that she is an eastern queen and that her robe of cloth of gold is all frosted with sparkling diamonds.

The gray dusk is falling when Mrs. Cleveland re-enters the room. She stands for some moments looking down at Ivy's wan, sleeping face, with the trace of tears still on the pale, thin cheeks, then wakes her with an impatient shake.

"I should have thought that your suspense would be too great to allow you to sleep so profoundly," she exclaims wrathfully, her ill-temper hightened by non-success in her errand. [Pg 128]

"Oh, mamma, I felt so relieved when you went after Leslie, and so sure that you would get the diamonds, that I fell asleep without knowing it," Ivy answers, with some contrition. "But, mamma, you saw him—he gave them back, did he not?" she continued, eagerly, stretching out her hand for her treasures.

For answer, Mrs. Cleveland holds up her empty hands expressively, and Ivy utters a wail of woe.

"What did he say to you?" Ivy inquires, after a little, pausing in her angry sobs.

"I did not see him. He had gone out, and his servant could not tell me where," her mother answers.

"Then you will go again to-morrow. He will be at home then," Ivy exclaims, with renewed hope.

"No, for he is leaving town to-night," is the short reply.

"Leaving town!" Ivy's voice and look are full of consternation.

"Yes, I learned that much by bribing his servant. He is going down into the country to-night in a hired conveyance, some twenty-five miles or more."

"For what reason?" Ivy asks, dimly divining a certain significance in her mother's manner.

"I do not know, but I strongly suspect it is to visit his captive countess, and present her with your diamonds," Mrs. Cleveland answers, divining the truth with a woman's ready wit.

"Oh, mamma!" screams Ivy.

"But I intend to follow him," pursues Mrs. Cleveland, "I mean to checkmate him if I can."

"I am going with you—remember that, mamma," her daughter cries out, hastily.

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## CHAPTER XLV.

While Lady Vera's friends are seeking with heavy hearts some clew to her strange fate, the fair young countess, half distracted with grief, remains a closely-guarded captive in the ruined mansion in the lonely wood. In spite of all her tears and protestations Betsy Robson persists in believing her to be a dangerous lunatic, and in treating her as such, albeit always kind and complaisant as to an ailing child.

The summer days glide slowly past, each one bearing some portion of hope from Vera's lonely heart. With the dawn of each day she had hoped for release—with the sunset of each day she had wept over her disappointment. The days were so long and lonely without books, music or occupation to beguile them of their length and dreariness. It seemed to Lady Vera almost as if she were dead and buried, living in this lonely house, seeing, hearing no one save stolid Betsy Robson, who glided about like another ghost in this strange world of the dead.

"If rescue does not come soon I shall either die or go mad, as that woman already believes me to be," Lady Vera tells herself in a passion of despair.

She wonders why Philip does not come to her aid. In her despair and loneliness bitter thoughts begin to creep into her mind. [Pg 129]

"Perhaps he has no care over me now that I am lost to him forever," she thinks. "He has turned to Miss Montgomery or Lady Eva, perhaps. Either one would be glad enough to console him."

From the world without there came no answer to these silent accusations against her lost lover. The world seemed dead to her as she appeared to it. All her companions were memory and sorrow.

As the weeks rounded slowly into a month, Lady Vera's fierce anger against Leslie Noble, her restlessness, her impatience, began to settle down into the calmness of despair.

She gave up pacing the floor, and weeping and grieving over her captivity like some poor caged bird beating the bars of its prison with unavailing wings. She began to sit still in her chair for long hours daily, with her white hands folded on her lap and her dark eyes fixed on vacancy—long hours in which the color and roundness fled from her face and form, leaving behind a startling pallor and delicacy that frightened Mrs. Robson, who thought that her charge had developed a new phase of her mania.

"Them still and cunning ones is always the most dangerous, so I've heard," she confides to the tabby cat that is her only companion in the kitchen. "I do wish she would ha' give up that sharp little knife she carries in her bosom. And I do wish Mr. Noble would come and see her. I can't think what keeps him away this long. He said he should come soon. Lucky he laid in a good store of provisions, or we might starve to death in this lonely wilderness afore he comes."

She busies herself in preparing little dainties to tempt the appetite of her charge, but Lady Vera scarcely tastes the delicate morsels.

"Be you a-grievin' for your husband, my poor dear?" Mrs. Robson asks her kindly one day.

"I have no husband," Lady Vera answers, disdainfully, with a smouldering fire in her great, dark eyes.

She accuses herself of no falsehood in uttering those words, for she never means to acknowledge Leslie Noble's claim upon her, and she has mentally decided that if she ever goes free again she will appeal to the strong arm of the law to sever the hated bonds that hold her.

After that one flash of wrath she subsides into mournful apathy again. Two weeks more roll by into the irrevocable past. Lady Vera droops more and more, like some gently fading rose. Betsy Robson, frightened and alarmed, sees that her hold on life is slowly loosening day by day.

The flowers she brings her from the tangled, neglected garden fall lightly from her grasp, as if her hands were too weak to hold them. She lies all day on her couch now, too weak or too weary to rise, and the snowy pillow day by day is drenched with her languid, hopeless tears.

"It is too bad that Mr. Noble does not come," Mrs. Robson mutters to herself. "His poor young [Pg 130] wife is dying, I honestly think. She has gone so thin and white, and her big, black eyes frighten one with their uncanny look. She has fretted herself to death. It goes on to seven weeks now since he brought her here. I wonder if aught has happened him? I do wish I could let him know some way that she's a-dying."

The last days of August have passed now. September comes in cool and blustery, inclining to storms. With every day Lady Vera sinks more and more, complaining of no pain or disease, only growing weaker and weaker, paler and thinner, while, as Mrs. Robson says, her great, black eyes look unearthly in her death-white face. If Leslie Noble does not come soon his captive will escape him through the open gates of death.

"It's a-going to storm to-night, Tab," remarks Mrs. Robson to her familiar, as she opens the kitchen door and peers out into the gathering darkness one chilly night; "the moon looks pale and watery, and the clouds keeps scudding over it. There isn't any stars to speak of, and the wind's blustery and damp. It's a-going to storm. You may blink and purr by the fire alone to-night, Tabby, for I must sit up with poor Mrs. Noble. It wouldn't be right to leave the poor, crazy creetur alone, ill as she is, and seems that harmless a body could hardly believe that she stuck a knife into her own husband. Yes, I'll set up with her to-night. Sometimes the spirits ride on storms to carry away the souls of them that's a-dying, and mayhap they may come for that poor young thing's to-night."

She closes the door with a shudder of superstitious terror in the face of the gathering storm, and betakes herself to the gloomy upper chamber where Countess Vera, still robed in the gray silk dress in which she had been brought from her home a captive, lies silently across the gloomy, crimson-hung bed, as white and still as if she were already dead.

"You have eaten no supper, dearie," Mrs. Robson remarks, glancing at the untasted dainties upon the tea-tray that she had brought up two hours before.

"No," the captive answers, with a weary sigh, and relapses into silence.

"There's a storm coming. Do you hear the wind howl, and the rain beating on the windows?" remarks Mrs. Robson, to break the spell of the dreary, brooding silence.

Lady Vera, turning her head listlessly a moment, listens aimlessly to the wail of the autumn wind moaning like a voice in human pain around the ruined gables of the house.

"It is a wild night," she answers, drearily. "What time is it, Mrs. Robson?"

"It is nigh onto eleven o'clock," the woman answers, consulting the broad-faced silver watch stuck in her belt; then, curiously: "You've never asked me that question afore since here you've been, my dearie. Why do you do so now?"

"When the hours of life are few, one is fain to count them," Lady Vera answers, with subdued bitterness.

And again there ensues a silence, filled up by the wild voice of the wind that has now increased to a gale.

The furious rush of the rain is distinctly audible; a flash of lightning quivers into the room in spite [Pg 131] of the shielding curtains.

"Mrs. Robson, I believe I am going to die. When your cruel master comes, he will find that his captive has escaped him, after all," Lady Vera says, weakly, and with a faint triumph in her voice.

Before Mrs. Robson can reply, there comes a hasty, thundering rap on the hall door that brings her screaming to her feet. It is thrice repeated before her frightened senses return.

At that strange and unexpected sound, Lady Vera, as if endowed with new strength, starts up to a sitting posture in the bed. Instead of being startled by the noise, she seems to rejoice in it. Her

eyes flash with new life.

"Go, Mrs. Robson," she exclaims. "Do you not hear the knocking? Someone is come."

"Who can it be, this dreadful night? Do you think it could be Mr. Noble?" exclaims the woman, timorously.

"God forbid!" exclaims Countess Vera, passionately. "I pray that it may be some friend of mine who has come to bring me deliverance."

But Mrs. Robson, by this, has begun to revive her scattered wits.

"Of course it's my master, Mr. Noble. How foolish I was for a moment. I am main glad that he has come at last," she declares, eagerly, and hastening to leave the room, though not forgetting to lock the door after her as usual.

Countess Vera waits in an agony of suspense for five almost anguished minutes, then footsteps mount the stairs toward her chamber. Mrs. Robson, opening the door, ushers in Leslie Noble.

At the sight of that hated face, at the wild revulsion from ardent hope to absolute despair, Countess Vera utters a heart-wrung cry and falls weakly backward.

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## CHAPTER XLVI.

Mrs. Robson hastens forward, with a cry of dismay, to lift her mistress from the pillows, fearing to find her dead. But Lady Vera has not even fainted. Her white, quivering, anguished face turns upon her enemy with scorn and defiance, struggling bravely with pitiful weakness and despair.

"You have almost come too late," she cries, resting against Mrs. Robson's broad shoulder, and looking at him with a strange triumph in her hollow, gleaming eyes. "Death has nearly been here before you. You have but come now to see him wrest your prey from your merciless grasp. You will have nothing but my poor, wasted body to gloat over. The soul that you have tortured out of its earthly tenement will soon be past your power."

He stares at her, growing ghastly pale and alarmed. Mrs. Robson has told him that his wife is ill, that she is fretting herself to death, but he is scarcely prepared for this. It looks like death, indeed, that marble pallor, those wide and brilliant eyes that gleam upon him so weirdly, [Pg 132] triumphing over him, even in death. A horrible sense of loss and disappointment thrills through him. Is she dying, indeed, his beautiful Vera, his rich and honored countess, the glories of whose state he has meant to share?

"Vera, my darling, you must not die," he exclaims, going forward and holding out his arms to her entreatingly. "Live for me, my dearest wife. I love you more than life! Give yourself to me, Vera; let me win your heart, and I swear I will make you happy."

She waves him away with a gesture of supreme loathing. In their anger and excitement no one is aware that the door has creaked softly on its hinges, that it is pushed slightly ajar now, and that two faces, lurid with jealous rage and deadly anger, are peering cautiously around it.

"I love you, Vera," he repeats, undaunted by her proud scorn, sure that he must win at last. "I love you, Vera, and I have never loved but you. Thinking you dead, I was lured into that marriage with Ivy Cleveland. She turned out to be a termagant, who only cared for my money, and I hated her long before that blissful night when you, so grand and beautiful that I already adored you, not knowing who you were, boldly claimed me as your husband. You must forgive that ill-starred marriage with your cousin, my precious Vera. She and her base mother made me repent it every hour of my life. I suffered enough through them, Vera, so you ought to be kind to me."

Strange that they do not hear the sibilant whisper of threatening hate that hisses through the room! But they are absorbed in their own passions, and the storm now raging at the hight of its fury has many strange sounds of its own as it surges around the ivy-mantled room.

Now and then a sheet of vivid lightning illuminates the curtained windows, and a peal of terrible thunder shakes the old mansion from garret to cellar. But only Mrs. Robson has any ear or any thought for the fury of the storm.

"Kind to you," Lady Vera repeats, in her faint, but cutting voice, gazing at her cringing suppliant. "Were you kind to me in my sore distress and misery when my mother lay dead in her grave, and I had no one to turn to but you in my bitter desolation and despair? Were you kind and loving to your friendless bride then, in her poverty and woe? No! and it is not Vera Campbell you seek to win now. It is Lady Fairvale, of Fairvale, countess in her own right, with thirty thousand pounds a year. You see, I understand the value of your vapid protestations of love and repentance."

"You mistake me, Lady Vera, in attributing mercenary motives to me," he answers, with pretended sadness and grief. "I love you for yourself alone. I am very rich still, although not so wealthy as you are. I am not yet too poor to woo you as a royal lover. See, my darling, I bring you jewels fine enough for a queen—jewels that even your grandeur need not disdain; diamonds bright as your eyes, pearls as fair as your milk-white skin."

He has drawn two jewel caskets from his breast, and unlocks them before her wondering eyes. [Pg 133] The diamonds flash in the light, seeming to fill the gloomy room with sunshine, the large, pale pearls shine with the lustrous whiteness of the moon's chill rays.

His eyes shine as he looks into her face to note the effect. Surely such an offering as this must win her back even from the portals of death to be his own. These must win her love for him, surely. No fair woman ever turned her back on the donor of such sparkling, flashing, burning diamonds, such moon-white, gleaming pearls.

But as he gazes triumphantly into her eyes, her lips curl, she recoils in scorn and aversion.

"I spurn both you and your offerings," she answers, quickly. "They are poor Ivy Cleveland's diamonds and pearls. Oh, how could you be so mean and vile as to rob that poor girl of her jewels now, when already bereft of the jewel of honor?"

"They are not Ivy's jewels," he answers. "I bought them for you to-day in London. Do you think I would offer you aught that had belonged to that woman who had wronged you?"

"Liar! Coward! Robber!" cries a voice of raging hate and jealousy, and like a sudden vision, Ivy Cleveland appears among them, her golden tresses flying in disorder, her face livid with passion, her blue eyes blazing with wrath, in her clenched, white hand, a tiny, gleaming pistol, like a pretty toy.

"Liar! Coward! Robber! I will have your life for my wrongs," she shrieks, and the gleaming pistol covers his heart, there is a terrible report, a flash of thick smoke, and with a cry of horror, Leslie Noble leaps into the air and falls backward—dead!

"He is dead, but I have my jewels again!" the murderess cries, with maniacal triumph, gathering the fallen jewels to her breast and exulting wildly over them.

At the loud report of the pistol, and Ivy's frenzied cry, Mrs. Cleveland rushes into the room and kneels by the side of the prostrate man, whose life-blood has gushed out in a crimson tide upon the faded carpet. She puts her hand over his heart and bends her ear to his lips. But in a moment she lifts her head and regards her daughter with a blank stare of terror.

"Oh, Ivy, Ivy, you have killed your husband!" she exclaims, in a frightened voice.

But Ivy, sitting on the floor like a child, running a diamond necklace lovingly through her fingers, like a stream of light, only glances up carelessly at the dead body on the floor, whose life-blood has crept slowly along the carpet, until it has crimsoned the hem of her dress. She laughs aloud, a chill, blood-curdling laugh.

"He deserved death," she answers, in a strange, unnatural voice. "He stole my pretty jewels from me—my diamonds and my pearls, ha, ha! I am the Queen of England, did you not know that? I beheaded my false subject because he stole the crown jewels. There is a ball to-night. I am engaged to dance with the President of the United States. He is coming for that purpose. Ha, ha! [Pg 134] will it not be a fine sight?" and springing to her feet she began to dance wildly around the room, her precious jewels clasped in her arms like a babe to her mother's breast, while she sang in terrible, maniacal glee:

"The king is dead, long live the king!"

Again there crept to the door two watchers who peered in all unheeded by those within the room, who watched with straining, horrified gaze the wild gyrations of the maddened Ivy, whose small figure continued to spin aimlessly around the floor to the accompaniment of gay, lilting tunes sung in a high-pitched, tuneless voice, that was terrible to hear.

"The poor lady is raving crazy!" at last exclaimed Mrs. Robson, finding voice for the first time since she had ushered Mr. Noble into the room. The sudden and unexpected appearance of two strange women on the scene, and the murder of her master had struck her dumb with terror, but all the while she had continued to uphold the exhausted frame of Lady Vera in her strong, protecting arms.

"Yes, she is mad," Lady Vera answers, in a low, sad, pitying tone.

"Who says that I am mad?" demands Ivy, sinking down upon the floor, wearied by her wild performance. "I deny it! I am the Shah of Persia's bride, and these jewels are my dowry from my royal bridegroom!"

Mrs. Cleveland, turning her eyes for the first time from the face of her stricken daughter, rests them upon Countess Vera's wasted, death-white features.

"See what your cursed arts have done," she cried out, harshly. "It is all your work! I am glad that you are dying, Vera Campbell! I have hated you from the hour of your birth! You were born to be my stumbling-block, and to work out my destruction!"

"I was born to be the avenger of my parents' wrongs," Lady Vera answers, proudly. "And though it kill me, I have kept my oath of vengeance!"

The wind moans ominously around the creaking gables, the thunder mutters hoarsely, the blue flame of the lightning casts its ghastly glare into the room. No one heeds the fierce war of the elements in the fiercer war of human passions raging within the gloomy chamber.

"Yes, you have kept your oath, curse you, curse you!" Marcia Cleveland answers, venomously. "You have dragged me and mine down to poverty, to shame, to madness! But live, Vera Campbell, live yet a little longer, and you shall see your weapons turned against yourself. You will be thrust from your splendid home and high estate, branded, disgraced, while I shall reign in your stead! But the sweetness will be taken from my revenge. You have driven my daughter, the light of my eyes and heart, mad, mad! It is a wound that naught on earth can heal. Oh, curse you, curse you! May you never know one hour of peace! May you be racked by every ill that flesh is heir to! May

God's——"

The terrible curse she is invoking stays forever on her lips! A blinding flash of forked and vivid blue lightning shatters the window panes, rends the curtains, and darts into the room like a living sword. A peal of awful thunder seems to rend the earth in twain, and the old house rocks for a moment like an infant's cradle. Then the rain rushes wildly again, and the thunder subsides into ominous mutterings and long, rolling sounds of terrible wrath, and Marcia Cleveland lies prone upon the floor, her distorted face upturned to the light, a single blue spot on her temple telling its awful story to the shocked beholders—slain by the *lightning*! [Pg 135]

"Oh, my poor, young mistress, you are dead, too! We shall all be killed!" Mrs. Robson exclaims in an access of mortal terror, for Lady Vera, overcome by the horrors of that dreadful night has fallen back in a deathly swoon upon her pillow.

At that cry of grief the two who have lingered at the door spring into the room. Mr. Sharpe, the detective, and Colonel Lockhart.

It is Mr. Sharpe who recoils from the sight of the two dead bodies, and the still sadder sight of the living madwoman, crooning her senseless songs, and counting her jewels in a distant corner.

Colonel Lockhart has no eyes for these. At one bound he is by the bedside where the missing countess lies cold and white and still in all her beauty.

"Oh, Vera, my love, my darling, have I found you only for this?" he groans, taking the slight form into his arms, pressing it to his aching heart, and lavishing passionate kisses on the cold, white lips.

But as if his love had power to call her back to life, Lady Vera sighs faintly and opens her eyes, heavily at first then with a flash of wondrous brightness in them as she recognizes her lover.

"Oh, Philip, is it you?" she sighs with ineffable content, nestling closer in his strong loving clasp. "I thought I was dying, but your voice has called me back from the world of shadows. I cannot die, now that you have come for me. Am I safe at last, Philip?"

"You are safe at last, my darling," he answers, solemnly, and glancing behind him with a slight shudder. "A terrible retribution has overtaken your enemies."

"I know," she answers, shuddering. "Is it not fearful, Philip? But oh, tell me," she continues, pleadingly, "am I responsible for the terrible ending of these selfish lives?"

"No, Vera. They were wicked people whose sins wrought out their own retribution. No blame can attach to you, darling," he answers, decisively.

"Do you really know this lady, sir?" inquires poor Betsy Robson, touching him timidly on the arm.

"Yes," he answers, looking round at her. "She is the Countess of Fairvale, my betrothed wife, whom Leslie Noble abducted from her home."

"Oh, me, and I thought she was Mr. Noble's crazy wife. *He* said so," cries Mrs. Robson, dissolved in penitent tears. "Oh, my lady, can you ever forgive me for not listening to your true story?" [Pg 136]

"Freely, my poor creature, since you were always kind to me," Lady Vera answers, moved to greatest compassion by the woman's humble penitence.

Then, with something of a shudder, Lady Vera turns back to her lover.

"It seems a dreadful thing to do, but you must search Mr. Noble's person," she says. "He had the stolen memorandum-book."

"My lady, I have already taken the liberty of doing as you suggest," Mr. Sharpe answers, respectfully, advancing with the gold-clasped book in his hand.

She takes it from him with a subdued cry of joy.

"And now, Vera, when will you feel able to leave this dreadful place?" inquires Colonel Lockhart.

"To-morrow," she answers, promptly.

"Then we will start for London in the morning. How glad Sir Harry and Nella will be," he exclaims. "And now, Sharpe, we will, with this good woman's assistance, make some arrangement for removing Lady Vera from this scene of horror into another chamber."

"There's only the kitchen," Mrs. Robson said, dismayed at her lack of resources. "All the chambers but this are leaky and damp. But the kitchen where I cook and sleep is warm and dry."

"The kitchen will suit me excellently well; anywhere but this," Lady Vera answers, shuddering. "You must bring poor Ivy, too," she adds, with a compassionate glance at the poor, insane creature.

The maniac went willingly enough, satisfied to go anywhere so long as she was not parted from her beloved jewels, and the warm, clean kitchen was felt by all to be a safe haven of refuge from the inclement night and the horror-haunted chamber up-stairs.

The remainder of the night was spent in a wakeful vigil. The next morning the gentlemen made hurried preparations for the inquest that was necessary to be held over the dead.

It was found that Mrs. Cleveland had come to her death by a stroke of lightning, and that Leslie Noble had been murdered by Ivy Cleveland.

But human vengeance was powerless to touch poor Ivy. The hand of God had already smitten her. A lunatic asylum received her for the remainder of her poor, wrecked life.

# CHAPTER XLVII.

Marcia Cleveland and Leslie Noble were buried in a quiet, country graveyard. By Lady Vera's care a plain gray stone was raised above their graves recording their names and nationality, with a brief line commending them to the mercy of Heaven.

The remnant of Leslie Noble's once princely fortune reverted to the Countess of Fairvale. She devoted it to the maintenance of poor Ivy Cleveland in the best insane asylum in England. [Pg 137]

She hoped that with time and care her reason might return to her, but the poor creature remained a confirmed maniac to the end her long life, never very dangerous or troublesome, but always fancying herself some royal personage, and always planning new costumes for some imaginary ball.

The splendid jewels, for whose sake she dyed her hands in human blood, were kindly spared to her as playthings. They constituted all the happiness of her life.

For Countess Vera, after that night of storm and death and merciful rescue, there dawned a brighter day.

Only one cloud dimmed the horizon of her life-sky. It was Raleigh Gilmore's suit at law. Even her best friends, those who believed in her the most loyally, secretly feared that it would go against her.

When Lady Vera met Sir Harry Clive again she went to him with a smile, the open memorandum-book in her white hand.

"You see," she said to him with that triumphant I-told-you-so smile, which women are wont to wear on such occasions, "it was no dream, Sir Harry. Here are the precious lines in my father's writing, word for word, as I repeated them to you that day."

Sir Harry humbly begged her pardon for his doubts.

"You wrote to this Joel McPherson, did you not?" he asks, anxiously.

"Yes," she answers. "Has no word come from him yet?"

"No," Sir Harry replies, "not a word. Perhaps he is dead; perhaps he has gone away."

"We must send someone over to America to look for him," Lady Vera replies decisively.

"I think you are right. It is the best thing that can be done," he agrees.

Her lawyer is of the same opinion. They decide to send Mr. Sharpe, the efficient detective, to Washington to find the missing sexton of Glenwood.

When Lady Vera has repeated to them Leslie Noble's assertion, that he had written to a friend to keep the sexton out of the way, they strongly suspect that McPherson has been made away with.

Mr. Sharpe is sent on his errand to America, Lady Vera's keen-witted lawyer staves off the impending trial from day to day pending the arrival of her important witness, and all wait in suspense for news from the detective.

Meanwhile, Raleigh Gilmore's case has weakened daily.

The witnesses upon whom he had relied so confidently, Mrs. Cleveland and her daughter, and possibly Leslie Noble, were all unavailable, two being dead, one the incurable inmate of a madhouse.

The tide of fortune was setting against him. Lady Vera's friends began to desert his banner.

Meanwhile, Lady Vera's lover and friends rejoiced in her returning health and strength. She had been so frail and delicate when Colonel Lockhart brought her back to them that they were shocked and frightened. They thought she would die. Lady Clive and the faithful maid, Elsie, wept floods of tears over her. Little Hal took a great deal of blame to himself for Lady Vera's abduction. [Pg 138]

"Vera, I should never have given you that dreadful old woman's letter if I had known what it was about," he reiterates in her patient ear many times.

"I know that, dear," she always answers, kindly. "No one blames you, Hal, for my misfortune. It was my own willfulness that led me into danger. Had I listened to my faithful Elsie, I should not have gone."

But their fears for her health are soon dissipated. Happiness, love and hope, are potent restorers. The light returns to Lady Vera's eyes, the roundness to her face and form, the color to her cheeks, and the slight shade of thought and sadness around her lovely lips does not detract from her beauty.

No one can tell with what happiness Colonel Lockhart basks in the sunlight of her presence, though when she runs her white fingers through his hair, she wonders at the silver threads that shine in the brown, clustering curls.

"They were not there three months ago," she says to him thoughtfully. "Are you growing old so fast, Philip?"

"I have grown old in sorrow since we parted, dear," he answers, searching her face, gravely.

"Shall you love me less for my gray hairs, dearest?"

"No, for they were whitened by your grief for me," she answers, pressing her sweet, shy lips on those silvery tokens of his sorrow.

And now Colonel Lockhart begs her to name an early day for their marriage.

"We have had so many vicissitudes in our courtship, darling, that I can never feel sure of you until you are my wife. Let it be soon, dear," he pleads.

But Lady Vera, blushing her sweetest, answers:

"Not until after the trial is decided, Philip."

But this is just what the handsome soldier is unwilling to do.

"Why wait until after that?" he asks. "Do you mean to throw me over if—all does not go to please you?"

The dark eyes look at him gravely.

"If it goes against me, Philip, would you be willing to wed one whom the world will brand as an impostor?" she asks him, slowly.

"Yes, for I would know the charge was untrue. Oh, Vera, let me make you my own now, while the issue is still in doubt, that you may know that I loved you for yourself alone."

"As if I did not know that already," she answers, looking at him with sweet reproach.

"That the world may know it, too, then," he urges.

He is most anxious that the marriage shall take place before the trial. Then if, as he fears, the trial should go against her, she will be safe in her position as his wife, and none will dare assail her. But he cannot explain this without wounding her sensitive feelings, so he is forced to admit her denial. [Pg 139]

"Not until after the trial, Philip."

"And then?" he asks, eagerly.

"As soon as you please," she answers, with tender blushes glowing all over her beautiful face, and then she laughs musically.

"We are setting the day for our marriage, and we are not even engaged," she laughs, in answer to his aggrieved look.

"We are!" he insists.

"We are not," she declares. "We dissolved our engagement several months ago, and since I became free you have not asked me to renew it."

The tender mischief in the lovely, laughing, dark eyes, almost disconcerts the handsome soldier.

"Oh, Vera, I thought of course you knew that I meant it," he says, rather incoherently. "We *are* engaged, and we are going to be married, aren't we, dear?"

"If you ask me," she says, with demure mirth, out of the happiness of her heart.

"I ask you now," he answers, laughing too. "Is it yes, Vera?"

She murmurs assent with a pretty assumption of coquetry, and bends her head for her second betrothal kiss, delighting her lover by the child-like gaiety that shows how her spirit is gradually throwing off the depressing influence of grief that has so long surrounded her.

"Then, Vera, I may write to my father, General Lockhart, and ask him to come over to the wedding?" he says, presently.

"What! and the *trousseau* not ready yet?" she laughs.

"Oh, my darling, you will write and order it at once, will you not?" he exclaims.

"I have already ordered it, Colonel Lockhart," she replies, demurely.

"What! before you were engaged?" he retorts, feeling it his turn to tease now.

"I had the prospect of a proposal, sir," she answers, with charming frankness.

"Then I shall write to my father to come over. I would not miss having him see my lovely bride, and I intend that the wedding shall come off as soon as the *trousseau* is ready," declares the happy lover.

Lady Vera does not say him nay. She is very happy in the prospect of a union with her faithful lover. The days glide past like a dream of pleasure, quietly, because as yet she denies herself to callers, but happily, because surrounded by her dearest friends and her adoring lover.

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## CHAPTER XLVIII.

And one day the last sweet rose leaf is added to the brimming cup of Lady Vera's new happiness, which even the thought of Raleigh Gilmore's fell design could not wholly overshadow.

Sir Harry Clive had sent her an urgent request to come into the library to meet a visitor, and only staying a moment to arrange her disordered hair, for she had been in the nursery playing with Lady Nella's children, she obeys him. [Pg 140]

Sir Harry takes her hand and draws her forward to the man, neatly clothed in black, who has risen from his chair to meet her.

"I know your face," she cries, instantly. "I have seen you somewhere. It is—oh, can it be Mr. McPherson?"

"It *is* Joel McPherson, Lady Vera, at your service," he answers, in honest, hearty tones. "I am glad you remembered me, my lady. I knew you again instantly although you look prettier and happier than you did that morning when your father took you away from Glenwood."

"Oh, then, you can tell me all about that dreadful night," she cries, repressing the shudder that always steals over her at the thought of her living entombment.

"Yes, my lady, that is why I came to England with Mr. Sharpe," he answers, respectfully. "I told your father that day that it was wrong to keep the story of your burial from you. He answered me that he meant to tell you all some day when you grew well and strong again."

"Poor father! He was too tender-hearted to keep that promise," Lady Vera murmurs, dropping into a chair, and hiding her tearful face in her hands.

"You wish to hear how you came to be rescued from your living grave, dear Lady Vera?" says the baronet, anxious to distract her mournful thoughts from her dead father.

"Yes, oh, yes," she murmurs, lifting her head, and looking at Mr. McPherson's grave, kindly face. "You will tell me, will you not, sir?"

"You see it was this way, my lady. On the evening of the day that you were buried, your father went to Mrs. Cleveland's to seek his wife and child. She told him cruelly to seek you both in your graves at Glenwood. He could scarcely believe it. It seemed too horrible to believe, and in the horror with which his enemy's words inspired him, he fell down like one dead at her feet. He came to himself lying out on the pavement with the wild rain and wind beating into his uncovered face. She had cast him out into the street to die like the veriest wretch, unfriended and alone."

"Heartless!" Sir Harry Clive utters, indignantly, while Lady Vera's choking sobs attest the strain upon his feelings.

"Then he came to me," continued Joel McPherson, his kind eyes moist at the remembrance of the earl's despair. "I could only confirm Mrs. Cleveland's story. Both his wife and child were dead. Then a longing came over him to look at the face of the dead wife. He had wronged her living, he said, and he could not rest until he saw her face again. He offered me gold to open the grave, but it was not the bribe, it was the misery on his face that made me yield to his wish."

He pauses, drawing a long breath, and wiping the moisture from his eyes, waits for Lady Vera to grow calmer. The sound of her suppressed sobbing fills the room.

Sir Harry touches her arm gently. [Pg 141]

"This is too much for you," he says kindly. "Shall we defer the story's conclusion until you are better, my dear?"

"No, I will be calm," she answers, repressing with an effort the sobs that rise at these reminiscences of the past; "I will not disturb you again. Go on with your story, Mr. McPherson."

"There is little more to tell, my lady," he returns. "I yielded to the earl's wish because, after hearing all his strange story I had not the heart to refuse. But in the haste with which the deed was done, and in the pitch-black, rainy night I made a mistake. Judge of my surprise when on wrenching off the lid of the coffin, and flashing the light of the lantern on the face within, I found that I had disinterred the daughter instead of the mother. It was the happiest mistake of my life, for in a few minutes we found that she was not dead, but simply wrapped in a deep, narcotic sleep," he adds, with emotion.

In a moment he continues:

"Your father, Lady Vera, did not discover the mistake until I explained it to him. He had not seen your mother for sixteen years, and as you greatly resembled her, he fancied that she had retained the fairness of girlhood through all those years, whereas, in reality, she was gray-haired and sadly aged by sorrow. I explained all this to him, and then we took you to my cottage near by, and when you revived, he quieted you by some plausible story that you had been asleep, fearing to shock you too much by the story of your burial while yet alive. He still clung to his fancy of seeing his dead wife's face, so I went back and opened that grave too, but," with a shudder, "it was too late. Death had marred her too sadly. I filled up both graves again, and by your father's wish, my lady, no one ever knew that one was empty. I questioned the wisdom of such a course, but the earl was peremptory, and the little mound remained, while very soon after Mr. Noble erected the monument that told every one that his wife, Vera, was buried beneath, while the truth was that you had gone abroad with your father. The earl, in his joy over your restoration to life, settled a generous little fortune upon me, which has made me independent ever since. He was a good man and true, and I am sorry that he is dead," adds Mr. McPherson, brushing his hand across his eyes.

"And my letter to you—did you ever receive it?" questions Lady Vera.

"Yes, my lady, promptly. And I was making my arrangements to come right over to England and

help you, when I was basely kidnapped by some unknown party and held in durance over two months, when, by good luck and constant watchfulness, I effected my escape. I went straight back to Glenwood, and there I found your man, Mr. Sharpe, interrogating the sexton, who now occupied my cottage. He was delighted to find in me the man he was looking for, and I came straight over to England with him. But if you had not sent him after me, Lady Vera, I should have come anyhow as soon as I escaped from my jailers."

Lady Vera, rising impulsively, goes over to press the hand of this kind, true friend in her two soft, white ones.

"God bless you," she murmurs; "I can never thank you enough. And will you swear to all this before a court of justice?" [Pg 142]

"Certainly, my Lady Fairvale. That is what I came to England for," Mr. McPherson answers, heartily.

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When Raleigh Gilmore's lawyer heard of this new witness in Lady Vera's favor, he declared that his client had no case at all against the defendant. He said it would be useless to bring it into court. They would only be routed ignominiously, for Lady Fairvale's identity was so perfectly established by the note in her father's memorandum-book, and by the sexton of Glenwood's testimony, that there was really nothing to be said against it. Besides, Mr. Gilmore's witnesses were all dead, or worse. So the base conspiracy fell through harmlessly, and there was no trial at all, though Countess Vera's friends were rather eager for it now, foreseeing that victory must perch upon her banner. Raleigh Gilmore retired to his country estate again, soured by his defeat and disgrace, and heartily wishing that he had never been beguiled from its quiet shades by the specious representations of the Widow Cleveland. There was one drop of sweetness in the bitter cup of humiliation pressed to the old bachelor's lips. Marcia Cleveland was dead, and he would not have to marry her as he had promised.

Countess Vera felt no animosity toward the man who had tried to oust her from her rights. She wrote him a kind and pitying letter, in which she offered him generous pecuniary assistance if he required it, and freely forgave him the part he had acted.

To this sweet and womanly offer, Mr. Gilmore replied gruffly and rudely that he neither asked nor needed aid from the usurper of his rights, and had no desire for her forgiveness.

After this, Lady Vera tacitly dropped him, and he figured no more in the pages of her romantic life-history, which thereafter flowed serenely in the unclouded sunshine of happiness.

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## CHAPTER XLIX.

The wedding—Colonel Lockhart's and Countess Vera's—when it came off, was a very grand affair indeed. General Lockhart, than whom there was no more gallant or distinguished an officer in America, came over to England to attend the nuptials, and by his handsome appearance and widespread fame, added prestige to the grand occasion.

Sir Harry Clive gave away the bride, and little Dot, his daughter, was one of the bride's-maids. Lady Clive declared that she had never been so happy in her life as in the hour when Lady Vera was married to her darling brother.

People said afterward that they were the handsomest couple ever married in London. Colonel Lockhart was so grandly handsome, Lady Vera so dazzlingly fair. Her bridal dress was a marvel of richness and beauty.

Her *trousseau* was all that could be desired by a woman's heart. The bridal gifts were numerous and costly. The countess was so much admired, and her sad and romantic story had excited such interest and sympathy that her friends vied with each other in the beauty and richness of their gifts, as if desirous to add in every way to the pleasure of her bridal-hour. [Pg 143]

Colonel Lockhart scarcely knew what to give his bride, her gifts were so varied and so costly, but he studied out a design of his own, and had the jeweler reproduce it. It was a beautiful locket, containing his own picture. The setting on the carved back was a perfect crimson rose, formed of magnificent rubies.

"In memory of the rose whose message failed that night when I went back to America," he said, with a smile, as he placed it in her hand.

She sighed and smiled as memory brought back that night with its hopes, and fears, and crowning failure. She remembered the song and the rose, and how both had failed to carry their story to his wounded heart. Then she opened the locket, and forgot all else in the sight of her husband's handsome, happy face beaming out upon her.

"Oh, how I thank you, Philip," she cried, rapturously. "It is beautiful."

"The picture or the locket?" he asks, laughing, yet inwardly deeply moved.

"Both," she answers, pressing the crimson flower of her lips upon the pictured face. "This shall always be my dearest jewel!"

Countess Vera's bridal tour was to the United States. Her husband was thoroughly patriotic, and desired to rid her mind of the prejudice she had taken against her native land, owing to the trials of her early youth.

They traveled leisurely and pleasantly all over their own native country, mixed in society, and viewed everything dispassionately, until the lovely countess owned that she had erred in disliking America and Americans.

"Yet I have nobly atoned for my early mistake by taking an American for my husband," she always declares, when Colonel Lockhart twits her with her early aversion.

One day they found themselves in the beautiful city of Washington, and Lady Vera expressed a wish to visit her mother's grave.

It was a lovely day in spring, sweet with the breath of early flowers, when they strolled through the whispering shades of Glenwood to seek the quiet grave where Mrs. Campbell's broken heart had found rest and peace. The turf was springing green and freshly above the low mound, and fragrant violets and tender daisies starred the ground. On the marble cross at the head of the grave was carved her name and age, and one passionate plaint from her husband's bleeding and remorseful heart:

"Oh, God, since she could die,
The world's a grave, and hope lies buried here."

"Poor mother, poor father!" Lady Vera weeps, her tears falling on the green grass for the sad fate of those two who had given her life. [Pg 144]

When she lifts her head again she sees her husband standing by the opposite mound beneath the shadow of a tall, pretentious monument.

"Do you care to see this, my darling?" he asks her, very gently.

Silently she glides to his side, and circled by his fond, protecting arm, reads the brief inscription, not without something of a shudder creeping over her sensitive frame.

"VERA,
WIFE OF LESLIE NOBLE.
Aged Seventeen."

"It is such a falsehood I cannot bear to see it there," she says. "You must have the letters removed, Philip. I cannot bear to know that my name is carved upon a tombstone while I am so full of young, happy, bounding life."

"I think you are right, my darling," Colonel Lockhart answers, and he takes care to carry out her wish. The lying inscription is carefully erased from the white marble tablet.

"When I am really dead, Philip, I shall want some kind and loving words carved on the marble above my head," she says; "I shall want the world to know that I was loved and missed. How cold, how brief, how unloving was that inscription."

Then glancing into his face she sees it working with some deep emotion.

"Let us come away from this spot, Vera," he says, nervously. "I tremble to think that once you lay buried here beneath this springing turf. What if I had missed you from my life forever?"

"You would have married Miss Montgomery, doubtless," she answers, with a spice of mischief.

"Never," he answers, most emphatically, as he leads her away. "You were my fate, darling. If I had never met you I should never have loved nor married."

They remain in America several years. Lady Vera shrinks from returning home while the memory of her strange, romantic story is yet fresh in the public mind. But after awhile circumstances induce them to make England their home.

Colonel Lockhart having already left the army to please his wife, nothing remains but to set their faces toward England and Fairvale.

There is no fear that Raleigh Gilmore will ever inherit Fairvale now, for Countess Vera has two lovely children—a dark-eyed boy and blue-eyed girl—who are as beautiful, as healthy and brilliant as their parents' hearts could wish. Countess Vera calls them Lawrence and Edith, in loving memory of the dead.

[THE END.]

# THE MYSTERIOUS BEAUTY. [Pg 145]

Of course I was "altogether out of sorts," and "worry had told upon me." There was no need of young Hunter, fresh from English and foreign hospitals, with all the latest scientific discoveries and the longest scientific terms at his fingers' ends, to inform me of that little fact; my own common sense could arrive at that conclusion unassisted. What did puzzle me about it was the connection between mind and matter; why a mental anxiety resulted in a shooting pain, and why the annoyance I had lately undergone should have a tendency to develop bunions. Hunter laughed when I asked him the reason of this, and then he said:

"If I were you, Mr. Slocombe, I would just run up to town one day and see Sir Percival Pylle; he is quite at the top of the profession for a case like yours, and I should feel more satisfied in treating you afterward when you have had his opinion."

The young man spoke modestly enough—more so than these overtaught young gentlemen of the present day are in the habit of doing—but there was a laugh in his eye all the time, and I have since led him to confess that he did not believe he should ever get me to submit to his orders unless some medical Colossus had first laid down the law in the same direction.

It was a great loss to this neighborhood when good old Dr. Manners died. We all knew and believed in him; he had vaccinated the last three generations, helped them through croup and measles, had lanced their babies' gums, and attended the funerals of at least half the parish twice over; and now that he was gone we none of us had the least idea how to be ill without him. Young Mr. Hunter had been with Dr. Manners for a short time before his death; but what are a few months' experience compared to that of the man who has known and physicked you from the day of your birth? So there was a little division of feeling about Hunter; the young folks, who could not be expected to have old heads on their shoulders, extolled his cleverness and skill; but we elders did not commit ourselves so unreservedly, and there was a tacit agreement amongst us that in case we had to call in the new doctor, it would be well not to trust him too fully as to our ailments, confiding to his ear such symptoms merely as we thought him capable of understanding, and reserving to ourselves our own opinions, while we took those he expressed *cum grano*.

He was quite right, though, in saying that worry had told upon me. Why, worry enough to tell upon a large family had thought proper to concentrate itself upon me, Adolphus Slocombe, a quiet single gentleman no longer walking on what is called the sunny side of fifty. First, there [Pg 146] was that law-suit—the one, I mean, which had been dragging on for years about Crofton's Spinney; and when the case was settled this spring in my favor, the expenses of litigation so nearly balanced the value of the property, that the modest sum of £7 10*s.* 3*d.* was all the gain resulting from the trouble and anxiety of the law-suit. The wind was very much in the east, too, this spring. I remember there was a biting frost the very day my lawyer's bill came in—a frost that cut off all the young wall-fruit which a previous mild fortnight had coaxed into setting. I am partial to wall-fruit, particularly so to what is grown in my own garden; in fact, the garden is a hobby of mine, and those long, red-brick walls, on which the sun shines soft and warm when other aspects are in chilly shadow, had been a sheet of blossoms pink and promising, and such as not one of all my neighbors could exhibit, only the day before.

People say calamities are apt to hunt in couples; mine came just then in a regular pack. I was trying to be quiet for a while after dinner, and, sitting in a cozy chair by the dining-room fire, had just thrown a handkerchief across my forehead, the better to think over my troubles undisturbed by the lights in the room, when a knock sounded on the door, and my housekeeper presented herself with:

"If you please, sir, could I speak to you?"

Her voice sounded rather odd, and she had a nervous way with her hands so altogether unlike herself that I knew at once some fresh catastrophe had happened, and she was come to "break it" to me. I had told her to shut the door behind her, which she did; and then, as she stood trembling and hesitating just inside the room, I added, to reassure her:

"Well, Mrs. Parker, what is it? I am afraid the cows must be ill, or one of the maids has given you trouble, and you want me to give her warning."

"If you please, sir," replied Parker, as though that really was just what she wanted.

"But which is it?" I asked, "the cows or the housemaids?"

"Please sir," began Mrs. Parker again; then she paused for a full minute, and finally burst out quite suddenly, "It's me, sir, please."

"You, Parker? I don't understand," which was certainly not surprising, considering the want of clearness in her remarks. However, now she had begun to speak, she seemed to feel more equal to the occasion, and presently went on:

"Please, sir, it's me, sir; you said 'to give warning,' you know, sir."

"Oh, indeed!" returned I, equally surprised and annoyed at this piece of self-assertion on the part of my old servant. "So you think, Mrs. Parker, that it is your place rather than mine to give warning to my domestics? I cannot say that I agree with you. I give you leave to choose and select the maids for yourself, and when they disobey you and give trouble I am willing to part with them on your advice; but servants shall not enter upon or quit my service unless I engage them or dismiss them myself. You have lived with me a great many years, Parker; but I intend to [Pg 147] be master in my own house, and there must be a limit to your powers."

I had worked myself up into quite an angry mood by this time; as to Parker, she incontinently fell

a-sobbing in the very middle of my speech.

She drew a little nearer when I paused, and, "Oh, Mr. Adolphus," says she, "my dear, dear master, 'tisn't nothing like as what you're saying. I wouldn't never go to ask for more power nor is my due here, and faithfully I've tried to do my duty to you these thirty years and more, but—but—but—there, sir, 'tis Sir Arthur Prynne's coachman, sir—him that has the south lodge and lost his wife a year agone last Martinmas; and, if you please, sir, I'd be glad and sorry, too, indeed, sir, to leave you this day month."

The murder was out now, but what a preposterous notion!

"My good woman, have you taken leave of your senses!" I asked.

"Please, sir——"

"But I do not please at all, Parker. Why in the world should you want to be married? It is the most ridiculous thing I ever heard of. You are as comfortable as you can possibly be here; you have a good home, good food, servants under you, and, I hope and believe, a good master."

"Yes, sir," sniffed through a pocket-handkerchief.

"Then," I went on, warming with my subject, "you have good wages, haven't you? I'll raise them, if you wish it. And you have taken brevet rank, you know; why, all the parish calls you Mrs. Parker, and I do not believe there is a living soul besides myself that recollects your proper style and title should be Sarah Parker, spinster. Don't you see that you have everything to lose and nothing whatever to gain in marrying Sir Arthur Prynne's coachman? Why, he has I don't know how many children, and they will be the death of you, Parker; plague your life out. Now, do make up your mind to be a sensible woman and stay where you are, and I will see that you shall never come to want when your working days are over."

Anybody would have thought that I had given her reasons enough, and good ones, too, against this marriage, but wilful woman will have her way, and a most particularly obstinate and wilful woman Sarah Parker was in this matter. She wanted for nothing in my house, and she had loved me all my life, but Abel Driver's sons were all out in the world; one daughter was in good service, and the others were married; and, in short, her fixed intention was to become the coachman's wife and live in Sir Arthur's south lodge, so I gave up the point at last, merely observing:

"Well, if you will, you must, and I shall say no more about the matter except to caution you that Driver's lodge stands very near the lake, and I have seen a thick white mist rising scores of times in that part of the park. You are subject to rheumatism, and to my certain knowledge turned sixty; so I advise you to think how it will suit your bones to be running out to open and shut the gates at all hours, before you give Abel Driver his final answer." [Pg 148]

Parker was not much pleased at these remarks, meant in all kindly warning; perhaps she did not like any allusion to her age: anyhow, she went away at once, and left me, rather shaken by the sudden news she had brought me, to ponder over the complications and inconveniences which result from indiscriminate matrimony, and to wonder what was to become of me without my worthy housekeeper.

The next day I sent for Hunter, and two days afterward I went to London and saw Sir Percival Pylle. There was not much agreeable sauvity in the great man's manner, and he listened to the account of my symptoms with an engaging smile; but when it became his turn to speak, the first word that fell from his lips was not a pretty one, nor pleasant for me to hear.

"*Gout*, my dear sir, nothing but gout," laughing lightly, as though the whole matter was as simple as possible. "Allow me to congratulate you. This will add ten years to your life. A very fashionable, indeed, I may say a very aristocratic, complaint it is just now."

Sir Percival's face broadened with a genial smile—mine lengthened. I have always had a constitutional, it may have been a prophetic, objection to gout, and now I was coolly told its clutches were already upon me.

"Really, sir," said I, "I cannot imagine what should lead you to say this. I am not aware of having any symptoms of this malady."

"Of course not, of course not. Why, if people knew what was the matter with them, and how to treat themselves, where would be the use of us doctors? We should soon become only an additional item, and a rather large one, in your poor-rates. But you limped a little, Mr. Slocombe, as you entered my room; may I ask why?"

"Bunions," I replied, with decision, "very bad bunions."

"But not always equally painful? Worse some days, and better others? Boots feel a good fit this week and unbearably tight the next? Bunion red, shiny, swollen and puffy to the touch?"

I bowed my head in assent.

"Just so, just so. Call it *bunions*, Mr. Slocombe, if you please. Ha, ha! a capital joke, that; but *gout* is a shorter word to say, and a truer one; don't waste too much breath or too many syllables over your ailments."

I was beginning to hate the pleasant laugh that made so light of my distresses, and I asked rather stiffly:

"What do you prescribe, Sir Percival?"

"Been abroad much? No? That's right. Change of air and scene will do you infinite good, cheer up

your spirits, and give you something fresh to think about. Let me see, Salzbrun, I think, will be the thing for you; charming place, very lively. Put yourself under the care of my good friend Dr. Trinkwasser; he will regulate your use of the mineral waters, and in six weeks they will make another man of you. No more *gout* then, sir. I'll write you a little prescription for present use." [Pg 149] (Scribble, scribble, scribble, went the long-tailed goose-quill.) "There, sir, that note explains to Dr. Trinkwasser all that I need tell him. Start this week, if possible; *bon voyage*! Good-day; *thank you*, much obliged. *Good*-morning." And leaving a neatly-papered fee in the white hand that shook mine, I quitted the doctor's presence to think over the advice he had given me.

Presently I hailed a passing cab, and told the man to drive to my brother Herbert's address. Herbert is a clergyman, and is wearing out his life and strength in an East-end parish, where his wife and children lead lives scarcely less busy than his own. Very few of the party were at home on this occasion; only half a dozen, including the father and mother, sat down to the early dinner which supplied me with lunch; but the sight of so many cheerful faces round the table was a pleasant change from my usual solitary meals. Herbert is many years younger than I am; but he married early, and the eldest of his ten children is a bright, merry-looking girl of eighteen, Emmie by name. She is, more-over, my god-child, and is rather a favorite of mine, because I see no foolish, nonsensical young ladyism about her. She does not disfigure herself with a fuzz of hair dangling over her eyes, but has nice sensible shining locks, which always look clean and well-brushed. She was paler than usual to-day, and there was listlessness in her manner such as I had never seen before in buoyant Emmie. I could not help remarking upon it to her mother when she was out of the room; and Miriam sighed and looked a little anxious as she answered:

"I do not think Emmie *is* very well, Adolphus. She had a heavy influenza cold in the spring, just after we had all been afflicted with mumps, and she has never been quite herself since. The doctor calls it lassitude and want of tone."

"And what does he do for her?"

"He has prescribed a tonic, which she is taking regularly; but what she really wants, he says, is a thorough change of air and scene, and that, you know, we cannot give her until we take our holiday August. She is a dear good girl, and when she is at home she will work, in hope of giving me less to do, I believe;" and here Miriam's eyes began to glisten as she looked at me.

"You might have sent her down to me," I growled; and then a thought struck me. Why should not Emmie go to Salzbrun? it would be the very thing for her, and not at all unpleasant for me to have a fresh young fellow-traveler to enjoy the sights and help me through the inevitable discomforts. Perhaps, too, Emmie's education having been so much more recently polished than my own, her powers of French conversation might be in better working order than mine, which, if not exactly the worse for wear, had certainly grown somewhat rusty from lying idle all these years; nay, more, it was possible that Emmie might have learnt German. That decided me.

"Miriam," I said, "will you let me take the child with me to Salzbrun next week? Of course, you should have no expense about the trip, and I think that she and I could be very jolly together for a couple of months or so."

The tears standing in my sister's eyes welled over on her cheeks; it would be the greatest comfort [Pg 150] to her to let her daughter go abroad, the best possible thing for Emmie, and such a real help and kindness on my part. It seemed a relief to her to thank me; but I hate being thanked, and stopped her as soon as I could.

Emmie's look of delighted surprise when she heard the plan was worth seeing, her rapturous hug of gratitude not altogether disagreeable, provided it were not too frequently repeated; and Herbert grasped my hand more fervently than usual when I asked for his approval.

"Then, when can you be ready? Sir Percival Pylle said start this week, if possible; but I am willing to wait over Sunday for you, Emmie. Take as little luggage, as you can, and meet me at Charing Cross on Tuesday morning. Will that do?"

Yes, that would give time enough for preparations, Miriam said; so I was free to go home and see about my own, and as I put a piece of paper into Emmie's hand at parting, I added, "Mind you don't buy anything that will make you look remarkable—I am not going to travel about with a scare-crow; and if you dare to bring a heap of luggage to the station, I'll leave the half of it at Charing Cross, a single man of my age can't be going about the world in charge of a dozen band-boxes, even if he is foolish enough to be troubled with a niece." My mouth was stopped with kisses, and then she let me go.

Tuesday morning was clear and sunny. Herbert and Emmie were at the station before me, and it was not without a feeling of satisfaction that I surveyed my niece. Her traveling costume was simple and well-fitting, hat and ulster equally suitable, and her luggage, dear little girl, consisted of only one moderate-sized portmanteau and the bag she carried in her hand. We started in excellent spirits; and I was not ill-pleased to hear some favorable comments, made by more than one passenger on board the steamer, on my young relative's appearance, coupled with the remark that she was evidently traveling with her father, whom she much resembled.

We did not hurry too much on our way to Salzbrun. Everything was new to Emmie, and she enjoyed it all, looking upon each small *contretemps* that befell us as only a fresh subject for fun. There never was such a girl to find pleasure in trifles, which other folks would pass unnoticed, and her laugh was as clear and sunny as her fresh, bright face.

It was late when we reached our destination, a very fine hotel, full of very fine visitors, in what was supposed to be the best situation in Salzbrun. I saw Dr. Trinkwasser the next morning, and,

when he had directed me as to the kind and amount of mineral waters I was to swallow, we fell quickly into the ordinary routine of the place. Emmie insisted on getting up in time to go with me to the spring from which I fetched my early morning draught, and then we took the prescribed constitutional, and watched the gay assemblage passing to and fro while we listened to the lively music of an excellent band.

"Indeed, uncle, half the fun of being here is in getting up in the morning and watching the water- [Pg 151]
drinkers," Emmie assured me. "Did you see the faces that fat old German lady made this morning when she got her second glassful? I do believe she must be related somehow to those horrid gutta-percha dolls the children have; no merely human cheeks seem capable of going, day by day, through such contortions without getting permanently fixed in one of them. Old nurse used to tell us, when we made grimaces, that if the wind were to change that very minute we should never be able to get our natural faces again. She did frighten me so; and now I try to keep one eye on Frau Schimpf's visage and one on the weathercock; then, in case anything happened, I should be able to explain it to the doctors, and bear witness against the false, inconstant winds."

If loquacity be a sign of health, there was no longer anything amiss with my niece, for her tongue was seldom still, but rattled away incessantly whatever came into her head, and at this time it was generally nonsense that was uppermost. This Frau Schimpf, over whom she was now making merry, had acquired a certain sacredness in many eyes, not from any merit of her own, but because she was living in the character of *dame de compagnie* with the most admired inmate of our hotel—an inmate rendered all the more interesting by the slight cloud of mystery that hung about her. No one could discover Madame B.'s nationality; she might be Russian, German, Hungarian, Pole—anything almost, except French or English; and then nobody knew whether or no Monsieur B. was in existence, and "Wife or widow?" was the unanswered inquiry made concerning her by every new arrival at the Schwartz Adler. Madam was tall, dignified, and graceful; her dress, invariably black (which settled the question of her widowhood in my mind), was made in the latest Parisian fashion, her white hands flashed with diamond rings, a faint pink tinged her cheeks, her brows were dark and well defined, her eyes dark and lustrous; but her greatest charm of all lay in her hair, it too was dark, raven-hued, and was arranged in piles and pyramids of curls and loops and bows, with all the ingenuity of the most artistic foreign *coiffeur*; a jetty fringe fell in soft waves across her forehead; and from behind one ear a long full, perfumed ringlet descended to her waist, or swayed gently on the breeze as she moved across the room. Madame B. was beautiful, distinguished, piquante; and this little Frau Schimpf, who sat beside her, was a short, stout dumpy woman unmistakably German, clad in an impossible and brilliant tartan, and given to loud speech and laughter, and the questionable habit of dipping into the salt before her the knife which in the intervals of cutting up her meat, occasionally found its way into her mouth. Frau Schimpf was willing to chatter to anyone. Madame B. talked only to her, and always in German, that detestable tongue, of which I knew not one single word.

Emmie ran up-stairs to fetch her hat, the first evening after dinner, and as she took my arm for a stroll, she asked eagerly:

"Oh, uncle, did you see those two ladies who sat side by side—one in black silk and the other in
all the colors of the rainbow? Were not they an odd contrast? And did you ever in your life see [Pg 152]
anything like that younger lady's hair? Do you believe it is all growing? I did so long to give the curl a little tweak to see if it would come off."

"My dear child," I said severely, for her remarks appeared to me rather flippant, "that is not a nice way for you to talk; perhaps these same ladies may be wondering now whether that great brown coil at the back of your head is all your own."

"They may come and pull it if they like," returned the girl, laughing; "every bit of it is home produce, grown on the premises, and warranted genuine."

"At any rate this lady's locks are arranged in a most artistic manner."

"Artistic? I should think it was!" and Emmie was off again in one of her hearty laughs. "Why, Uncle Adolphus, that is just the very thing that tickles my fancy. It is *too* artistic, *too* unnatural; I am sure Eve never wore her hair in that style, nor Venus, nor—nor anybody that ever was taken for a model," urged the girl, getting a trifle confused in her examples of style.

"Hair-pins and curling-tongs were not invented in those early days," said I, trying to be repressive. "What a remarkably fine sunset we are having."

Emmie followed my lead, and we talked of the beauty of the evening, and the wonderful effects of sunset coloring in different states of the atmosphere; but my thoughts, I must confess, were busied still with the beautiful being whom my eyes detected in the hotel gardens below us. How utterly unlike my early dreams and visions, and yet what an adorable creature she was. This was, perhaps, rather more than I allowed to myself on that first evening; but day by day my admiration for Madame B. deepened, and I began to contrast with her all other women of my acquaintance, but always to their disparagement. Even Emmie, my bright little niece, lost something of her piquancy during this process. Inclined to admire all that was foreign, the smooth, shining hair parted on Emmie's forehead looked to me now "so dreadfully English." I had always thought Miriam a sensible woman for forbidding her girls to disfigure themselves with fringes—*idiot fringes*, I had called them, when in my ignorance I aided and abetted her decision. Ah, well! one's mind grows broader with more varied experience, and mine now widened fast, until I positively longed to see some wandering tendrils straying across my niece's brow, if a row of bright wavy locks was impossible for her. I did not tell her so then, and I was glad afterward that I had been wise enough to avoid the subject.

We were by no means the only inmates of our hotel to whom the beautiful unknown became an object of interest. Her eyes, her hair, her diamonds, her languid grace, were topics often dwelt on in the smoking-room; and as I sat puffing silently my evening pipe of peace, I gleaned at last a few facts concerning her. Madame B. had come to Salzbrun for her health, but what was the matter with her nobody knew. Frau Schimpf came for health too, but she was also the lady's paid companion. Every morning when we went to the spring for my draught of mineral water, the [Pg 153] dumpy little German was there before us getting hers also; but the stately beauty never came. And at last I learned that, instead of drinking the waters like the vulgar herd of us, Madame B. was amongst the selecter few for whom a course of mud-baths only was prescribed. Emmie's mirth had been greatly excited at the notion of these baths, and she was always begging me to let her try one, "just for the fun of it," because she was "convinced that they must make one feel like an eel or a tadpole, and she wanted to find out which of the two it was." The very mention of such creatures in connection with the baths seemed a positive insult to Madame B.

When we had been about ten days at Salzbrun, a sad thing happened. Little Gretchen, the smiling *Madchen* who used to fill up, from the spring which Frau Schimpf and I frequented, the glasses handed to her by the drinkers, was missing one morning; a stranger was in her place, and presently the story flew from mouth to mouth that the poor child had been knocked down by a runaway horse the previous evening; her leg was broken, and broken badly. Anna, who had come to do her work, said the little maiden was in sore pain, but brave and patient, and that the Herr Doctor had shaken his head and looked very grave about the accident.

The morning sunshine shone less bright than usual that day to many who heard the tale, for Gretchen's modest behavior and pleasant courtesy had made her a favorite with all her customers. The livery music of the band failed to inspirit us, and when Emmie and I had taken our compulsory walk, and fetched in little paper bags the rolls that were to serve for our breakfast, we sat down sadly and gravely enough, at a little table under the shady trees, to drink our coffee.

"Can't we do anything for Gretchen, uncle?"

"We can give her some money," I suggested; "doctors cost more than she can afford, poor child."

Just then Frau Schimpf, who was breakfasting at a table near us, and with whom Emmie had occasionally exchanged a few words, turned round and said something to her in German. And then followed a conversation, in the course of which my niece learnt fuller particulars of the recent accident. It appeared that Gretchen was the eldest child of a large family, and the only member of it besides the mother capable of earning anything. That mother was a widow, herself too delicate to be able to work much; and now the poor girl's weekly wage must cease, for she could never be well enough this summer to resume her post. "Even if she ever does get well enough," continued the German lady. "I have seen the Herr Doctor only this last half-hour, and he says her injuries are so severe he cannot yet tell whether she may not have to lose her leg, and then what would become of them? Gretchen, even with a wooden leg, would not be able to stoop fast enough to fill the visitors' glasses another season, and what else could she do? Besides," added the good woman reflectively, "a wooden leg is expensive; it wears out—you have to buy another. Gretchen is young; she may live long enough to need a dozen wooden legs before she dies, to say nothing of sticks and crutches." And as Emmie translated to me this dolorous [Pg 154] suggestion, Frau Schimpf finished her repast and walked away.

We found that Gretchen's accident had created quite a little excitement at the Schwartz Adler, where many of her customers were staying; and before dinner-time the general desire to help the little maiden had taken definite form, and it was unanimously decided that the visitors at the hotel should get up an entertainment something in the style of penny readings at home for her benefit. It was to come off as soon as possible, while the interest was at its hight; and ardent spirits amongst us formed themselves into a committee of management, and went about the house, knocking at every one's door in search of talent of all kind to swell their programme for the following Tuesday. Emmie and I were requested to give our valuable services; but happily the house contained so many stars more brilliant than ourselves that we were permitted to sink into contented insignificance after purchasing our five franc tickets for the entertainment.

It was wonderfully well got up: somehow these things arrange themselves more easily and simply amongst foreigners than with us, and the number of performers was astonishing. There was a gentleman who played the flute, another who accompanied his wife's pianoforte music on the violoncello, several amateur singers with voices far above the average, brilliant pianists and violinists, besides readers and reciters in French, English, and German, to suit all tastes. The landlord placed his big *salon* at the disposal of the committee, and Emmie assisted a bevy of ladies to deck its walls with flowers and evergreens, while the non-performing gentlemen, myself amongst them, went to and fro executing their sometimes rather contradictory orders. Amongst them all I looked in vain for Madame B. What a sweet retiring disposition she must have! I thought, for she is never visible except at dinner-time; but by and by Frau Schimpf came bustling in, and presently Emmie ran up to me with a translation of that worthy woman's latest remarks.

"She says we shall have a treat indeed this evening, uncle, for Madame B. has at last consented, under extreme pressure, to recite in German."

"Admirable woman!" said I, which was what I thought; but Emmie fancied it was spoken ironically, and went on to rebuke me gently.

"You shouldn't laugh at her," she said; "it really must be horrid to have to stand up and *spout* before all these people; and I don't wonder it took a lot of coaxing to persuade her to do it. I don't

think even you, my much and deservedly beloved uncle, would ever be able to induce me to perform in public."

"And if I could, my dear, you would not be worth hearing," returned I; for we were on terms of friendly chaff, and I liked her to get occasionally as good as she gave.

Presently she came back to me.

"Our latest bulletin," she whispered; "Madame B. is by no means unaccustomed to public speaking; she has *un talent*, and is in the habit of exercising it at some sort of club—*Verein* they call it—in Berlin." [Pg 155]

This upset the modest violet theory; but, after all, the glorious rose which basks in fullest sunshine is a finer flower; anyway, there was much to admire in the lady; and when at the appointed hour she was handed, by two or three gentlemen in waiting, to the front of the extempore platform in the *salon*, and stood there self-possessed and stately in her trailing black silk robe, while her audience clapped a welcome, I declare my heart went pit-a-pat with excitement, just as though I were a boy of nineteen.

The lady waited for silence with downcast eyes, but when the room was hushed into stillness she raised them suddenly with a quick change of expression, and in a rich clear voice began to speak in German. That there were rhymes in what she recited even my ignorant ears could catch, but the extraordinary thing about it was the incessant repetition of my own name in every variety of tone, now playful, now tender, now coaxing, now petulant; and once when her accent was especially caressing, the dark eyes rested for an instant on my face, bringing a tinge of red above my respectable British whiskers. What was it all about? Was it possible that Madame B. was acquainted with my Christian name? that she was conscious of my fervent admiration, and not displeased by it? And here I became aware that Emmie was indulging in a paroxysm of laughter and delight beside me, while a storm of rapturous applause burst out all over the room as the melodious voice ceased and Madame B. bowed her acknowledgments. She came back again and recited something else—of which I could not understand a word—before Emmie had time to explain the first piece, but I hardly listened now; I was sitting in a strangely delicious dream. Adolph? yes, certainly that was the German for my own name Adolphus, but never had I imagined the variety of sweet inflections with which that name could be uttered.

"I shall always call you uncle Adolph in future," cried Emmie, breaking in upon my revery. "It is a much prettier name than Adolphus, and ever so much shorter. Oh, dear, I do wish I could say it in half as many different ways as Madame B. can!"

"But what was it all about?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon, uncle. I forgot you did not understand. It was just the loveliest thing you ever heard. The poem begins by saying not exactly 'what's in a name?' but by suggesting that we hardly know what there *is* in it until we try to use it under a great variety of circumstances; and then it takes a common German name, Adolph, and puts it into the mouth of a girl who is talking to her lover; and sometimes she pets him, and sometimes she pretends to scold him, or to take offense, and then she is in despair at parting from him, and overjoyed to meet again. You could make out all that for yourself, couldn't you, from the way Madame B. pronounced your name?"

"I never heard anything to equal her; it is wonderfully clever."

"She must have had plenty of practice, mustn't she?" remarked Emmie, taking a view of the matter which fell rather like a wet blanket on my enthusiasm. "I expect she has recited that poem dozens of times before. You see she says it off by heart, and Frau Schimpf told me she is accustomed to immense audiences in Berlin, and thinks nothing at all of the people here." [Pg 156]

Our entertainment was an undeniable success, and the committee were able to hand over for Gretchen's use a sum of money sufficient to keep the little maiden in comfort for many months to come. Its results, so far as I was concerned, were less happy. My thoughts would wander off too constantly to Madame B. I began to show small civilities to the *dame de compagnie*, who took them in very good part; and listening to the ease and fluency with which she rattled off her native language, it appeared to me that speaking German must really be an easier, simpler thing than I used to imagine, and I resolved to set to work at once to pick up all I could of it. *Ja nein*, those were words I knew already, and I had learnt to call *Kellner* in commanding tones whenever there were any orders to be given through Emmie to the waiters. I would go a little further now, and one day, when the child had been telling me some long story of her adventures while I had been writing letters, I drew myself up, and replied complacently.

"*Ach, so.*" But Emmie was not impressed, as I had expected her to be, by my proficiency; indeed, she took it quite the wrong way, for she leant back in her chair with a burst of laughter that surprised me, and as soon as she could speak, exclaimed,

"My dearest uncle Adolph" (she had called me so ever since the memorable Tuesday night), "you really are too funny. When I come down to stay with you in the winter we will get up some private theatricals, and you will bring the house down. I had not the faintest notion you were such a mimic; it is inimitable, just her very tone and manner to the life."

"Whose tone and manner?" I asked, faintly, trying to look unconscious.

"Why, Frau Schimpf's, of course; it could not be any one else. Oh uncle Adolph, what a shame of you to be so civil to the poor old thing, when all the time you were doing it only to get that up! Do say it again, though; I can't think how you could contrive to catch her voice and accent so completely."

We were wandering about next morning, in the direction of the ladies' mud-baths, when our attention was suddenly caught by loud screams proceeding from one of them, as of somebody in deadly fear. Several people came running to the spot; there was a commotion both inside and outside the building, and at last the word *Schlange*—snake—began to pass from mouth to mouth. Was there a viper in one of the ladies' baths? The idea appeared too horrible. Poor Emmie turned pale at the thought, and asked anxiously if German snakes were dangerous; but not two people gave her the same answer, and at last the brilliant suggestion occurred to her that it might, perhaps, be only an eel.

I looked at my watch, and found it was already past the time for my second glass of mineral water, and Emmie decided to stay where she was while I went in search of it, in the hopes of hearing the end of this strange affair. Twenty minutes later I returned, to find her leaning for support against a tree, exhausted by mirth, which burst out afresh at sight of me, while every face I met was expanded into a broad grin. [Pg 157]

"Oh uncle Adolph, it is too ridiculous!" she panted, as she ran up to me and seized my arm. "What *do* you think it was? It was Madame B.'s bath, you know; and after she got into it she felt something in the mud, and she thought it was a snake, and screamed and made a tremendous fuss; and the bath-people came rushing to help her, and they got sticks and rakes and poked about in the mud, and, oh! what *do* you think they found in the bath?"

"Surely not the eel you suggested?" I asked faintly.

"A *curl*, Uncle Adolph! just that very identical long black curl you thought so beautiful! and it had got all straight and horrid in the mud, and really must have been unpleasantly like a snake to put one's foot on. But that is not all," she went on, "for it seems that poor Madame is *bald*, absolutely *bald*, and all those bows and fringes are nothing but a wig, and take on and off like a helmet; and to-day she must have been thinking of something else, for she stepped into her bath with the hair on, and this curl dropped into the mud. I do feel sorry for her, for when the people showed her what they had found, she was so angry that they say she tore the rest of the wig off her head, and threw it at them in a passion. So now everybody in the place will know that Madame B. is bald and artificially got up, and I should not wonder if the discovery drove her quite away from Salzbrun at once."

Emmie was right; that very afternoon the two ladies left the place, taking leave of none, and not caring to face any of their former companions. At night the subject was discussed at *table d'hote*; fresh incidents were supplied, dull witticisms were made about Medusa and her snaky locks, and those who had before been most inclined to offer incense at the shrine of Madame B. were foremost now in hinting that her teeth, her eyebrows, and the faint pink color in her cheeks were one and all as artificial as her hair. As for me, I held my tongue. Nobody, not even Emmie, had the least suspicion of my budding *tendresse* for the fascinating widow, and by and by some farther particulars became known about her. Her husband, a wealthy jeweler of Berlin, had been dead about two years, and had probably bequeathed to her, amongst much else, the diamond hoops which flashed so brightly on her pretty hands.

My dream was over, I had been rudely awakened. Not for the sake of hearing "Adolph" murmured all day long in the soft accents of that dulcet voice could I, an English country gentleman, for a moment contemplate allying myself with the made-up widow of a German shopkeeper, however beautiful and attractive her appearance might be in full "war-paint." No, I would go back to my old home and my old ways, and forget the foreign siren who had dazzled me for a while.

We stayed on at Salzbrun until my course of water-drinking was over, and then, after a fortnight's tour through other parts of Germany, I brought my niece home with me to the Manor House. [Pg 158]

Emmie had grown very dear to me in all these weeks that we have spent together. I do not think it would be quite fair to ask her parents to let her live with me entirely and be my adopted daughter; but I have been trying on one excuse and another to lengthen out her stay, and fondly hoped the Manor House would be a second home to her, and that at least half her time would in future be spent with me.

But what is the use of planning? My fine schemes were all knocked on the head this morning, in the course of an hour's conversation, and I and my projects are simply nowhere in the new state of things.

I was standing on my doorstep after breakfast, smoking calmly, and at peace with all mankind, when young Fred Willoughby came riding up the drive.

"Hullo, young man," said I, "why are you not after the hounds this morning? You can't have better weather in November, and you won't find any fox in this direction, take my word for it."

"It is rather a dove than a fox that I have come in pursuit of to-day, Mr. Slocombe. Can you give me ten minutes in the study?"

In less than that time he had poured out a fervid declaration of his devotion to my niece, of his parents' approval of his choice, and would I—could I give him any hope that Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Slocombe would ever be persuaded to allow him to marry their daughter? Of course he soon persuaded me. Fred is a thoroughly good fellow, the son of old and tried friends, and can promise his wife a future fairly free from any money anxieties. He is evidently much attached to Emmie, and I believe will make her truly happy. So, by and by, we shall have another wedding, and then I know exactly how it will be in the future. History, they say, repeats itself. So somebody's marriage will inconvenience me; I shall lose my head housekeeper in Emmie. There

will be bad times for the garden again next spring, I know there will, and I shall be worried and out of sorts, and shall suffer from *bunions*, or something else, and then Hunter will send me to Sir Percival Pylle for good advice. I see the whole programme before me, like some dreadful nightmare; but I can be firm upon occasions, and I do solemnly declare that nothing, not even the advice of the most learned and fashionable of physicians, shall ever again induce me to seek for health in the neighborhood of a German mud-bath.

[THE END.]

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## Transcriber's Notes:

Added table of contents.

Images may be clicked to view larger versions.

Retained some archaic spellings ("hight," "awsome," etc.).

Retained some inconsistent hyphenation (e.g. "bedside" vs. "bed-side").

Page 2, changed "frendless" to "friendless" ("poor, friendless child") and "maried" to "married" ("when I married your father").

Page 6, changed "tumultously" to "tumultuously" ("springs up tumultuously").

Page 9, corrected tense to "bursts" in "she bursts out, angrily."

Page 10, added missing quote after "for the likes of her."

Page 17, added missing "it" to "would think it strange."

Page 32, added missing close single quote after "Banks of Allan Water?"

Page 34, changed comma to period after "still sharply."

Page 42, changed "eveything" to "everything" ("I forgot everything").

Page 43, changed "Vere" to "Vera" in "Lady Vera's morbid thoughts."

Page 45, added missing hyphen before "law" in "of his mother-in-law." Changed "hear to it" to "hear of it."

Page 52, changed "idifferent" to "indifferent" ("She is utterly indifferent").

Page 53, changed "Mongomery" to "Montgomery" ("Miss Montgomery's pretty soprano").

Page 54, corrected tense from "touched" to "touches" in "touches the white keys."

Page 55, changed "yous" to "your" ("your *tete-a-tete*").

Page 57, removed stray quote after "courted pleasure abroad."

Page 65, added missing period after Mrs in "Mrs. Cleveland's glance."

Page 78, added missing period after Mrs in "Mrs. Noble shrieks."

Page 79, changed "martyred brother's" to "martyred mother's."

Page 81, changed "Ida" to "Ivy" ("with Ivy on his arm").

Page 87, corrected tense from "have" to "had" in "So they had buried her."

Page 89, changed ? to . after "The angry color flames into her cheeks."

Page 90, changed "eommanding" to "commanding" ("so imperious, so commanding").

Page 93, changed "evade" to "invade" ("began to invade").

Page 99, changed "asistance" to "assistance" ("opportunely came to your assistance"). Corrected tense from moaned in "she moaned, feebly."

Page 105, added missing quote before "I was looking over papa's book."

Page 106, changed "excuting" to "executing" ("lose no time in executing it").

Page 109, corrected tense from "looked" in "The maid looks at her."

Page 112, corrected tense from "turned" in "Lady Vera turns her head."

Page 113, changed "Conntess" to "Countess" ("all trace of Countess Vera").

Page 115, added missing quote before "You will help me to the earldom."

Page 119, removed extra quote after "regarding him steadily."

Page 126, changed "every" to "ever" in "ever since we came to London."

Page 131, added missing period after Mrs in "Mrs. Robson, I believe."

Page 134, corrected tense from moaned in "The wind moans ominously."

Page 139, changed comma to period after "he asks, eagerly."

Page 150, changed "half of at it Charing Cross" to "half of it at Charing Cross."

Page 153, changed "led" to "leg" in "wooden leg is expensive."

Page 154, changed "iittle" to "little" ("help the little maiden") and removed redundant "day" after "following Tuesday."

Page 157, changed "knowh" to "known" ("became known about her").

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