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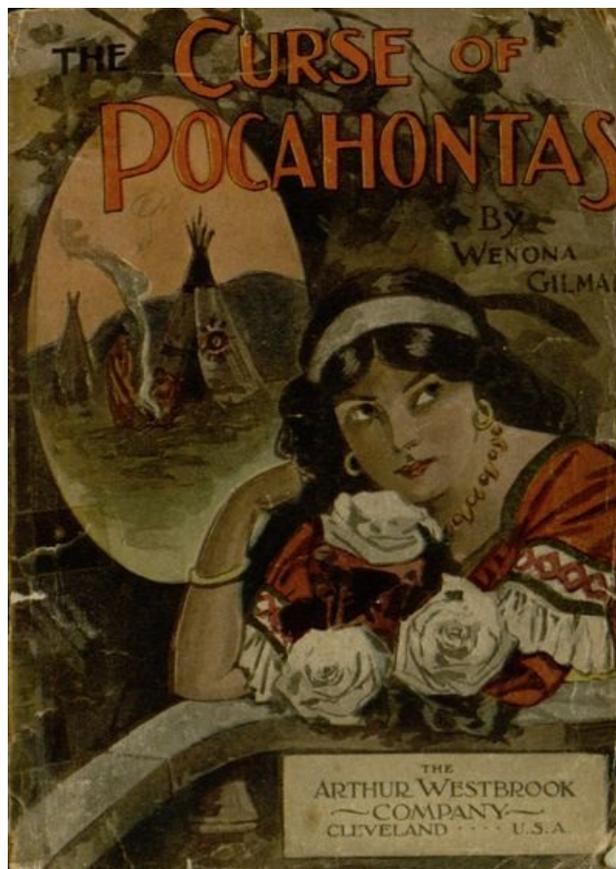
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THE CURSE OF POCAHONTAS

By WENONA GILMAN

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THE CURSE OF POCAHONTAS

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CHAPTER I.

Mrs. de Barryos sat beside a window overlooking a dainty rose-garden, the golden sunshine streaming over her, the balmy air lifting the soft curls of dark hair that was artistically touched with gray. Her hands were folded idly over a letter that lay in her lap—small hands that looked as if they had never known the meaning of toil, they were pale and thin, like the face of the woman to whom they belonged, for Mrs. de Barryos was an invalid.

She had been pretty before her face acquired its present angles through suffering; never beautiful, but pretty in a dainty, meaningless sort of way; inoffensively pretty some people might have called her, for there was no strength in it, nor character. Her eyes were innocent, wide-open brown ones that were like those of an obedient child. Her chin was decidedly weak, and about the mouth had grown with her age a sort of querulous tremble, as if she felt that the world had used her unfairly, and wanted all mankind to sympathize with and pet her because of it.

She was never known to miss an opportunity to tell people of all the wretchedness that had been so bravely and uncomplainingly borne. She had fancied for the past five years that death was imminent, that its shadows lay across her threshold, and yet she was apparently as far from it as she had been at the beginning of the five years.

There was another thing about Mrs. de Barryos' life of which she was apparently as proud as of [Pg 4]

her illness and patience, and that was the fact that she was a lineal descendant of the renowned Pocahontas, a fact at which some people laughed; but it was an undisputed fact, all the same, for the historical Indian maiden had given birth to one of the grandfathers upon the maternal side, and the curling hair and weakness of character had been inherited from the branch of the family that should have imparted its strength.

And it was of that same ancestress that Mrs. de Barryos was thinking as she sat there beside the window, her eyes mechanically following the flitting movements of a graceful form in the garden that was bending above the roses.

And surely the girl was beautiful enough to look upon.

It might have been easy enough to believe that there was the blood of an Indian flowing through her veins, for the clear olive complexion, the inky blackness of the hair, which still was not straight, the touch of crimson in the cheeks, and the great velvet eyes might have indicated it. There was a better explanation of it, however, in the fact that her father was a Mexican.

After a little she came toward the window at which her mother sat, her arms filled with the lovely crimson blossoms that fitted her dusky beauty so royally, and seated herself upon the sill of the window, dropping the roses about her in gorgeous profusion as she prepared to bind them into a bouquet.

"Aren't they exquisite?" she asked, admiringly, her voice a full, rich contralto that made music even of the most ordinary speech. "It seems to me that I never saw them so fine before."

"I wish you would put them away!" exclaimed her mother, querulously. "It seems to me, Carlita, that you are always working among the flowers, and that I never get a moment in which to speak to you."

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The girl threw one swift glance of blended astonishment and reproach in her mother's direction, then rose quietly, gathered up her flowers, entered the room, and placed them upon a table, then drew a stool to her mother's feet and sat upon it.

"I am awfully sorry if I have neglected you, dearest," she said, gently. "Was there anything special that you wanted to speak to me about?"

"Yes, there is," returned the plaintive voice. "There is something I want to tell you. I have just had a letter from—from Jessica."

"Well?"

"I—I wrote to her mother the other day. I know you don't like me to be making preparations for my death, Carlita, but—"

"Oh, mother!"

"Well, what is a woman to do when she sees death staring her in the face and no one will believe it?" cried the woman, fretfully. "I wanted to make some provision for you, and—"

"My dear, my dear, if you knew how this pains me, I am sure—"

"If I don't know, it isn't because you haven't told me often enough, Heaven knows!" exclaimed Mrs. de Barryos, with irritation. "You never think of any one but yourself, Carlita."

For a moment it seemed as if the girl were about to utter a protest; then she thought better of it, and contented herself with a little gesture of deprecation and silence.

After a brief hesitation, her mother continued more quietly, soothed, perhaps, by her daughter's submission:

"Your Aunt Erminie and I never agreed, and so I knew that you would not desire to live there at my death, and so I have written to Jessica's mother, who was my old school friend, asking if I might appoint her your guardian. She has written today, through Jessica, to say that she will be very happy to accept the trust. I have not seen Louise for a very great many years; but I have always loved her, and I am quite sure that she will be kind to my little motherless girl."

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"Oh, mother! Why will you persist in saying such dreadful things?"

"Because I know the end is not far off, my dear, and—"

"You have said that same thing for five years."

"Then the end is five years nearer. I never can have any satisfaction in talking to you, Carlita. You won't sit down and reason a thing out, as other people do."

The girl leaned her exquisite face upon her hand and looked dreamily through the window.

"I beg your pardon," she said, softly. "I will not interrupt again."

"I feel so satisfied," her mother continued, spreading out her hands curiously; "now that Louise has undertaken your guardianship, I can die quite contented. You will have Jessica for a companion, and—"

"I have never seen Jessica or her mother."

"There you go again! What difference can that possibly make? Louise and I were the greatest friends as girls. I shall never forget how she cried when I told her that I was going to marry your father.

"My dear Dorindah," she said, "you will regret it to the last day of your life. Jose de Barryos is a hot-tempered Mexican, and you know how dreadful they are."

"It was quite true, Carlita. I never knew a moment's happiness from the time I married your father until the day he died." [Pg 7]

The girl moved restlessly; there was intense pain depicted in her countenance; but her mother continued as if she had not observed:

"He ruined my life, made me the wreck that I am—I, who was called one of the greatest beauties of my day. I was never happy for a single moment after I became his wife; but that is only what I might have expected from the curse that rests upon me."

"The curse that rests upon you?" returned Carlita, looking at her mother for the first time with a dawning interest. "Why, what curse rests upon you?"

"It is that about which I wanted to talk to you, that about which I wanted to tell you. My poor child, when you go into the world, at my death, you will go with the same curse upon you that has spoiled my life, and that must wreck yours."

"Mother, what do you mean?" asked Carlita.

"It is a curse of Pocahontas, child—the curse that falls, from generation to generation, upon one girl child who shows the trace of the Indian, and you are that one! I was the one of my generation, you of yours."

"Mother, you are jesting."

"I am in most deadly earnest, Carlita. You know that we are descendants of Pocahontas. She married a white man—John Rolf, if you remember—and died a broken-hearted woman. She left one son, and upon her death-bed she pronounced a curse—a curse that has never failed to fall. It was that one girl descendant of each generation should suffer, through her love, even as she had suffered. It was that she should know no happiness; that if she dared to love, the most bitter misery should fall upon her and the man of her choice. And the curse has never failed, Carlita. It has never failed and it never can fail. Think! You have heard the story of how, when your great-aunt and uncle were coming from their wedding, the skiff in which they were crossing the river capsized, and all within it were drowned—six of them! Your great-grandmother went mad, and died a raving maniac, when her husband was killed right before her eyes. Your grandmother died of a broken heart when her husband wandered away, and no one ever knew whether the Indians killed him, or he simply deserted her. He was never heard of afterward. Your mother's pitiful history you know well enough; it needs no repetition. I want you to know all this, and that the curse has descended to you, in order that you may escape the misery and heartache that has fallen upon the others of your race. If you would save yourself from suffering and death, you must never love!" [Pg 8]

The girl sprang to her feet, the crimson color passionately staining her cheeks.

"Mother!" she cried, hotly, "what are you saying? Would you rob a young life of all that makes it worth the living? Would you make of me a hermit, shunning the whole world, and shunned in turn? Would you deprive me of that sentiment for which God created me woman?"

The invalid stretched out her hands again deprecatingly.

"I have only told you the truth," she said, without the slightest compassion for her daughter's suffering, because she could not understand it. "I have warned you and done my duty. I shall not be here to look after you and protect you, and all that I can do is to warn you. The truth stands there, and you must recognize it. If you love, if you wed, you will not only ruin your own life, but that of the man who tempts you to marriage. You have that to keep before you always—always. If I had done it I should not be the wreck I am today; but I had no one to warn me against the fate I was preparing for myself. Just keep these words ever fresh within your memory, and you will be safe: 'The curse of Pocahontas rests upon me!'" [Pg 9]

CHAPTER II.

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Shortly after that, to the surprise of everybody, Mrs. de Barryos did die.

People had expected that she was going to be one of those who lived eternally, eternally complaining, and her death came in the nature of a sort of shock to the community. Carlita was looked upon with general favor, and there were those who, while they sighed, exclaimed to each other consolingly:

"Well it is the first freedom of any sort the poor child ever had. She will grieve, of course, but as soon as the first shock has worn off, she'll be happier than she ever was in her life before."

But any kind of a mother is better than no mother at all, and there was the sincerest sorrow in Carlita's heart. There was enough of the warm Mexican blood in her veins to fill her with a passion that was beyond the understanding of those colder, more northern folk, and she had loved her mother very sincerely. She was frightened, too, at the time of her mother's death by the remembrance of that curse which her mother had impressed upon her many times before the end came, and felt that shrinking sense of loneliness, of bitter oppression, of isolation from all the world that is so hard to bear.

When Jose de Barryos died he left his fortune, and it was considerable, equally to his wife and daughter, the daughter under her guardianship and that of a brother who did not long survive

him, so that at the time of Mrs. de Barryos' death there was considerable interest felt as to who she had appointed guardian of her daughter in her own place, Carlita being still under legal age. Some said that she would appoint her husband's sister, Mrs. Erminie Blanchard but there were others who knew that there had not been sufficient friendship between the two women for that, and there was a rustle of excitement felt when two ladies in mourning arrived on the day of the funeral, two women whom none of them had ever seen before, but who went at once to the great de Barryos mansion, for it was nothing less in that country, and established themselves in the house.

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There was considerable talk among the neighbors, who stood off and looked at them from a distance like frightened sheep, feeling somehow an embarrassment that they were never known to exhibit before.

Both of them were large women, the elder inclined to be stout, with a waist that was suspiciously small for the size of bust and hips. Her hair was yellow—a brilliant, half-greenish yellow—that contrasted oddly with her very dark eyebrows and black lashes. Her eyes were a dark blue, and her complexion very white and very pink about the cheeks.

She was startlingly young-looking to confess to being the mother of the young woman who accompanied her.

She—the daughter—was a curious contrast to her mother, while following at the same time upon much the same lines. Her hair was red—that glorious dark rich auburn—her eyes dark brown and rather fine, her complexion singularly like that of her mother. She was not beautiful—not even pretty—but there was a certain sort of dangerous fascination about her that even inexperienced people recognized.

Carlita rather gasped when they bore down upon her suddenly the day of her mother's funeral, their mourning was so heavy, so crisp, so new, and they gushed over her in such a curious way, calling her "a dear thing!" "darling!" and all the rest of it, which was quite new to Carlita, and they took such absolute possession of everything. But she explained it all to herself by remembering that letter which her mother had received signed "Jessica," and tried to be satisfied.

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When the will was read, the good people understood it all better.

Mrs. Louise Chalmers has been appointed guardian of the orphaned heiress, and Mrs. Louise Chalmers was that rather large, rather showy, rather overdressed, while yet in mourning, woman, and to her had been left an income of eight thousand dollars a year so long as she remained Carlita's guardian.

Her black-bordered handkerchief was pressed very closely to her eyes during the reading of the will; but although an occasional sob was heard by those who sat nearest to her, there wasn't an atom of moisture on the handkerchief when it was removed. Her little, black King Charles spaniel fidgeted and sneezed on her lap during the entire time, not quite able to comprehend why he should be neglected for the first time in all his absurdly spoiled life.

It did not seem quite appropriate to those plain Southern folks that Mrs. Chalmers should hold a dog on her lap during the reading of her old friend's will; but they rather forgave her when she went up to Carlita, and, in a really very pretty way, put her arms about the young orphan's neck, and said in her sweetest and most maternal voice:

"I can not take your mother's place, my darling, but I shall try to be a second one to you. It is a very sacred trust that she has left me, and I shall try with all my heart to be worthy of it."

And she immediately took the place of "second mother," taking the direction of everything in her own hands with a clear sweep that rather staggered Carlita. Her mother had been ill for five years before her death, as has already been told, and the girl had been housekeeper in entire charge, so that to be so completely swept aside in her own domain was something which she had not calculated upon. Still, she submitted, because there did not seem to be anything else to be done.

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There were not many changes made in the house, because practically there was no way of making them. The town was not full of opportunities. The people were slow and inactive. Jose de Barryos had owned a huge cotton plantation just outside the limits of the town, and had been contented to have his dwelling-place there, though it must be confessed that he had not spent much of his time at home. He and his wife had not agreed sufficiently well to permit their living very comfortably under the same roof for any length of time together. And she had remained there after his death because she lacked the energy to do anything else.

But it was not the sort of place in which Mrs. Chalmers could be long content. She was not surprised, as she sat one evening upon the lawn near the fountain, with the sweet southern air blowing lazily about her, to receive a visit from her daughter.

The girl threw herself upon the grass and looked up indolently.

"I say," she exclaimed in a tone that was low, almost thrilling, "this is dead slow! And I am tired of the whole thing. I don't think I could stand it another week for all the fortune that black thing possesses!"

"Jessica!"

"Oh, bah! You are doing the delicately virtuous with a vengeance, and it is that which adds to my ennui almost more than this enervating atmosphere. Call a halt, can't you? One can't speak of

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that little backwoods thing but you are up in arms!"

"She is beautiful!"

"Yes; but with about as much style as one of these buzzards that are so disgustingly plentiful. Her big eyes are uncanny, and that chalky complexion looks like the first indication of decay. She looks like one of the mulatto girls that abound in these parts. I am seriously afraid that some one will think that we've brought a negro home with us!"

"Jessica, for the love of Heaven, hush! If she should hear you, she would never forgive you in the world!"

"And what an awful calamity that would be!" sneered the girl, gracefully drawing a blade of long grass through her lips. "This place will be good enough when this absurd time of mourning is passed and we can fill it with guests; but until it is, for the Lord's sake, let's cut it all and run. I can't stand it!"

"We can't leave her."

"Of course, we can't—worse luck—but surely you have not lost your cunning in the development of romance. You can make her see the absolute necessity for change of air and scene. You don't need a better ally than that chalky complexion of hers. Get me out of it, or I shall do something disgraceful."

"Where shall we go?"

"Anywhere. I suppose we've got to draw it mild on her pocket-book for a while; but—well, the opera season has opened in New York, and there will be something to live for. After that, we can go over the pond for a while and—"

"Why don't you try to use a little less slang, Jessica?"

"Because slang is strictly in my line, Miss Virtuous. Look here! It is quite sufficient to be on my p's and q's when our little mulatto is around, without getting qualms and—and things. I say, when are you going to propose the New York plan?"

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"You really think it best?"

"Best or worst, it's going to be done. Great Scott! think of it! We've been buried in this hole for three weeks now. Not a glass of champagne, not the face of a man, not a single game of poker—nothing to relieve the dread monotony. I'd be in a mad-house in three weeks more! Besides all that, I'm dead tired of this black toggery."

"You mean to take it off when you get back to New York?"

"Take it off!" echoed the young lady, looking up in astonishment. "Well, rather!"

"What will Carlita think?"

"What, in Heaven's name, do you suppose I care what she thinks? Did you really believe that I intend to pass the rest of my life guarded from evil by the fear of Carlita's displeasure? If such an idea has ever disturbed you, put it away at once. She will very soon find her level in my life, and in yours, if I mistake not. When will you speak to her about our going?"

"Tomorrow, if you really wish it."

"You'd better make it tonight. There is no time like the present. I shall sleep better if I know the matter is settled."

"And if she should refuse?"

The girl lifted herself upon her elbow and opened her eyes very wide.

"Refuse!" she exclaimed. "Heavens and earth! Whence did you acquire this new-born submission? I'm positively afraid the mulatto is affecting your brain. Is she your guardian, or are you hers? Go in there and tell her that you are going, and that she is going with you. It is quite enough. Just let that settle it. Don't begin with anything like questioning her inclination, or you may have cause to regret it by and by. Come, toddle along now, and I will wait for you here."

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The girl lay indolently back upon the grass, and her mother arose, albeit with a sigh.

CHAPTER III

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"Thank Heaven for New York once again, to be free, to breathe without the suffocation of those black things clinging about me, to get under the bracing air of a Northern climate once more. I wonder if you could command or persuade Carlita to leave off that dreadful placard of woe and let us have a little music and laughter once again?"

Jessica Chalmers threw herself into an arm-chair, crossed her knees upon each other, lifted her dainty foot to a graceful angle, and glanced up at her mother with a smile upon her lips that was really very pleasant to look at. She wore a negligee of pale blue and silver that became her wonderfully well, and there was an expression of fond admiration in the eyes of the mother that returned her smile.

"I don't think I would undertake it if I were you," she replied, thoughtfully. "After all, it can make

very little difference to you. I am not anxious that Carlita should go much into society, as if she marries before she reaches the age of twenty-one I shall be docked just eight thousand a year. It isn't a fortune, I grant you, but it is a tidy little sum for pin money. I think you have been rather blind to the fact that Carlita is an exceptionally beautiful girl, and—and—"

She did not complete her sentence, and Jessica shrugged her shoulders indifferently.

"She is welcome to it," she answered, indolently. "You know that is one thing I never envied any one in my life. On the contrary, I think it must be rather a bore to be continually thinking of it and fearing to lose it. It is style that tells—chic—and Carlita hasn't an atom of that. Don't fear; I shall not be in the least jealous of your pretty protege. She and I are as far apart as the antipodes. She is the most utterly namby-pamby little nonentity that I have ever met."

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Mrs. Chalmers turned away and walked toward the window, looking down into Fifth Avenue. She was silent for a moment, then, with her lips set curiously, answered slowly:

"If she is, it will be the first half-breed Mexican and Indian that I ever knew to be either a nonentity or namby-pambyish. You may be right, my dear Jessica, but you will pardon me, I know, if I say that I don't believe it."

A reply was prevented by the entrance of a maid bearing a card. She did not take it to the mistress of the house, but straight to Jessica, who looked at it, then sprang to her feet with a little exclamation of delight.

"Leith Pierrepont, by all that's wonderful, and so soon!" she cried. "Show him in, Marie!"

But almost before the order had been given a young man entered the room. He was tall, singularly handsome, with the bearing of a West Pointer. His eyes were a deep, luminous gray, shaded by lashes and brows that were black. His hair was also black, with a suggestion of a wave in it that was exceedingly attractive. It was brushed away from a brow as fair and smooth as a girl's, but there was no weakness in the face. Its strength was one of its greatest attractions, but it was not in the least in harmony with the indolence of his movements, the careless, nonchalant grace of his speech.

People said of him that he had never been in a hurry in his life, but certainly no one ever accused him of being slow. He was as picturesque as he was handsome, with a slow, rare smile that women loved.

He extended a large, white hand with artistic, tapering fingers, which closed over Jessica's with a warmth of pressure that was infinitely strength-giving, his eyes lighting with a pleasure he did not hesitate to express.

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"Halloo, Leith, old man!" cried Jessica, not loudly, not coarsely, but with a fascinating slanginess of manner that no one under heaven could ever imitate. "Thought you were in the jungles killing tigers. When did you get back, and did you bring me that skin you promised? 'Pon my soul, I'm glad to see you! Heard the news?"

"You always take my breath away, Jessica," he answered, with the irresistible smile spreading over his face. "How do you do, Mrs. Chalmers. What have you been doing to yourself? Time has been going backward, the old traitor. I never saw you looking so well. It isn't fair in the very least, robbing young girls of their rightful prey. Is there any news, Jessica? I haven't heard any in so long that I can scarcely believe it possible."

It was a long speech for him. He did not usually trouble himself to such an extent, and when he had finished he threw himself into a chair as if exhausted.

"News—well, I should say so!" exclaimed Jessica, her brown eyes aglow. "When did you get back?"

"Yesterday."

"Then you haven't heard. We arrived this morning."

"Really? From where?"

"Louisiana. We've been having an addition to the family; but it's a grown-up one. Mamma has another daughter."

"You don't mean it?"

"Yes, truly. What do you think of it?"

"How can I tell until I have seen her? You didn't take me for a clairvoyant, did you? But really, for selfish reasons, I'm awfully sorry. It will spoil the number and break up all our sport."

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"Not much!" exclaimed Jessica, with conviction. "Rather than that I should send her back to the savages that she came from. Did you bring Olney Winthrop back with you?"

"Yes, poor old chap. He had rather a narrow shave with a panther, and then was almost carried off with jungle fever. He will certainly not remind you of the flesh-pots of Egypt when you see him. He is all broken up, and insists that there is nothing that will restore him like a little game. I have come to ask if you will have us this evening?"

"Well, rather!" exclaimed Jessica.

"My dear," said Mrs. Chalmers, dubiously, "do you think you had better—so soon?"

"Rats!" cried her daughter, inelegantly, but without the slightest indication of vulgarity. "Do you think I am going to be shut off from the world because Carlita has come here? Come off! Come by

all means, Leith, and bring Olney Winthrop. We'll see if we can't bring a little life back to his veins. And you might ask Redfield Ash, if you should happen to run across him. Four is not a good number for poker, and Redfield Ash is the most unlucky man alive. By the way, would you like to see our savage?"

"I am always interested in anything or any one that concerns you."

Her eyes lighted pleasantly as she touched a bell and said to Marie:

"Ask Miss de Barryos to come here, Marie."

"What a very swell name. Is she a Mexican?" inquired Pierrepont.

"Her father was. Her mother was an old school friend of mamma's, and I do believe mamma is afraid of this half-breed."

"Nonsense, Jessica."

"It is true, just the same. You never saw such a change in your life since the savage came among us. I really think she expects to see the scalping-knife in the girl's hand every time she comes— Oh, Carlita! I sent for you to introduce one of our dearest friends, Mr. Pierrepont. Miss de Barryos, Mr. Pierrepont."

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Leith Pierrepont arose and looked into the girlish face. He knew from the fire in the dark eyes and the crimson glow in the olive cheeks that she had heard every word that had been spoken concerning her, and there was an expression of sympathy in his eyes as he put out his hand.

Carlita did not take it. She stood there for a moment haughtily erect, dumb with indignation, her fierce anger rising in bitter words to her lips; but she repressed all sound, forbade herself the utterance of the torrent of hot, wrathful words that arose to her lips, and bowed coldly.

Pierrepont withdrew his hand and placed it carelessly upon the back of his chair, as if he had not observed the cut, and said quietly:

"It is a great pleasure to me to meet you, Miss de Barryos. Miss Chalmers tells me that your father was a Mexican. I knew Juan de Barryos. I met him in the City of Mexico a number of years ago. He was the nephew of the Count of Regla, one of the old Spanish grandees, and one of the most picturesque characters in Mexican history. Juan de Barryos was an owner of mines of enormous extent, as was his uncle, the more world-famous Count of Regla. Juan de Barryos was a relative of your father?"

He asked the question curiously, half interrogation, half exclamation, and she answered proudly:

"Juan de Barryos was my father's brother and my guardian until the time of his death."

"Really! Then by my friendship for your uncle I ought to be allowed to claim some sort of acquaintanceship with you, ought I not?"

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"I never saw my uncle but twice," she returned, coldly. "His friends were not mine."

Jessica crimsoned, half with anger, half amusement. She was not anxious that Carlita should make a good impression upon this man, but her reply was almost rude. Still Pierrepont was unruffled. He turned indifferently to Jessica:

"I am afraid I have overstayed my time," he exclaimed. "May I call it an engagement and bring poor Winthrop tonight?"

"Decidedly."

"Then good-afternoon. Miss de Barryos, I am very glad to meet Juan de Barryos' niece, in spite of the fact that she knew him almost as little as a stranger might. It was a great misfortune to you, for he was a charming man. Good-afternoon, Mrs. Chalmers."

He shook hands with his hostess and was gone. But almost before he had disappeared, Carlita had slipped away to her own room.

She stood there in the center of the room with her hands pressed passionately upon her breast, allowing her fierce anger full play upon her features.

"They hate me!" she cried, fiercely. "Hate me, because of that cursed blood of the Indian that flows within my veins. They hate me! Oh, God, if I could but open them and let it out drop by drop. If I could but be like others are. They hate me and I have allowed them to see their power to hurt me; but it shall not be so again. I will show them that I am not the thing for which they have taken me. I will show this woman and her daughter that I am not the weak, characterless thing that they have thought. They shall regret their words. I swear that—I swear it!"

And in the meantime Leith Pierrepont walked indolently down the street, musing dreamily.

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"What a deuced pretty thing she is," he said to himself. "What eyes! What a complexion! I don't believe I ever saw a woman in my life who looked like her. My dear Jessica, I am afraid you have made a mistake in allowing this addition to be made to your family. She is the very most beautiful, wonderfully picturesque girl that an artist could fancy. If she doesn't make a sensation, then I'm mistaken. Heigh-ho! Leith, old fellow, if she plays such havoc with every man's heart as she has with yours in this short time, I shall be sorry for the other women. What a confounded shame it is that she has fallen in with the Chalmers. I wonder how it happened? I believe for the first time in my life I am curious. Carlita de Barryos! She's of a rattling good family, if there is a trace of Indian in her—which I don't believe altogether, and she's the most graceful person I ever met, and the highest-tempered to have absolute self-control. God! wasn't she furious! Cursed

little vixen is Jessica, but fascinating. Carlita de Barryos! Upon my soul, old fellow, I believe you've seen the first woman you ever saw in your life that you'd like to make your wife! Funny, too, that I should meet her there—there of all places. The longer a fellow lives the more waggish the world grows for him."

CHAPTER IV.

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To the surprise of both Mrs. Chalmers and Jessica, Carlita came into the room before the arrival of their expected guests that same evening.

She was gowned in black, but it was black chiffon; the silk lining of the waist cut low, her beautiful throat gleaming like marble under its soft covering. Her hair was parted, and fell in great waves down to her ear, from which it was drawn back to the nape of the neck, a few small curls drooping upon the olive brow. The daintiest of bloom stained her cheeks and lips, and there was an added light in the dusky eyes that made her almost thrilling in her strange beauty.

For the first time Jessica looked upon her with a little start and slight contraction of the brows. She had said quite truly that she had never been jealous of the beauty of any woman, and yet she was conscious of a distinctly unpleasant sensation as her mother's ward stood before her. She had said that Carlita lacked style, and yet in that moment she realized that there was something better than mere style in the young girl's make-up; there was an individuality, a charm, a wonderful grace, as if some exquisite conceit of one of the old masters had suddenly stepped from its frame and stood there in flesh and blood reality.

Jessica bit her lip. For the first time in her recollection she found herself disconcerted. She could find nothing to say. She wanted to invent some excuse to banish Carlita from the drawing-room, but could make none. And before she could recover her accustomed aplomb, the little maid Marie announced Mr. Pierrepont and Mr. Winthrop.

Carlita stepped aside and looked from one to the other of the two men.

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She observed the magnificent proportions of the one whom she had met in the afternoon, enhanced by a dress-suit which fitted him singularly well, noted the slow grace of his perfect manner, and then turned to the other one.

He was tall also, and slight almost to emaciation. His eyes were of Saxon blue—honest eyes that were like those of a frank, generous boy who loves life, loves the world, loves happiness, loves danger even, but has never learned to dissemble.

He showed traces, even the presence, of a terrible illness; but there was something that caught and held her interest and her sympathy in the smile that he bent upon Carlita when Mrs. Chalmers had performed the introduction.

"It is so delightful to meet you, Miss de Barryos," he said, genially. "Leith told me that he had forestalled me this afternoon, and also that you were something of a Mexican. I should have known it even if he hadn't said so, and the inclination to call you *senorita* was almost uncontrollable. I have been in Mexico frequently, and—oh, love it!"

"I don't know it at all," Carlita answered. "My mother was an invalid for years, and we never traveled."

"Ah, you have so much in store," enthusiastically returned the musical voice of the young man. "And there is no place under all God's sun where the grass is so green, where the sunlight is so brilliant, where the flowers are so gorgeous, and where the birds sing as they do in Mexico. The brilliant, thrilling coloring is so magnificent that it seems to fill one's veins to bursting with the very delight of living. How you will love Mexico! You speak Spanish, of course?"

"My father taught me when I was a little child."

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"And you have not forgotten?" he questioned, speaking the words to her in Spanish as he smiled at her delightedly.

"I have not forgotten," she answered in the same tongue, the words flowing in liquid beauty as English words never could flow.

"It is such a pleasure to be able to speak the language sometimes," he continued, still in Spanish. "And—will you pardon me if I say you speak it exquisitely? Leith knows almost every other language under the sun except Spanish, and it is really the only one I care a copper for. Will you let me come sometimes and talk to you—some afternoon when there will be no one else? You know I am an invalid now, and am doing nothing but recuperate. I came near going off the other day with jungle fever. It's a nasty thing, and leaves a fellow so infernally weak. It would be a positive charity if you will let me come sometimes."

"I should be glad to have you," she answered, earnestly.

And then some one else was announced whose name she did not quite catch—another man—and then she saw that Leith Pierrepont had taken his friend's place.

She was conscious of a distinct shock that was almost anger. Her cheeks grew hot. She was angry with herself, and lifted her eyes to his face half in defiance, though of what she could not have told.

He was smiling down upon her with that rare smile that somehow she knew already, though she had only seen him a moment that afternoon.

"Even if you do speak Spanish with Winthrop, you won't let him quite monopolize you, will you?" he said to her in that dangerously low, caressing tone he knew so well how to use. "I am afraid I didn't make a good impression upon you this afternoon. I was unfortunate enough to introduce some subject that did not meet with your approval altogether, and—you don't like me. Is that true?"

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She flushed again angrily, seeing the smile lurking behind his magnificent eyes.

"I never presume to form opinions of strangers," she answered, haughtily; and then could have bitten her tongue for making so childish a reply.

She saw, however, at once that it had not ruffled him in the least, for he replied, lightly:

"I am so glad you are not impulsive. Young ladies usually are. If you had been, I should despair of ever winning your good-will; but as you assure me it is not so, why, I shall hope to be one of your first friends in your new home. Have you known Mrs. and Miss Chalmers long? Are they related to you?"

"Oh, no! Mrs. Chalmers and my mother were school friends. They have not met since then; but the old warm attachment was always maintained," she replied, thankful to him for showing her a way to change the subject.

He looked over her head curiously, an expression of relief, she almost thought, coming into his eyes.

"Oh," he returned, "I see."

"See what?" she asked.

He looked down quickly and straight into her eyes.

"Nothing," he said, slowly. "I only see as blind men do. Do you play poker?"

"No. I have never seen it played; but I dare say I shall learn quickly enough."

He leaned toward her, resting his elbow upon a convenient mantel-shelf. His eyes were bent upon her, dark with meaning.

"Don't!" he said earnestly. "If you were an impulsive young lady who had formed a swift friendship with me, I should entreat of you, by that friendship, not to do it. It is a game which it would break my heart to see—my sister play."

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The words had barely been spoken, when Jessica touched him upon the arm with her fan. There was an expression upon her face which no one had ever seen there before. Her voice was light, and did not match it in the least, as she exclaimed:

"Come! the table is waiting. Carlita, a novice at poker always wins. Shall we lose all our money to you tonight? Will you take a hand?"

The words were meaningless to Carlita, but she hesitated. She wanted to do that which would be in defiance of Pierrepont's wishes. She glanced from Jessica to him; then, moved by an influence which she could not combat, she answered:

"I will not play, thank you, Jessica."

Miss Chalmers bit her lip. With her fingers upon Pierrepont's arm, she led him away, while Winthrop again took his place.

Mrs. Chalmers had seen the entire by-play, and a look of anxiety crossed her brow.

"Great heavens!" she muttered, "Leith Pierrepont has fallen in love with that girl, as sure as fate! Well, God help her when Jessica finds it out beyond a doubt!"

CHAPTER V.

[Pg 29]

Redfield Ash came as they were about to sit down to the table, making six for the game with Henry Fielding, who had arrived just before, and with an eagerness which he rarely showed, Olney Winthrop turned to his hostess.

"Will you excuse me, dear Mrs. Chalmers, if I beg off?" he exclaimed. "Five is a much better number than six. Miss de Barryos and I will utilize the time in rubbing up our Spanish together. It is such a pleasure to meet some one who speaks it."

Jessica glanced swiftly toward Pierrepont, and noted all too clearly the shadow of annoyance that crossed his brow. She even heard it in the tone of his voice as he exclaimed rather suddenly for him:

"I thought this game was made especially for your benefit?"

At another time Jessica would not have allowed his withdrawal, but now she cried with a sweetness of accent that attracted the attention of her mother:

"By all means talk to Carlita, Mr. Winthrop. It is really very kind of you. The next time you come I

shall take special pains that she joins our game."

She did not look at Pierrepont, but he glanced toward her coolly, insouciantly, muttering mentally:

"The little fiend heard what I said. She is determined to ruin that girl, but I swear she shall not! Let us see who is stronger, my dear Jessica, you or I!"

But there was no man at the table apparently less interested than he. He shuffled with a dexterity that baffled most men, talking lightly of his stay in India and of Winthrop's narrow escape from the panther, to all appearances oblivious of the fact that Winthrop and Carlita had wandered from the room, she with her great dark eyes turned interestedly upon Winthrop, in earnest conversation with the language unintelligible to him.

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"You are a stranger in New York, are you not?" Winthrop asked, as he threw himself into a chair beside her in the library, leaning toward her, a faint flush lifting the pallor of illness.

"Yes. We arrived this morning, and I have never been here before."

"Ah, there will be so much to see. The opera begins next week, and—"

"I am in mourning."

The voice was very soft, almost tremulous, and Winthrop started.

"I beg ten thousand pardons!" he exclaimed, gently. "And it is your mother, too. It always seems to me the saddest thing under heaven when a girl like you loses her mother. Mrs. Chalmers is your guardian, is she not?"

"Yes."

"Of course I ought not to ask it, I who am a perfect stranger to you, but somehow it does not seem to me that I am a stranger. There is some sort of immediately established friendship that makes me feel an interest that perhaps is not reciprocated, and you might resent it as an impertinence."

There was something so frank and honest in the clear blue eyes that Carlita felt herself insensibly warmed by the man's manner, and answered cordially:

"I assure you I would not. I have not so many friends that I can afford to decline an honestly offered friendship, such as I am sure yours is. I am very grateful."

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The words were simple enough, but there was something in her manner that touched the young man deeply, and leaning forward, he lifted her hand and pressed it ever so lightly to his lips.

"Thank you," he said, softly. "I shall appreciate the trust above everything else in this world. Then I may ask if—if you—are quite—quite happy here?"

She looked a little surprised for a moment, then the expression of the blue eyes reassured her. She knew she could trust him, knew that he meant her no harm. There was a curious feeling of perfect safety, of implicit confidence in him that she had never felt toward any human being in her life before. It affected her strangely, and there was just a shadow of unshed tears in her eyes as she replied:

"I ought not to say that I am not happy, because I know Jessica and her mother so little. I have been brought up in such a narrow circle. My knowledge of the world is so limited. Papa died when I was a small girl, and mamma was an invalid, as I told you. There were only the neighbors, good people, but not much up in matters of the world, so that it is all new and strange to me. I don't want to show that I am ignorant; I want to do that which Jessica and Mrs. Chalmers tell me; I don't want to appear a little Puritan idiot; but there are some things that do not seem exactly right to me, and I have not learned yet to reconcile myself to them. You see how I have trusted you."

She smiled a trifle wistfully, and he leaned a little further toward her, as if protectingly, as he replied:

"And I shall try all my life long to show you how I appreciate the trust. I understand so well how you feel. I would not alarm you for all the world about your position here, but—but there are some things that I—I would not have you learn. One of them is to play poker."

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"And yet you came here to play with me?"

"I have never seen you. I did not know you. I would not sit down at a poker-table with you now for—for my right arm."

He said it so earnestly, so sincerely that she started.

"Is it so wrong, then?" she asked, quickly. "Is it so great a sin?"

He appeared embarrassed.

"I hardly know how to answer you," he returned gently. "It is a sin in a sense. It is gambling, and all gambling is sinful. I would not have you understand me that Jessica or Mrs. Chalmers is doing anything criminal, but—I should so much prefer that you would not join them."

"And yet you do it?"

He flushed crimson.

"My dear child, my little friend, you will learn that men are permitted acts which the world does not allow to women. I am not going to argue with you about the right or wrong of it. There is a

law which is as binding as the Christian oath, and that is the law of custom. The world has a code of its own, and right or wrong, we must follow it. I will promise you one thing, however, that is, that if you will never play a game of poker, a game of anything that involves money, I never will either. Will you do it?"

It never occurred to either of them that it was an extraordinary thing for them to do upon the occasion of their first meeting. It is doubtful if they remembered that it was their first meeting.

He extended his palm, and she placed hers in it with the confidence of a little child.

"I promise!" she answered, earnestly. "It is not the slightest sacrifice to me, but it will be a great one to you if you have learned to like the game." [Pg 33]

"Not if my giving it up will benefit you in the future," he answered, softly. "I wish that you would remember our compact of friendship tonight, and that if you ever need any one you will send for me."

"I am not liable to forget."

"And there will be so many evenings next week, next month even, when Mrs. Chalmers and her daughter will be at the opera and you here of necessity, perhaps alone. Will you let me come sometimes and keep you company?"

"But you will be missing the opera yourself."

"That will be so little by comparison with gaining an evening with you. May I come?"

"The promise means more to me than to you," she answered shyly. "I am not overfond of my own society, but I am afraid you will not be recompensed."

He smiled enigmatically.

"We will read together, if you will. I used to be called a good reader, and I'm sure you are, from your voice. Do you sing?"

"A little. I have had no cultivation except what my mother gave me, and that was not much."

"I'm sure your voice must be exquisite. It is contralto, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"That is charming. I am passionately fond of a good contralto. What delightful evenings we shall have! I wish it were next week now. What with our Spanish, our reading, and our music it will be simply charming, quite as if we belonged together and were at home."

He looked at her curiously as he made the speech, and while she colored slightly, she offered no objection.

"Are you fond of horses?" he continued. [Pg 34]

"Very."

"Then perhaps you will let me come to take you to drive."

"If Mrs. Chalmers does not object."

"May I ask her?"

"If you like."

"It is so good of you. I don't think I ever felt so happy in all my life as I do tonight. I have heard fellows speak of being drawn irresistibly to one at a first meeting, but I could never quite understand it before. I have been drawn to you by an impulse that I have no more power to control than I have over the action of the heart. I am egotistical enough to think you are not quite indifferent to me, as you have accepted my friendship so generously. Isn't it true?"

"Quite true."

"I'm so grateful! I wonder if you know what it means to a lonely fellow like me?"

"I ought. Am I not a lonely girl?"

"Yes; and it is so much harder for you than for me. I have knocked about the country more or less for the last ten years, not knowing one day what I should do the next. I've got an object in life now, and it seems very sweet."

"What is it?"

He colored swiftly and laughed shyly.

"I wouldn't dare tell you now, for fear you might banish me; but some day, when I have persuaded myself that I am more sure of attaining it, I will tell you."

CHAPTER VI.

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"Leith, what are you doing?"

Leith Pierrepont sat beside the window of the bachelor apartment which he and Olney Winthrop had taken together. It was a handsome apartment, fitted up with one reception-room, in which no

one by chance was ever received, a library the delight of a man's heart, two bedrooms, a dining-room in which the breakfasts and dinners, if they wanted them, were served by the caterer in the house, and a bath-room, perhaps the most sumptuous and pretentious room in the apartment.

It was in the library that they were now, Winthrop stretched at full length upon a huge couch, large enough for two to lie upon in comfort without interference one with the other, a pile of pillows under his head that might have satisfied a woman, and a meerschaum in his mouth that was as black as ebony and quite as well polished. His hands were clasped under his head, and his eyes were turned with great interest to his chum, who, as has already been said, sat beside the window with a cigar between his lips and a book in his hand.

Occasionally the cigar was rolled from side to side of the man's handsome mouth, the eyes were thrown ceilingward, where they remained for a moment or two, then returned with interest to the book.

It was after half a dozen of these performances that Olney Winthrop put his question, which had to be repeated the second time before it attracted the attention of the individual to whom it was addressed.

"Leith, what are you doing?"

"Studying."

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The answer was given curtly enough, and for a moment Olney was silent; but once again curiosity mastered him.

"Studying what?" he ventured to inquire.

"Spanish."

Another silence, this time much longer than the other. A change had come over Olney suddenly. He took his hands out from under his head, and looked toward the ceiling himself, as if he expected some inspiration from that quarter. But evidently it did not come. He drew on his beloved pipe for some moments thoughtfully, then arose to a sitting posture and leaned his arms upon his knees.

"What the dickens are you studying Spanish for?" he demanded at last.

Leith Pierrepont turned his eyes in the direction of his friend and looked at him absent-mindedly for a moment, then said, calmly:

"H'm?"

"I asked what the deuce you are doing that for?"

"Doing what?"

"Studying Spanish, of course."

"Why, to learn it, to be sure," returned Leith, indolently. "What did I study French or German, or any of the rest of it, for?"

"You did that in French and German countries, and it was different. You are doing this here in America, where no one speaks Spanish."

"It strikes me that you forget Miss de Barryos very readily."

Leith knocked the ashes from his cigar as he spoke, with the nonchalance of a person absolutely indifferent to the subject upon which he is speaking; but Olney happened to know him a little better than to believe he felt as he appeared.

"She speaks English," he said, sententiously.

"I know, but she also speaks Spanish."

"And you are really learning it for that reason?"

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"Certainly. What other?"

"Would you learn Chinese if Jessica were to happen to speak it?"

"Certainly not. The interest is not the same by any means."

Leith returned to his book, and Olney resumed his position upon the couch. He did not look in the direction of his friend, but steadily at the ceiling, or in a line with it, for there was such a cloud of smoke between that he could not see it. He pulled at the pipe with a steadiness and strength that argued well for the condition of his lungs, then rose at last and laid it almost tenderly upon a table.

He thrust his hands into the pockets of his trousers and walked once or twice nervously up and down the room; but Leith only kept on diligently with his study, never glancing away from his book, except toward the ceiling.

Olney could bear the silence no longer, and broke it himself by and by.

"What do you mean by it, Leith?" he asked at last, forcing himself to speak quietly, though he was far from feeling it.

"Mean by what?" asked his preoccupied companion.

"Studying Spanish."

"My dear fellow," drawled Leith, "you really appear to think there is something criminal in the

fact of my learning a language. What is there extraordinary about it?"

"I never knew you to do it before for any girl."

"You never knew any girl before that I had determined to make my wife."

Olney did not stare. A crimson glow crept from throat to brow, but he did not cease in his walk for some time. The desultory conversation stopped again for a time; then he paused in his walk, at no great distance from Leith, and leaned his elbow upon the mantel-shelf.

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"Dear old boy, this is the first time in all our histories that it has ever happened," he said, somberly.

Once more Leith looked up from his lesson, this time with a faint show of annoyance.

"Why will you persist in breaking out in that fashion, as if you expected me to know in what groove your mind has been wandering for the last half hour?" he asked, irritably. "It is the first time that what has ever happened?"

"That you and I have fallen in love with the same woman!"

Leith looked at his friend for a moment, then put his book upon the table, face downward, and threw his cigar into the cuspidor.

"I was afraid of that," he said, slowly.

"Afraid of it!" echoed Olney. "You must have known it."

"How should I? A fellow isn't always in love with the girl to whom he pays attention."

"He is when the girl is one of the same kind that Miss de Barryos is."

"Perhaps you are right. I'm awfully sorry, old fellow."

"Sorry for what?"

"Sorry that you are in love with her."

"Why?"

"Because she can't be wife to both of us, and I mean to have her."

"Oh!"

"You see, Olney, you and I have been good friends for ten years now, and ten years is a long time, as years go. We've never had a disagreement in our lives, except that you have perhaps had a little more energy than was altogether comfortable, and I'm as fond of you as I could possibly be of a brother. You believe that, don't you?"

"I know it; and it is that which hurts me."

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"But you can't expect me to give up the woman I love for you, can you?"

"Has she consented to be your wife?"

"No; I've never asked her."

"Then, you confounded, conceited cad, how can you presume so upon her consent?"

There was no ill-temper in the remark. They frequently used such tender epithets with each other; and Pierrepont only smiled as he answered, with perfect good nature:

"Did you ever know me to set my heart upon anything that I did not accomplish?"

"No, confound you!" returned his friend. "But I'll be hanged if you shall succeed with this!"

"Why?"

"You can't expect me to give up the woman I love for you," returned Olney, repeating his friend's words with a sort of sneer; "now, can you? Well I propose to marry Miss de Barryos myself."

"Has she consented?"

"I have not asked her."

Pierrepont laughed.

"Then, so far, apparently, we are on a perfectly equal footing. All right, old fellow. It is rather hard lines that we should have gone a-foul of each other in this, of all things; but since it is so, let us treat each other with perfect fairness. I tell you frankly that I mean to marry Miss de Barryos."

"And my intention is equally strong that she shall be my wife."

"So be it," returned Pierrepont with more earnestness than he usually showed, though there was still a smile clinging to his lips. "At least, one is not deceived in the intentions of the other. I want you to clearly understand me that I intend to marry her. People have accused me of making love to women every time I speak to one; but I swear to you that I have never uttered to any woman the words that I shall speak to her, never asked a woman in my life the question that I shall put to her. I am thirty-four years old, Olney, have never been balked in a desire in my life, and I don't intend to begin with this which means so much to me. It's a fair warning, old fellow."

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Olney smiled.

"And forewarned is forearmed," he said, gravely.

"Oh, what a wretched ending! I positively hate to read a book like that. It gives me the blues for a week afterward. I don't see why writers can not have some respect for the nerves of their readers and not upset them with a jar that echoes through every fiber of the body."

Carlita flung the book from her, crossed her pretty feet, and leaning back in her chair, folded her hands behind her head and looked at Olney Winthrop, who was spending one of many evenings with her while the others were at the opera.

He smiled rather gravely.

"I don't see how else it could have ended. She couldn't have married the Disagreeable Man, you know."

"Why not?"

"Oh, who would want to? A sickly, treacherous-tempered beast like that."

"He wasn't anything of the kind. Do you think a 'sickly treacherous-tempered beast' could ever have written that exquisite letter which he tore up? He was only fretted into irascibility by the idiocy of others who had not sense enough to appreciate him. No man could have been as fond of his mother as he was and not be genuinely good. I don't see why he could not have been happy as well as any one else."

"He was treacherous-tempered or he wouldn't have torn up the letter, you see," argued Olney, mildly. "I don't see how she could have cared anyway for a great, gaunt, sickly fellow like that."

"That is like you men. You never seem to think a woman can like any one but a Hercules. For my own part, I perfectly detest the conceited creatures who think they are gods of creation, and let you see it in every word they speak, in love with themselves and unrivaled by any woman in the universe, men like—like—well, Leith Pierrepont for example."

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Winthrop flushed eagerly, never observing the curious break in her voice, then a sort of generous remorse took possession of him that he had found pleasure in that unjust criticism passed upon his friend.

"Oh, really, you mustn't say that!" he stammered, helplessly. "It isn't true of Leith, not the least in the world. I don't know a fellow more lacking in conceit than he. He is as generous and—"

"Pouf!" exclaimed Carlita, with the freedom of a privileged friend. "Do you think you can make me believe that? He thinks that every woman who looks at him is ready to fall into his arms if he would but say the word. There are times when I positively detest him, and—"

Singularly enough, she did not complete her sentence. She suddenly realized with a surprise that was intense that there were tears in her eyes, hot, angry tears, though why she should be angry, she had not the remotest idea. She hated herself for her absurd weakness, and sprang up swiftly and went to the piano, and rattled off a waltz that came more nearly being without time or melody than anything she had ever attempted in her life before.

She excused herself to herself by mentally asserting that the book, "Ships that Pass in the Night," had upset her, and then turned into a song that trembled upon her lips with a sweetness and pathos that her voice had never contained before.

It was only an old song, such an old one, with the music entirely unworthy of the exquisite words, but she sang it with a depth of feeling that made it sublime.

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"How tired we feel, my heart and I,
We seem of no use in the world;
Our fancies hang gray and uncurled
About men's eyes indifferently;
Our voice, which thrilled you so, will let
You sleep; our tears are only wet;
What do we here, my heart and I?"

But the last words were not spoken. They ended in a little sob, a little sob that would not be drowned by the power of the will. She would have risen and escaped from the room, but that Olney caught her about the waist, his face white and wistful and filled with apprehension.

"Carlita," he exclaimed, his voice low and soft with tenderness, "what is it? What has distressed you? You trust me—"

"It is nothing," she cried, endeavoring gently to free herself. "I am too stupid for anything. I really believe I am hysterical over that absurd book, and it is something new to me, too. You mustn't mind me, Mr. Winthrop, for—"

"But I do," he interrupted, huskily. "Anything that pains you is exquisite torture to me. I love you Carlita, love you so that I can not conceal it as the Disagreeable Man did. I must tell you. It is so much better than that I should keep it to myself until too late, if there should be any hope for me. I am not conceited enough to think there is—you mustn't believe that—but if love really begets love, as they tell us it does, mine ought to meet with some return, for Heaven knows it is great enough. I feel as if I were the Disagreeable Man myself, so gaunt and wasted through illness, so unworthy of your sweet trust and affection, and yet—Oh, Carlita, I don't want to wait as he did, when there might be hope. I know you don't love me. I know I am the most presumptuous man

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alive, that I can even speak upon the subject to you, but—but won't you say something—something kind?"

She was standing and he sitting, holding her by one hand, his other arm about her waist. He was leaning toward her with his face lifted—a face so true, so honest, so sincere, so wistfully pleading, she almost imagined there was a moisture in the frank blue eyes.

She didn't say anything. She was surprised, and stood there staring down at him, her tears dried suddenly. It seemed to her that she had never felt so strangely in her life. He was the first man who had ever whispered that magic word in her ear. It moved her—moved her peculiarly. She felt the strongest inclination to bend down and kiss him, kiss him upon those blue eyes as she would a little boy. He looked so pale and wan, so haggard through the illness which he did not seem able to shake off. Sympathy quivered in her heart like the flutter of a dove's wings, but she could not frame words to save her life, and stood there staring down at him dumbly.

A great anguish arose in his eyes under her silence. A cold dew gathered upon his brow and stood upon his mouth. He dropped his arm from about her waist and bowed his head.

"Forgive me," he said, hoarsely. "I ought to have known, and not have distressed you with a sentiment which I might have known you could not reciprocate. I might have been satisfied with your generosity in allowing me the privilege of your society without presuming upon that generosity. I suppose now I am to be banished, but I deserve it for my presumption. All the sweet, long evenings that have meant so much to me must be at an end. I must go back to the old emptiness, the old unrest."

"Why?"

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The word escaped her unawares, but she was glad that she had spoken it when she saw him fling up his head, saw the eager light that came to his eyes, the flush that colored his pale cheeks.

"Carlita," he whispered, hoarsely, "that moment was like—hell! Speak quickly! Can you be my wife? Could you find in your pure heart toleration for a fellow such as I? I will worship you to the day I die! Speak and relieve me of this awful suspense!"

"I have—have been very happy during these evenings that we have spent together."

She never quite knew how she happened to say that either, whether it was sympathy, whether it was that she loved him, or—Oh, yes, she was quite sure she loved him when she saw that wild joy of expression. She did not shrink from him in the very least when he arose suddenly to his feet and drew her passionately to his breast. It was really very comforting to think that she belonged to some one, and that some one belonged to her, and—loved her.

It was even pleasant to be passionately, lovingly kissed, and as she looked with a smile into his eager, craving eyes, she even lifted her mouth to him of her own accord, and returned the caress while she listened to the burning words that fell from his lips.

"My darling, my wife, I can scarcely believe in the reality of my own happiness. I can scarcely believe it is true, that you love me, that you are mine. It seems to me that I must be dreaming. My God! if it be, let the dream last forever, forever!"

Jessica and Mrs. Chalmers returned before he left her, but there was no announcement made to them that night. They said good-night formally and separated, Carlita going to her room, and Olney returned to his bachelor apartments.

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He found Leith there before him, and went immediately to his old friend and put out his hand.

"Congratulate me, old man," he said, with a grin which was half idiotic in its happiness.

"Upon what?" inquired Leith, lazily.

"Miss de Barryos has promised to be my wife."

Leith did not even change color. He put out his hand and took that of his friend cordially.

"Certainly I congratulate you, if you wish it," he said, with his accustomed nonchalant indolence. "But what is the use? The marriage will never take place."

"What do you mean?"

"What I say."

Olney laughed lightly, disbelievingly, but there was not the shadow of a smile upon Leith's perfectly indifferent lips.

And Carlita had gone to her room, happy in the happiness she had given, believing that she had answered to the dictates of her heart, and then slowly the expression of content faded from her eyes, a white-lipped horror drew the corners of her mouth. She looked into space dully, hopelessly, stupidly.

She had suddenly remembered the curse of Pocahontas.

CHAPTER VIII.

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There was something of a sensation created in the Chalmers household when the announcement of Carlita's engagement was made.

Not that there was anything spoken in the presence of Olney Winthrop but the sweetest words of congratulation; but when he had departed, and mother and daughter were left alone, the latter stretched herself out at a comfortable angle, with a cigarette between her lips, and exclaimed, leisurely:

"It appears, to a man up a tree, that we are getting very little out of this game that we have played. Do you propose to let Winthrop's pair beat your full hand? It strikes me that you are losing your cunning with a vengeance. Four weeks in that beastly hole in New Orleans; a lot of sticky black garments clinging about one for the same length of time, and making life a nightmare; a funeral to attend, and tears until one could float a ship in them; acting a part from morning until night, and even through the night, for what? The really good Samaritan work of getting the little mulatto engaged and robbing us of eight thousand a year, not to speak of the advantage of handling her money, and so affording an abode 'fitted to her station in life,' as the idiotic lawyers say. Rats! It isn't my line, I confess. What are you going to do?"

Mrs. Chalmers pathetically fondled the ears of her ever-present dog.

"How should I know?" she answered, meekly. "I thought we were doing the safest thing possible when we were keeping Leith Pierrepont away from her. It never occurred to me that it could be possible that she would fall in love with Olney Winthrop, though I knew he was head over ears in love with her. I told you she was dangerous when we brought her here, though you would not have it."

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"What were we to do with her, pray? A school wasn't to be thought of at her age, and an asylum wasn't possible, worse luck! But something must be done. We can't commit highway robbery and deliberately pilfer her estate. I confess it wouldn't go greatly against my conscience, for I can see no earthly reason why she should have all and I nothing. But there is that confounded hole Sing Sing to consider. Look here, the blood in your veins has grown to milk and water recently. I wonder if you would have the nerve to carry out an idea that has struck me?"

"What is it?"

Jessica threw away her cigarette and lighted a fresh one before replying. When she spoke again, her voice had assumed a lower tone.

"You will agree, of course, that she is of a wildly, sentimental nature, like all Mexican and half-breed Indians. She has proven that by falling in love with Olney's white face. I don't think she cares the snap of her finger for him, except that she pities him and—wants to be loved. It is such a fine, beautiful thing. Pouf! Well, it is my belief that if we could get him out of the way for awhile, she would discover that fact, and jilt him."

"But how are we to get him out of the way?" inquired Mrs. Chalmers, actually putting the dog aside once and lifting her suspiciously golden head interestedly.

"I haven't quite prepared that side of my subject," answered Jessica, calmly. "There has not been time to go into it in detail as yet. The announcement is too new, and I confess it never occurred to me that she could be such a fool. I am inclined to believe she might have made a sensation if only she had been content to wait until she got rid of that hideous mourning. Still, I have thought—"

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"What?"

"Winthrop is largely interested in some Mexican mines."

"Yes, I know, I heard Leith Pierrepont speaking of it."

"He must be suddenly summoned there."

Mrs. Chalmers lifted her head and looked at her daughter admiringly.

"What a head you have, Jessica, to be sure! But how is it to be accomplished?"

"That is the detail which I haven't quite mastered. Do you know where your old friend Meriaz is located?"

Mrs. Chalmers colored. She hesitated a moment, then answered, slowly:

"Yes, I think so."

"That is good. Then we must utilize him. If he had had a little more money, I should have urged your marrying him. As it is, he must think you mean to recall him, and so be made to serve you."

"You forget—"

"No, I don't forget anything. I am peculiarly alive to the fact to which you would have called my attention. We must insure the co-operation of Meriaz."

"There will be no doubt of that. He will obey my instructions."

"Are you sure?"

"Perfectly."

"All right. You write to him at once, telling him where these mines are and all the information which you remember Leith to have given. He can arrange the details of the affair better than I can. If you wish, you might tell him that I have fallen in love with the fellow, and that you are anxious to get him out of the city on that account. Tell him that Winthrop must be summoned at once, that time is valuable, and that he must make the excuse for summoning him there a tremendously strong one, else it will be of no avail. You understand just what I mean now?"

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"Yes; and it strikes me as being a good one. It will give us a chance to get abroad, if we see that there is no possibility of weaning her from the attachment."

"Yes, and in the meantime give me an opportunity to look into her finances, and see what is possible to be done. I haven't been down in that God-forsaken country to be plucked of our game by Olney Winthrop, I will tell you. Money doesn't grow on trees, and it rather strikes me that men are getting rather shy of our poker-table. They don't seem half as anxious to lose their precious ducats as they once did."

"Last night at the opera I heard a man in the next box ask Dudley Maltby who you were and his answer was: 'The most inveterate little gambler in New York, and the most unscrupulous.'"

"Dudley Maltby said that?"

"He did."

There was a dangerous expression in the brown eyes. For a moment the lips were slightly compressed, then she arose and went to her desk quite calmly.

"What are you going to do?" inquired her mother.

"Ask Dudley Maltby to dinner and to the opera Friday night. He shall pay for that remark with every particle of his reputation."

"It strikes me that you are rather—rather neglecting Leith of late."

"Nonsense! That is something which I shall never do; but he is safe enough. He is more in love with me than he ever was in his life before." [Pg 51]

Mrs. Chalmers looked a trifle uncomfortable. She hesitated a moment while Jessica was selecting a pen, then said, forcing herself to speak quietly:

"What makes you think so?"

"He told me tonight that I had neglected him cruelly, and that he felt piqued and hurt. He said that there was no woman who had the power to hurt him as I had."

"But—but he—he didn't tell you that he—he loved you, did he? He didn't ask you to be his wife?"

"What do you mean?"

Jessica turned suddenly, her interest in the note abated.

"Nothing special," answered her mother, carelessly, "only—only that he—well, he doesn't seem half so devoted to you as he did before he went away."

"He called upon me almost within the hour of his return."

"Yes, I know he did, but—but he hasn't followed it up well, and—my dear Jessica, I found a Spanish book in his overcoat pocket tonight."

It never occurred to Jessica to ask how she had found it in his overcoat pocket, or what she was doing looking through the pocket. She was accustomed to that, and thought nothing of it. It was the fact which interested her. Her brows drew angrily.

"Do you mean to say that you think he is in love with Carlita?" she asked, her voice tense and strange.

"Perhaps not exactly in love with her," answered her mother, uneasily, "but very much interested in her."

"I would kill her first! I would kill them both!"

The words came through the set lips as if the speaker were perfectly capable of carrying out her threat or any other dire calamity that should suggest itself to her, and Mrs. Chalmers moved anxiously. [Pg 52]

"Perhaps I shouldn't have said quite so much!" she exclaimed, soothingly. "It may be only a desire to—to understand, but—but—"

"I shall watch! I shall see!" exclaimed Jessica, leaving her desk and walking restlessly up and down the floor. "Do not fear but that I should know how to revenge myself upon him as well as her. I have rather suspected him. He has been so careful of all that he has said to me since his return, so careful of who should see him in our box. He is not too good to be there, but he doesn't want to be seen. I heard him say to her upon the night of their first meeting, that it would break his heart to see his sister play a game of poker."

"He said that?"

"He did! But I will teach him that he is playing with an edged tool this time. I shall prove to him that I know how to take a revenge, and it shall be a bitter one, if he dares to do this thing. Write your letter to Meriaz. I am anxious to see this to the end."

CHAPTER IX.

"Aïda" was in progress at the Metropolitan, and Jessica never lost a night at the opera. It was the first time in all her life that enough money had found its way into her exchequer to purchase a

season's box, and she was making the very most of it that lay in her power.

Very many persons present had observed that no woman ever found her way into that box, and that most of the men concealed themselves in the rear, or even contented themselves with a visit to the anteroom. But Jessica never troubled her head about that. She didn't like women, didn't want women, and their absence affected her not at all.

Carlita was at home, as usual, beautiful as a dream in her soft chiffon gown, the exquisite dark hair rippling from her forehead in great waves that no hair-dresser's art could ever imitate.

She was standing before a huge soft-coal fire, looking down into it, with a faint smile curving the corners of her mouth, as she waited for Olney Winthrop—a smile which deepened as she heard the chime of the door-bell.

There was not the faintest perceptible start at the sound, not an increase of color at the knowledge of her lover's coming. She lifted her head to welcome him, and started, quivering in every nerve in her body, her face flushing crimson, as she saw who it was that had pushed aside the heavy portière and stood there in her fiancé's place.

It was Leith Pierrepont.

He came forward with the easy, nonchalant grace that was peculiar to him, the indolent smile upon his mouth, looking handsomer than he had ever done in his life before, and a woman would of necessity have been made of granite not to have seen it.

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He put out his hand as he joined Carlita beside the fire, and because she could not refuse, she put her fingers into it.

She noticed that his hand had closed over hers firmly, in spite of the fact that she had only intended that he should touch it; and while he did not retain it, he was in no hurry whatever to loosen his grasp of the cold palm.

"Jessica and Mrs. Chalmers are not here," she stammered, angry with herself that she could not keep her voice steady.

"I know it," he replied, indolently. "They are at the opera. Jessica never misses 'Aïda.' It is a favorite of mine, too, and Nordica is excellent in it."

"And yet you are not there?"

"There are some things that I prefer even to a well-rendered opera. Olney will not be here this evening."

"Why?"

She flashed her great eyes up at him, as if he had given her a personal affront. He smiled enigmatically, and she flushed with anger.

"He has a headache," Leith returned, leisurely. "You know he isn't strong. That dose of jungle fever about knocked him out."

"I'm sorry he isn't feeling well. I'm—"

She strove to infuse the sentence with earnestness, but her voice had never sounded colder in her own ears, and she found it impossible to finish the speech. She paused uncomfortably, and after a moment Leith said, with another smile that somehow made her feel that she hated him more than ever:

"Won't you ask me to sit down? I never could stand with any degree of comfort."

"Certainly, if you wish to sit," she answered. "I thought perhaps you would be going to the opera."

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"No; I told you I shouldn't," he answered, sitting down gracefully and looking up at her carelessly. "I had much rather hear you sing."

"But I never sing."

"Oh, yes, you do. Olney has told me. He says that you have a singularly lovely voice, and I have always considered Olney one of the few really good judges of music."

"I am not a musician."

"You mean you don't play your own accompaniments. That makes no difference. I will be very glad to do it for you. I am not in particularly good practice, but I used to be called rather good at that sort of thing."

She had seated herself, and as he spoke he rose as if he were going to the piano; but, instead, leaned over the back of the chair and looked down upon her. The look seemed to get into her veins and tingle through her blood like living fire. His voice was low and musical as that of a thrush, as he said, softly:

"Why will you, who are always so kind and gentle to others, be cruel to me? What have I done to win your dislike? How have I sinned that you withdraw your friendship from me alone of all the world?"

She bit her lip to keep the hot tears out of her eyes. She could not understand her own emotion, and hated him that he had caused it. She arose, not even glancing toward him, and threw out her hands deprecatingly:

"You are making too much of the fact that I do not care to sing for strangers," she replied

haughtily. "If it will interest you, I will try, but I assure you that I am the most inexperienced of amateurs. What would you like me to sing?"

He did not reply to her. He was leaning against the piano, looking at her, not impertinently, but curiously, as if he did not quite understand her. She allowed her fingers to wander over the keys idly for a moment, then played and sang an excerpt from "Gioconda," not with her usual style and expression at all, but still with a sweetness and depth of voice and a breadth of expression that was infinitely pleasing.

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"You can't do a thing of that sort playing your own accompaniment," he said, when she had finished, not complimenting her at all upon her beauty of voice or method. "Let me sit there, will you?"

She arose at once, a trifle nettled at his lack of praise, and he took the stool she had vacated. His fingers touched the piano with a tenderness that went to her soul. She loved music with a sort of ravenous passion, if one may so express it, a wild longing that had never been gratified, and she listened with an increased fascination that held her speechless.

"Do you know 'Aïda'?" he inquired at last.

She nodded.

"Do you remember the duet in the tomb?"

"Yes."

His fingers wandered into it, then his glorious voice, sweet as the lower tones of a harp, rang out full and rich. She joined him when her time came, singing as she had never sung before, enthused by the genius which she had never expected, enchanted by the magic of his touch.

When it was finished he turned to her.

"Who taught you?" he asked, quietly.

"My mother."

"Your method is faulty. I wish you would go to Arditì for a while. Your voice is excellent, but you waste it deplorably. You have a warmth of coloring and a breadth of expression rarely found, and would make a superb singer if properly taught. Will you go to Arditì? Please do."

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"Perhaps. I have never heard good singers, that is, none except my mother, and she was not great. You have studied, of course?"

"Oh, yes; in Paris and Italy. Shall I sing something for you?"

"If you will."

He looked up at her. There was just the glimmer of a smile in his eyes, such a curious smile, so wistful, almost beseeching, a pathetic smile that made her heart tremble in spite of her hatred of him, that extraordinary hatred which she had never been able to explain to herself, and for which she could have found not the shadow of a cause if she had dared to question herself upon the subject.

His hands continued to wander over the keys as if he were improvising, and after a little time his voice, sweet, gentle, so low that it could scarcely have been heard behind the portières that fell between them and the hall, floated out:

"The solemn sea of silence lies between us;
I know thou livest and thou lovest me;
And yet I wish some white ship would come sailing
Across the ocean, bearing word from thee.

"The dead calm awes me with its awful stillness,
No anxious doubts of fears disturb my breast;
I only ask some little wave of language
To stir this vast infinitude of rest.

"Too deep the language which the spirit utters,
Too vast the knowledge which my soul hath stirred;
Send some white ship across the sea of silence
And interrupt its utterance with a word."

He had never removed his eyes from her while he was singing, but she had dropped hers. The crimson glow which she could not command had crept into her cheeks. His voice fell almost to a whisper, and as the last word left his lips, he lifted his hands from the keys and imprisoned both of hers together, leaning toward her with his splendid face uplifted.

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"Do you know what that sea of silence is, Carlita?" he asked, his low voice thrilling through her like old wine. "It is that great gulf that lies between you and me. Shall I tell you more?"

"I am oppressed with this great sense of loving—
So much I give, so much receive from thee;
Like subtle incense rising from a censer,
So floats the fragrance of thy love round me."

She lifted her eyes, startled, wide with horror and alarm, and would have drawn back but that he

held her, his beautiful eyes dull with passion.

"Did you think I did not know? Did you think I should not comprehend?" he continued in the same tone. "Did you really believe that I should allow another to steal you from me? There have been times when I almost thought you did not realize that you love me. There have been times when I have believed you fancied your heart given to that other to whom you have promised yourself, and then the knowledge of how absurd it all was comforted me. The knowledge that some day you would turn to me helped me to bear it all, but the sea of silence is killing me, Carlita, drowning me in my own desire. I love you—ah! you know that, and the words are so weak. You know that I would let the blood drain from my body through the ends of my fingers, drop by drop, for you. I don't believe you realized it all when you promised to be another man's wife; but it could not be concealed from you always. Won't you send the white ship across the sea, my darling? Won't you speak some word to comfort my waiting?"

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He had not spoken the words in the headlong, pell-mell fashion of impassioned youth, but with a feeling that held her spell-bound until the sound of his voice had ceased, and then things looked black and swam before her eyes as if she were suddenly affected with vertigo. She staggered, and would have fallen but that he arose, and, placing his arm about her, held her closely. His warm breath aroused her, and tearing herself from him, she sprang aside.

"False friend! Craven! Coward!" she panted. "How dare you? How dare you speak the words to me that you have uttered? How dare you say that I love you—you—you, the man who has played the friend to Olney Winthrop, who has pretended to love him as a brother does? You come here in his absence, like the coward that you are, to steal that which belongs to him—only to him; but it is beyond you, thank God for that! I hate you—hate you as I have never hated a human thing in my life before—hate you for the cunning coward that you are! I shall tell Olney Winthrop of this, and—"

Pierrepoint was leaning against the piano, all his nonchalance, his graceful indifference returned, listening to her as if she were speaking to him only the pleasantries of the drawing-room. She burst into tears before she could complete her sentence, and he moved for a moment restlessly, but naturally and calmly as he usually spoke, said:

"There will be no necessity for you to take that trouble. I shall tell him myself before I sleep tonight."

"I hope that Heaven will spare me the insult of ever looking upon your face again!" she cried as she started from the room.

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She was forced to pass him in order to reach the door, and as she would have done so, he stepped before her almost indifferently. There was the smile still upon his mouth, his eyes were brilliant now, and his voice as slow and drawling as ever.

"I just want to say a word before you go," he said, quietly. "There will come a time when you will wish to recall what you have said, when you will yearn for the love which you disregard now. When it comes, send for me. You need not fear that I shall harbor any resentment for your cruelty. When you send, I shall be ready to respond, even if your message should reach me at the other end of the earth. You are the only woman whom I have ever loved, and some day you shall be my wife!"

He said the words with gentleness and perfect respect, but her face crimsoned with anger.

"Never!" she cried, fiercely.

He smiled.

"I have never failed to keep my word, particularly when the promise was made to myself," he answered, lightly. "Neither heaven nor earth, nor life nor death, nor yet eternity itself, could stand between us!"

He stepped out of her way, not a particle of excitement visible in his manner—on the contrary, he was calmer, more careless than usual—and she looked into his face for one moment, then fled by him and up the stairs to her own apartment.

Then she locked the door and threw herself upon the bed, in a passion of tears—tears such as she had never shed, not even at the death of her mother; but they were so different—hot, angry tears; and yet—yet there was some grief in them, too, though she could not have told why.

It was almost daylight when Jessica and her mother returned, and yet she was still lying there, never having removed her clothing.

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She got up then, in a shamed sort of way, and undressed herself; but it was of the man she hated that she dreamed, not the man she loved; it was the gray eyes into which she looked, not the blue; and she rose in the morning unrefreshed, and with eyes still swollen from weeping.

CHAPTER X.

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Olney Winthrop was detained away for four days on account of illness, but on the fifth he came again.

He was pale and haggard, and about the mouth there was a wistful expression that touched

Carlita in the old, fond way. She went up to him and placed her hand upon his shoulder with a loving gesture.

"You have been ill," she said; "but I did not dream that it had been so bad. Why did you not let me come to you?"

"You would have come?"

"Can you ask?"

She looked pathetically into his eyes and allowed him to kiss her. It brought a flush to his pallid cheeks and a warm light to his worn eyes.

"I wonder if man was ever blessed with so sweet a love as I?" he asked, more of himself than of her, his voice low with emotion. "Carlita, if I should lose you, death, by any means whatever, would be a happy release. You love me, darling? Say it once again. It is not that I doubt, but only that I adore the sound of the words from your exquisite lips."

She shivered slightly, some of the bright color fading from the olive cheek.

"What is it?" he questioned, with tender solicitude.

"I have so often meant to tell you," she answered, her eyes not upon his, but fixed absently upon a distant object which yet was unseen, "but have not had the courage. It seems almost like stabbing a living thing to the heart to speak of it to you; and yet—and yet—"

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"Tell me, dear heart. Is there anything with which you would not trust me?"

"It is only that I would not distress you. There is an old curse in the family; such a foolish thing, you will think, for nineteenth century people to believe in, and I don't—really I don't; and yet it makes my blood freeze in my veins sometimes when I remember it. It is the curse of Pocahontas, Olney. Have you heard what it is?"

"No."

"It descends to the dark girl child of each generation—the child that shows the trace of the Indian in her unfortunate veins. It is a curse put upon her love, that unhappiness, misery may follow the giving of her heart, and—Olney, what a fool I am to alarm you with this absurdity!"

He had started and grown a shade paler, then caught her hands in a grip that would have hurt her had she been more alive to physical emotions.

"Why do you listen to such things?" she continued, laughing half hysterically.

"It was so strange," he returned, huskily—"so strange that you should have mentioned it at this, of all times."

"Why?"

"Because I have received a summons which takes me away from you for a time—upon a perilous journey, perhaps."

"Where? Why?"

She was breathless, and returned the pressure of his hands with a strength of which she was unaware.

"To Mexico. My whole fortune is involved, and it is necessary that I should go."

She leaned toward him eagerly.

"Don't!" she whispered, hoarsely. "Something tells me that you will not return. I have a presentiment of evil—a horrible presentiment! It is the curse in reality. Don't go, Olney. My fortune will be enough for both."

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But he had recovered himself, and smiled reassuringly, though feebly.

"We are foolish, my darling, both of us. I could not be a dependent upon the bounty of my wife. You must understand that, love. However much one we may be, I could never consent to feel myself a burden. Don't ask it of me, dearest. It would only make the temporary parting all the harder to bear, and you must have strength to bolster up my weakness."

"Oh, Olney!"

"If you had never heard of that foolish curse, you would think nothing of it; and if I had not been ill and weak mentally as well as physically, it would not have impressed me in the least. Remember that you yourself called it an absurdity."

"But you are not well enough to go—not strong enough to stand the test."

"The warmth of the climate will benefit me as nothing else could. I shall not die, Carlita. The thought of your love will give me every courage. Besides, I shall have one near who cares for me as a brother."

"You mean—"

"Leith."

She sat there for a moment, dumb, stunned, never raising her eyes, but Olney was watching her narrowly; then she drew a trifle closer to him, and with bowed head, whispered:

"There is—something that—I must tell you. It is about—about—"

"Leith?" he questioned, gently.

"Yes," she returned in a voice which he did not remember.

"I know," he said, softly.

"He told you?"

"Yes."

"And yet you—trust him?"

"As I would my brother," he returned, simply.

Her hand closed over his with a violence that made him wince.

"God help you!" she returned, heavily. "I loathe the man as I would a coiling reptile. There can no good come of it. Remember that I have told you this. God help you and help me, for the curse has fallen, as I felt that it must when I dared to love!"

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CHAPTER XI.

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It was a very lonely time for Carlita, those weeks that followed.

Of course she had Olney's letters, letters filled with loving promises and words of hope for the future; but letters are a poor substitute for the presence of one we love. Still, they are infinitely better than nothing. They came every day at first, filled with all those messages so dear to a girlish heart; then when he had gotten further down into Mexico, where the mail service is so deplorably bad, of course they became fewer. She had understood that that must be so before he went.

He told her in many of them of the utterly uncivilized state of the country, almost as uncivilized as if millions of miles existed between it and our own United States, of the long-cloaked, dark-browed, sombrero-crowned men who either walked or slunk through the streets when there were any, or roads when there were not, of the strange, wild, brilliant, many-hued country, that still had its intrinsically fascinating for all its repulsiveness.

"I almost wish that I had persuaded you to come with me, to give me your sweet companionship, for I am sure that in spite of all the hardships, you would enjoy it all," he wrote in one of his many letters. "Even granting its barbaric state, there is an unconscious poetry in it all that I am sure would delight you, a tropical, luxurious, brilliant beauty that gets into one's veins like wine, or the seductive bewilderment of opium. I am not quite sure but that you would never leave, but live on and on, content, like these people, with only the joy of living, the mere halcyon pleasure of existence—a lotus-eater. And yet there are parts of it so wild, so superbly barbaric almost that the very danger enchants one. I am growing well and strong under the excitement of it all and the desire to get back to you—the craving to feel the touch of your dear lips, to feel the warmth of your beautiful presence. Let us come here on our honeymoon, will you? To the home of your own people. Ah, there is romance enough in the very atmosphere, in the gorgeous color, the song of the birds, the picturesque buildings and customs and country, to make one die from excess of loving."

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But after that, as has been said, the letters became less frequent, and there was nothing to do but sit beside the window and watch for the postman—the postman who went to others with his messages of happiness or pain, as it might be, but passed her by. She continued to write, though, every day, just as if she had received her daily effusion.

But never once had Leith Pierrepont's name been mentioned in it all.

It was very lonely. There were times when it seemed almost as if Mrs. Chalmers and Jessica had forgotten her very existence.

They rarely breakfasted before one o'clock in the afternoon, and then Carlita had had her luncheon and had gone out for a walk in the park or downtown to amuse herself by looking in the shop windows—not a very profitable pastime; but what was the poor child to do? By the time she returned they had gone for their drive, an excursion upon which she was never asked, although it was her money that paid for the new luxury of a victoria and pair, not to speak of the sumptuous coachman and footman; but she did not know it and therefore thought nothing of the omission. Unless there was a dinner party, which she never thought of attending, Mrs. Chalmers and Jessica sometimes condescended to dine with her; but that was not often; and if there was no opera in the evening there might be a theater party, with a dinner afterward—a really superb little dinner served by their new French chef, which was practically the greatest attraction the house offered since its reputation for "extraordinary" poker had been established.

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For every night, whether there had been an opera or no opera, there was a poker game in progress, and always enough people willing to lose their money to make it profitable as well as interesting.

A few women had joined their ranks, women who rouged their faces and blackened their eyebrows and wore peroxide of hydrogen hair strangely like Mrs. Chalmers' own.

Carlita had seen the party once when the noise was so great that she could not sleep. She crept downstairs, concealed herself from sight, of course, and watched them for a little while, but her

disgust was so great that she never did it again, but often covered up her head with the bedclothes in order to keep the sound out.

It was more lonely often than if she had lived all alone, and so no wonder she thought of Leith Pierrepont's words at last and of—Arditi.

She hated the very name of the man at first, because Leith had asked her to study under him, and then by degrees the thought became less repulsive to her, and she finally concluded that in sheer self-defense she would go and see him anyway, just to satisfy herself as to whether she had any voice or not, and to relieve the awful monotony of existence.

She found him—the great artist—in his studio, and he listened kindly to her words and then tried her voice. It was really a superb voice, filled with color and feeling, and a breadth of tone that was wonderful. He was delighted—as who would not have been?—and accepted her as his pupil gladly, almost joyfully.

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After that the work fascinated her, and she toiled faithfully, making marvelous strides, assisted perhaps by the very ache in her heart, for there is nothing under heaven that develops the soul like sorrow. I doubt whether a person has any very great amount of soul cultivation until grief has brought it there. And Carlita certainly suffered.

The letters had ceased altogether.

She was not particularly surprised at first, because Olney had told her of the wretched condition of the railroads, and consequently of the mail service; but it couldn't have been quite so bad as all that, to give her no letter in five long, apparently endless weeks.

But she covered up the hurt in her devotion to her new art, and Mrs. Chalmers and Jessica watched her curiously.

"Who could wish for anything better than this?" Jessica asked of her mother one day, as they heard the strains of the piano from the room which, at her request, had been set apart for her own particular use.

"No one—if it could only last," returned Mrs. Chalmers, with a little, only half-suppressed sigh.

But of course it couldn't, and that was the horrible pity of it all.

The music lessons continued, and Arditì forgot the time in his devotion to his new pupil.

"She is a genius!" he said, ecstatically; "the only one that I have discovered in years. She sings because she can't help it. She is like a bird in the forest, except that there is a note of sadness which the bird never acquires, because it has no soul. Some day she will show the world what an artiste is!"

And the full rich tones were floating out one day, glorious as the minor strains of an organ, when suddenly the tone failed, the hands fell upon the key-board with a crash, the lovely face, flushed with devotion to its new master, whitened, and a little cry fell from the drawn lips.

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She did not speak—it seemed as if she could not—and after a moment of silence the man who had caused her alarm went forward and put out his hand.

She hesitated a moment, half drew back, then, impelled by some strange power, placed her cold palm in his.

"I am afraid I startled you," he said, in that beautiful voice with which no male voice that she had ever heard could remotely compare. "I asked for Jessica and Mrs. Chalmers, but the servant said they were in the park; then I heard you singing, and begged to be allowed to come here. I see you have taken lessons of Arditì, as I asked you. It was very good of you."

"How—how do you know that I have?" she stammered.

"Ah, who knows the method so well as I? There is not another teacher in America that could do it, and you have put your whole heart and soul into it. God! what a voice it is!"

She threw out her hands deprecatingly.

"What matters it?" she cried, huskily, breathlessly. "Tell me, when did you come? And where is he—Olney? Why does he allow you to come first?"

There was the bitterest pain in her voice—pain, humiliation. Leith half put out his hand, then withdrew it, as if he were not quite sure of what it was that he would do. There was a new light in his eyes—a curious light which she could not quite comprehend. There seemed to be sorrow in it—sorrow for her—and yet it glowed with passion and—and something else—she could not quite make out what, but it frightened her. She drew back and pressed her hands upon her breast.

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"Is Olney with you?" she asked, whispering her question in this new fear that had come upon her.

He shook his head.

"You have—left him there," she stammered, helplessly—"left him in that awful place he wrote me of—deserted him—when he needed you?"

The hollow tone of his voice as he replied was not like that with which he had greeted her.

"There was nothing else to do," he answered, simply.

She stared at him for a moment in a silence that was uncanny, then said, hoarsely:

"What is it—you mean? He—he is not—"

"Dead?—yes," he said, completing the sentence for her.

She stood there, just a moment, all the color gone from her countenance, all the light from her eyes, and then she fell forward; it would have been at his feet but that he caught her in his arms.

He turned the white face upward and gazed into it long, lingeringly, lovingly. There was a wistful, yearning look about his mouth, a twitching at the corners that spoke of a suffering to which he had never given expression, and which was no longer to be endured, and then—he couldn't help it, perhaps—he bent his head and pressed his lips upon hers.

She would never know; she was unconscious, he told himself; but as he lifted his head with the wild, passionate expression of self-loathing burning in his eyes, he saw Jessica and her mother standing in the door-way.

CHAPTER XII.

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Perhaps of the three conscious ones, Jessica was the first to recover herself.

A sort of fear that seemed to turn her cold from feet to brow oppressed Mrs. Chalmers, and she stood there white-lipped, stunned, in presence of that unnamed terror, while her daughter went forward, a smile that was almost playful making her treacherous lips beautiful.

"Leith, really Leith!" she cried sweetly. "What man but you ever could turn up in this most unexpected fashion, or this most welcome one? Was it your sudden coming that has upset Carlita? These Southern women are so easily affected. Mamma, can't you ring for Carlita's maid? Here is poor Leith holding her in his arms as if she were a china doll, which he feared to drop lest it should break. Has she really fainted, or is it only one of her pretty affectations because of the picturesque comfort of the position?"

"I am afraid I was a little abrupt in breaking some startling news to her," answered Leith, quietly, thankful for once for the incessant flow of Jessica's words. "Poor little girl! I am very sorry for her."

"Really? What was it?"

"Wait a moment."

Carlita had stirred ever so slightly in his embrace but he was painfully alive to every movement. It seemed to him that it would be impossible for him to look into her clear eyes then, eyes lighted with hatred and loathing for his despicable act, and it was with a feeling of absolute relief that he resigned his precious burden to her maid, who, with the assistance of Mrs. Chalmers, took her from the room.

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"Do tell me!" cried Jessica, making not the slightest pretense of interest in her mother's ward. "I am consumed with curiosity. Is it about Olney?"

"Yes."

"He is ill?"

"Worse than that."

"Worse! Not—dead?"

"Yes."

"Good heavens!"

There was a desperate sort of silence that lasted she could never quite remember how long, but her mother's touch aroused her, her mother's voice speaking in her ear in a low, strained tone, which seemed unreal and ghastly to her.

"Olney is dead, Jessica. Do you hear me, child? Olney Winthrop is dead."

The girl shook off the hand and lifted her white face.

"Yes, I know," she answered, hoarsely, almost gruffly. "What is the good of making a scene about it? Many of—of our friends have died suddenly who appeared less like it than he. What was it, Leith—typhoid? Mexico is such a beastly hole for typhoid."

Her mother heard and understood all the bravado in the tone, and a shiver passed over her that added to her pallor under all the ghastly, artificial red. But she forgot it in listening to Leith's reply.

"No," he said, heavily, "it was not fever."

"Then what?"

He glanced away from her, even shot a half-nervous glance in the direction of the door, which was something he had never done before in his life.

"What was it?" she repeated, unable to control her impatient excitement. "Not—"

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"Yes, murder!"

There was none of the old, graceful nonchalance in the voice as he spoke that word. It was strained, husky, tense, like that of a man who is putting the most violent restraint upon some wild

passion.

Mrs. Chalmers uttered a little cry, a cry that could not be described in its terror, suspense, she knew not what, of horrible presentiment; but Jessica's head was flung up, her nostrils dilated, her eyes wild and filled with a curious expression which her mother could not fathom, even had she been in a mental condition to try.

And then Jessica repeated that awful word, repeated it in a voice which contained a note of triumph—hideous triumph—that shot through her mother's weaker soul with renewed terror:

"Murder!"

There were volumes in the mere utterance. She stood looking at him for just a moment, then deliberately sat down and crossed her hands between her knees, looking up at him curiously. Mrs. Chalmers leaned against the mantel-shelf for needed support.

"How horrible!" exclaimed Jessica. "And that it should be some one we all know—actually engaged to Carlita! It reads quite like a story book, doesn't it? Do sit down and tell us all about it."

But Leith did not sit. He passed his hands across his brow as if his head ached.

"I can't," he answered, heavily. "It is getting late, and I am worn out. I haven't slept for—I can't remember just how long, but I feel seedy and in need of rest. I think I'll go now, and come again tomorrow, if you'll let me."

"But at least you'll tell us the main facts!" cried Jessica. "It won't take a minute. Who murdered him?"

She seemed to delight in the mere utterance of the grewsome word, and Leith shivered, though his answer was filled with passion: [Pg 75]

"I wish to God I knew!"

"Then you don't?"

"No."

The words were uttered so peculiarly that even Jessica was silent for a moment, then said, with sudden, swift meaning:

"Then you were not with him?"

"No."

"And there was no inquiry made, no effort to discover the murderer?"

Leith lifted his shoulders wearily.

"Oh, yes," he answered. "But what does inquiry amount to in a place like that? There is no law, and a man's importance is measured by the value of his hat and saddle, and the number of men he has slain."

"Then you have no suspicion?"

"None." But he stooped to pick up a handkerchief he had dropped as he spoke the word. "I really must go now," he said when he had regained it. "I am dead tired, and—"

"But you saw him after he was dead?" she persisted, observing that his hand trembled, in spite of his efforts to prevent it.

"Yes, I saw him," he stammered.

"Was he shot?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Directly through the heart."

"Ah! then he did not suffer much. You should be glad he was killed at once, and—"

But it seemed to Pierrepont that he could bear it no longer. His accustomed indifference had already deserted him, and he felt that all his courage was as rapidly following. He cried out passionately, more passionately than she believed possible for him, even after the kiss she had seen him press upon Carlita's lips: [Pg 76]

"Glad! Glad, when it left not a moment for preparation to meet that God whom he feared! when it left not a moment for a word of farewell to the girl whom he loved! Glad! Good God! I had rather suffer a life-time of anguish than to die like that—a rat in a trap!"

"And you buried him down there?" his pitiless interlocutor continued.

"Yes," he answered, half sullenly. "What else was there to do?"

"Why not bring him home to the girl he loved, and who loved him?"

"Like that! It were a thousand times, ten thousand times, better that she never saw him again. Besides," managing by a superhuman effort to control himself somewhat, "there was no way. It was awful getting through, myself, and it would have been impossible with him. There were miles and miles that had to be done on mule-back, and miles and miles more, even after we reached the railroad, that had to be done on a hand-car. Then there were land-slides that had to be walked

over and the car carried. Oh, it would have been impossible, quite impossible, even if—if—"

"If what?"

"If I had desired to," he blurted out, hastily, hoarsely. "I will come again tomorrow—tomorrow—when, I hope, Miss de Barryos will be better. Good-night."

He bolted from the room, snatched up his hat and coat in the hall, and rushed into the street.

Already the lamps were lighted, flickering brilliantly in the deadened gray of the gloaming that was so rapidly fading into night. Pedestrians were hurrying homeward, their faces cut to crimson by the sharp, frosty air.

The sting of it was pleasant to Pierrepont. He opened his mouth and drank it into his lungs with the same relish that a thirsty man drinks water. [Pg 77]

"God, what a relief!" he exclaimed, his step growing more elastic. "She knew how she was torturing me, saw it in every word that I spoke; and I, fool that I was, was betrayed into weakness and cowardice by a woman whom I despise! I felt myself a criminal striving to avoid the accusation of my crime. I think if she had cried out: 'You are the guilty one!' 'Twas your hand fired the shot that killed poor Olney Winthrop!' I would have sunk upon my knees and begged for mercy. Pough! how all this cursed affair has upset me! I wonder if I shall ever be myself again? I wonder if I shall ever be able to shake off the influence of all these lies I have been forced to tell, and shall be forced to tell from this time henceforth? God! it's the old story retold of Adam and Eve, without the Garden of Eden. A woman's beautiful face makes cowards of us all. And I, who so despise a liar, who never told a lie in my life until—"

He did not complete the sentence, but flung up his head with a gesture of repugnance and abhorrence.

A slow, pitiless, scornful, malignant laugh fell from Jessica's lips as she heard the outer door close upon him. She got up, went to the window, and watched him as he disappeared down the street; then, quite as calmly as she had moved the day before, returned to the mantel and laid one hand upon it, while with the other she lifted her dress and placed her foot upon the fender before the fire. Then, after a pause:

"Why do you look at me in that uncanny sort of way?" she exclaimed, half fretfully to her mother, without even glancing in her direction. "You make me feel creepy all up and down my back. Why don't you say it out and have done with it?"

"Say—what out?" stammered Mrs. Chalmers, her voice as stiff, as heavy, as full of terror as her face. [Pg 78]

"What you are thinking."

"I—I don't believe I—could. It seems to—me that I—must have been asleep—and had a—horrible nightmare. I—think I must have been—wondering—what you—thought."

Jessica lifted her head. In the mirror she saw leaning against the door-jamb a figure clothed all in black, the white hands crossed upon its breast as if to hush the wild throb of the passionate heart. The beautiful face looked deathly in its pallor. It was Carlita.

Jessica turned her eyes upon her mother as if she had not seen, then answered slowly, her voice vibrating with intense meaning:

"What I think of the murder of Olney Winthrop? You mean whom do I believe to be the murderer? I am quite sure there can not be two ideas upon that score. The ball that entered Olney Winthrop's heart was fired by the hand of Leith Pierrepont, none other!"

CHAPTER XIII.

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"The ball that entered Olney Winthrop's heart was fired by the hand of Leith Pierrepont!"

Over and over again, like the insistent surge of the waves, or the maddening repetition of some wild, fantastic melody, those words kept repeating themselves in Carlita's reeling brain.

She had crept away noiselessly when she had heard them spoken, crept away and almost crawled up the stairs to her own chamber, where the gathering darkness lay in somber shadows. She closed the door and turned the key, leaning against it in a weak, half-relieved sort of way, like the criminal who has gained a moment of respite from his too close pursuers.

But the haunting memory of those ghastly words aroused her again, and she pressed her hands upon her breast, her great eyes peering into the gloomy shadows, the words she had heard standing out before her in letters of glaring fire.

"It can't be—it can't be!" she panted, leaning forward as if she were speaking her passionate cry into some listening ear. "It can't be! Olney Winthrop murdered, and—Leith Pierrepont his—No, no, no! It can not be true! My God! I will not believe it! There is some awful mistake! Some hideous blunder! But then—but then—"

She paused and moistened her stiff lips, her eyes opening and closing curiously. She did not continue that monologue, but catching hold of a chair, then the foot of the bed, a table, then another chair, she dragged herself to the fireside, which had burned itself to little more than dull

gray ashes.

She knelt upon the white bear-skin rug, and taking the poker tried to stir it into a blaze again; but the faint flicker made her shiver. She dropped the poker from her cold fingers, and burying her white face upon her knees crossed her arms around them.

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Her grief for her betrothed seemed to be swallowed up in the awful sense of horror that oppressed her. It was not so much of Olney Winthrop murdered that she thought, as of Leith Pierrepont murderer.

And then the shadows lengthened and dusk faded into night. The poor fire died entirely and lay gray and passionless upon the hearth. The cold flash of an electric lamp shone through the window, over which the shade had not been drawn, and lay in a line of light across the floor, beyond which were ponderous caverns made of shadow.

It was ghoulish, eerie.

She would have thought it strange that her maid had not come to prepare her bath and bed if she had been in a condition to consider ordinary subjects, but matters of daily moment and time ceased to exist for her during those hours.

Once or twice she moved uneasily, and a hoarse moan left her lips as if some horrible thought, too heavy to be borne in silence, weighed upon her heart.

And then at last she lifted her head. The eyes burned like living coals, but the face was gray and passionless, like the dead ashes upon the hearth. It was a curious, uncanny contrast.

Her neck was stiff and sore from its long continuance in one position, but she did not seem to be conscious of it. Her fingers were still interlaced about her knee. Her mental faculties seemed to return to her suddenly.

"He told me that he loved me, that whether I desired or not, I should be his wife," she said in a low, hoarse tone that fitted the scene with curious horror, the "he" referring to Leith Pierrepont. "Knowing that I was the betrothed wife of his friend, he came in that friend's absence and made his dastardly proposal to me. Can it be that he has done this thing for—that? For that? In order that he might carry out this hideous desire? Good God! No human thing with the dim shadow of blood in his veins could do a thing so vile. And yet—God of Heaven, I will know! I must know! I will avenge you, Olney! I swear it! Do you hear me, sleeping there in your lonely grave? I swear that I will avenge you, and that I will bring your murderer to justice, let it cost me what it will of womanliness, of self-respect, of life itself even. My moment of weakness is passed, and the work shall commence at once."

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She arose, feverishly stiff and cramped from her long, sorrowful vigil, and walked with a step that was almost firm to the door.

It never occurred to her to consider the time, but turning the key in the lock, she opened the door and went into the hall.

All was dark, the house strangely still.

"It is out of respect for—Olney," she whispered to herself, with a little catch in her voice like a sob. "It was kind of Jessica! After all—"

She didn't finish the sentence, but walked unsteadily up the hall. Her weakness seemed to come again with her knowledge of the darkness.

She paused before Jessica's door and hesitated for a moment, then she saw a faint gleam of light beneath the door. It gave her courage. She did not knock, but turned the knob gently. It yielded, and the door swung back.

The brilliant gleam of light blinded her for a moment, and then she saw Jessica standing beneath the chandelier. She was clothed in a long gown of shimmering greenish satin, the décolleté bodice finished with a fall of lace that somehow made her look like a serpent which trails his long, singularly graceful body in the moonlight. About her handsome throat was a string of diamonds, and in the clustering coils of auburn hair a crown of diamonds that scintillated and flashed with defiant glitter.

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And there was something in the cold look of the brown eyes that matched them strangely—a look that hardened as it rested upon the girl at the door.

She observed the expression of surprised contempt in Carlita's burning eyes all too clearly, but it only served to intensify her hatred.

"I—I didn't know you had—been out," Carlita stammered. "I half feared I should find you in bed. The house was still and dark. Is it late?"

"No, early—in the morning," Jessica answered, with a short laugh. "Haven't you been to bed? It is almost three. There! the clock is striking now."

"I had no idea—" returned Carlita, in an uncertain and indefinite sort of way, as if she didn't quite know what she wanted to say. "May I come in for a moment?"

"As well come in and close the door as stand there and have the draught blow on one," answered Jessica. "It has been a very stupid evening," stifling a yawn. "Calve was not in voice, and Jean de Reske didn't sing at all. It seems to me abominably like a swindle to announce at the last moment that some one whom you especially went to hear 'has a cold, and So-and-so has kindly consented to take his place.' Even the poker game afterward was stupid—insufferably stupid. Carlita, what a

fool you are, that you don't cut all the Puritan idiocy of your bringing up, and try the gaits with me! You'd have twice the friends, live twice as long, and have a thousand times the fun."

Carlita shivered slightly, as her eyes traveled over the figure before her.

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"I suppose you are right," she said, half stupidly; "but somehow it doesn't seem to be in my line."

"Pouf! You can do anything you like. What's the good of making a sepulcher of one's life—of living for death, so to speak—when you have so little of life and so much of death? You make a constant sermon of yourself, and people hate sermons. That's why they go to sleep in church. You never see any one go to sleep at a poker-table. There are people who talk against it, I know—'wouldn't have their sisters play for their right arms,' and all that rot—and then turn round and kill their best friend!"

She laughed shortly, heavily, hatefully, and again Carlita shivered, while she moved uneasily.

"It is inconsistent," she said, in a stony sort of way; "but so few people are consistent. I wanted to ask you about—him. You know—the man whom—"

"Leith Pierrepont?"

"Yes."

"What about him?"

"What did he tell you about—Olney? I fainted, or—or something—and after that he had gone."

She was suffering too acutely to observe the gleam in the red-brown eyes, and there was nothing in the voice to attract attention.

"Olney is—dead. You know that?"

"Oh, yes; he said that. But how?"

"Shot through the heart."

Carlita moistened her lips, and then continued her grewsome questioning.

"And they buried him—?"

"Out there."

"Was there an effort made to—to discover the murderer?"

"Effort? Oh, yes; I suppose so. But, after all, what does 'effort' amount to in a place like that? His murderer might have been standing right beside the coffin, and no one would have made an 'effort' to arrest him. Leith Pierrepont himself says that man's importance is measured there by the number of men he has slain."

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"Good heavens! He said that?"

"Yes."

"The dastard!"

"It is doubly pitiful for poor Olney," Jessica continued, volubly, "because he was so alone in the world. There is no one to take his case for him—no one to see that justice is done. The murder was committed out of the country, and so the murderer will go scot-free, deceiving other people, his polluted body in contact with that of innocence—perhaps even marry a pure young girl."

"No!" cried Carlita, her voice tragic in its suppressed passion—"never! Olney is not without an avenger. I have sworn before Heaven a solemn vow that I will bring his murderer to punishment for his cowardly crime; and I will keep that vow, let it cost me what it will of happiness, of life, or even honor. All the world shall know and scorn him for the thing he is, and God Himself shall put upon him the brand of Cain. I have sworn an oath to Olney dead, and may I stand accursed before Heaven if I fail to keep it!"

She went swiftly from the room, and Jessica closed the door behind her, her low, strident laughter filling the room with unmusical sound.

"I shall have my revenge upon both," she said, with sardonic triumph—"my sweet revenge!"

CHAPTER XIV.

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It seemed to Carlita that the dawn of morning would never come. As well have undertaken any other impossible feat as to sleep, and so she sat beside the window watching eagerly, first for the cold, gray break of light in the heavens, and next for some movement in the other world to tell her that mankind was astir again.

She was up, had had her bath, and dressed herself when her maid arrived, pale, but with a fierce burning in the dark eyes that made one forget the circles round them.

"All dressed, Miss de Barryos!" exclaimed her maid in some surprise. "You did not ring for me?"

"No, Ahbel," she returned, feverishly. "I couldn't sleep, and there was no necessity of disturbing you."

"But it is nine, and I have been up since seven. You are too thoughtful for others and too little so

for yourself always, Miss de Barryos. And you were ill last night? There was bad news?"

"Yes, from Mr. Winthrop."

"I know. Miss Chalmers' maid told me. We are all so sorry, Miss de Barryos, sorry for you as well as that misfortune should have befallen the young gentleman."

"It is very kind of you, Ahbel," returned Carlita, choking back a tearless sob which the tone of sympathy in the voice evoked.

"And such a dreadful thing!" continued the girl. "You can bear those things so much better when one dies of a fever, or of something in one's bed. It is so much more natural like. But to be—murdered!"

The girl interrupted herself with a little shiver, but Carlita neither shrank from the word nor moved. She stood stonily, gazing with those burning eyes into the street. [Pg 86]

"It was very dreadful!" she said, dully.

"And do they know who did it?" continued the girl.

"No."

"But there must be some way of finding out. I have heard such a lot of those people, Mexicans, you know—worse than brigands. They don't want to find out who did it; but a good smart Yankee detective would ferret it all out quickly enough."

For the first time Carlita started.

"A detective!" she repeated.

"Yes'm. A good detective could go down there and get at the bottom of facts in no time."

"Do you know a good detective, Ahbel?"

"Indeed I do, ma'am."

"You are quite sure he is a thoroughly reliable man?"

"Quite sure, ma'am. He is considered one of the very best in New York, and his word goes further with the superintendent than any of them."

"Do you know where to find him?"

"Yes'm. He is my uncle. I was at his house last night to see his daughter, my cousin. I came to ask your permission, but Miss Chalmers said you were not to be disturbed, and that if you required anything, her maid could attend you."

But Carlita seemed not to have heard the latter part of the speech.

"Would he be at home now?"

"Yes'm. He finished a case only yesterday, and said he would take a few days' rest; but I know he would do this for you, Miss de Barryos. He is like an old war-horse, anyway. The mention of a new mystery to solve is like the sound of a trumpet to a horse. He gets restless in a moment."

"And you think he would be willing to risk the danger of that country?" [Pg 87]

"A good detective don't know the meaning of danger, miss, any more than a good soldier does. He won't stop to think of that."

"How soon can you fetch him here?"

"In an hour—perhaps less."

"Let it be less, if possible, and go at once."

"Yes'm."

"And you may bring him here upon your return. Unless it should be necessary, you need say nothing to any one of his presence here."

"I understand, miss. Shall I wait to bring your breakfast?"

"No; tell Jawkins to serve it in the breakfast-room."

At least, it was something with which to occupy the time until Ahbel's return. But a very poor occupation it proved. Mental excitement and a sleepless night are not conducive to excellence of appetite, so that she did poor justice to the delicious meal that was served her.

She returned to her own room when she could bear the over-decoration of the breakfast-room no longer, and waited restlessly, counting the apparently endless moments as they passed. And then, at last, she heard a quick step in the hall, a light tap upon her door, and Ahbel stepped inside, followed by a man, before Carlita had time to bid them enter.

It was such a curious sensation that oppressed her as she glanced from her maid to her maid's uncle—a breathless excitement, subdued by a sort of repulsion which was indefinable in her present mood.

Ahbel's cheeks were crimson, her eyes sparkling, under the excitement and an unusually brisk walk; but it was toward the man that Carlita's most inquiring glances were bent.

He was rather small of stature—small and wiry—with a smoothly shaved face, through which the incipient black beard showed, making the skin look blue. The hair was thick and very black, contrasting oddly with the half-sunken cheeks. But it was the eyes that gave him his [Pg 88]

extraordinary appearance. They were deep set and small, gray as to color, but so piercing, so penetrating, as to make a comparatively innocent man tremble as he looked into them.

He bowed profoundly as Ahbel introduced him to her mistress.

"Miss de Barryos, this is my uncle, Edmond Stolliker."

"Won't you sit down, Mr. Stolliker?" asked Carlita, pointing toward a chair, and speaking to her maid's uncle as if he were "to the manner born"—well, perhaps, because a something about him, unnamed but still apparent, compelled it.

He bowed again and took the chair she indicated quietly and without any apparent awkwardness.

She seated herself opposite him, a table between them, and nervously handled some of the ivory and silver toilet articles that littered it.

"I have sent for you to—"

"Pardon me, Miss de Barryos," he interrupted, speaking for the first time in a low voice which had a curiously distinctive carrying power. "Is it your desire that your maid should be present during this interview?"

Carlita started slightly; but after the faintest possible hesitation, turned to Ahbel, of whom the detective had spoken as if she were the most absolute stranger to him.

"You may go," she said, gently. "If I should need you I will ring."

"Yes, miss."

She left the room without even a backward glance, and when the door closed, Carlita began again: [Pg 89]

"I suppose your niece told you of why I have sent for you, and—"

"She said something of the death of your fiancé, which was thought to be murder; but I never like to accept even the most apparently trifling detail from one so little interested as a maid. If I am to be retained in this case, Miss de Barryos, I must receive all my data from you personally until I can discover for myself."

"You understand, then, that this case will necessitate a visit to Mexico?"

"Your maid told me as much."

"To the wildest and most uncivilized parts?"

Edmond Stolliker smiled. It warmed and genialized his face wonderfully.

"Fortunately, I speak several patois of Spanish," he returned, by way of reply.

"Then you are willing to undertake it?"

"Quite."

"Then I will tell you the story, though the details are meager enough—merely bald facts, I am afraid. My fiancé, Mr. Olney Winthrop, was summoned to Mexico concerning some mines in which he was interested. He went, accompanied by a friend of his, Mr. Leith Pierrepont. At first his letters to me were filled with courage and hope; then suddenly they ceased. Five or six weeks later—yesterday, in fact—Mr. Pierrepont returned and announced his death."

"From what?"

"Shot through the heart."

"Ah! Under what circumstances?"

"I don't know. I fainted when Mr. Pierrepont told me, and on my recovery he had gone. The few facts I have learned were through Miss Chalmers, daughter of my guardian."

"But there is some one whom you suspect of this murder?" [Pg 90]

Carlita did not reply at once. Her dark eyes blazed, her lips were scorched and parted, and through them her hot breath came in little gasps; yet when she could control herself sufficiently to speak, she cried out passionately:

"Have I the right to speak suspicion?"

The detective leaned forward, almost touching the small table between them, holding her spell-bound by the strange gleam of his piercing eyes, which seemed to be searching her very soul.

"Shall I tell you whom it is that you accuse in your own heart, Miss de Barryos?" he asked, in a tense half-whisper. "It is Leith Pierrepont! But why? That is the question which I am most anxious to have answered."

A crimson flush overspread her face from throat to brow. She shrank backward in her seat, but the detective leaned even further forward, touching the table now with his long, slender fingers.

"Miss de Barryos," he continued, after a brief pause, "if I am to do anything for you, you must not begin by blindfolding me and then telling me to see. A detective occupies much the same position toward his client that a lawyer or doctor does. He must be trusted all in all, or not at all. I am not here through curiosity, but at your desire."

"You are right, and I all wrong," she cried out; "but the subject is so hateful a one that I must needs shrink from it. There is a reason why I suspect—the man whom you have mentioned. He

has dared to speak to me of love, knowing that I was the betrothed wife of the friend who trusted him as a brother. He swore in my presence that, let what would happen, I should be his wife. He is a man whom I have never trusted—whom I despise; and I believe he has done this cowardly thing in order to carry out the vile oath that he swore."

The detective was watching her narrowly. She had arisen, her face grown white again with passion, her fingers clinched, a fierce gleam in the dark eyes, which even he, with all his long experience in the art of reading men, could not fathom.

"And so—he loves you!" Edmond Stolliker said, musingly.

"If you would so desecrate the holy name."

"And when Mr. Winthrop was summoned to Mexico this man went with him?"

"Yes."

"Why? Were his mining interests also jeopardized?"

"He had none there."

"Ah! That is a significant fact, certainly. Did Mr. Winthrop write you anything of the condition in which he found his affairs there?"

"His last letter stated that he had not yet discovered why he had been summoned at all, as matters seemed to him in a more prosperous condition than they had ever been."

"Umph! Will you let me see that letter?"

She hesitated a moment, unwilling to trust so sacred a thing to other hands; then remembering her oath, she went feverishly to her escritoire. As she was selecting it, a knock sounded upon the door, and Ahbel entered.

"Mr. Pierrepont, Miss de Barryos," she exclaimed, striving to calm the excitement of her tone.

Carlita turned like a tigress, the precious letters dropping from her hands to the floor about her.

"Tell him," she cried, passionately, "that Miss de Barryos is not at home to him, neither now nor ever!"

Edmond Stolliker was upon his feet in a moment.

"Wait!" he exclaimed, in command, to the maid; then crossed the room suddenly and stood facing Miss de Barryos. "If we are to discover the murderer of your fiancé, Miss de Barryos," he said, earnestly, "you must be my unfailing ally. You must obey me absolutely. This man must suspect nothing whatever of your intentions. He must suppose that you believe every word that he speaks. He must even believe there might come a time when you would not be unfavorable to his suit. You must see him whenever he calls; keep him near you at whatever cost. If you would discover the murderer of your fiancé, you must be an actress as strong and subtle as Bernhardt herself, forgetting your own inclinations and hatreds, and thinking only of Olney Winthrop dead, and needing an avenger. You feel yourself capable of this?"

"Of anything that will insure justice to the dead and to the living!"

"Ahbel, say to Mr. Pierrepont that Miss de Barryos will be down at once," the detective said, quietly. "Is there any convenient cover from which I could hear a conversation between you?"

"Yes; the conservatory."

"Good! Let no detail escape. Ask him every question that you can put with safety, without allowing him to suspect that it is for greater cause than your natural interest. You can do this?"

"For Olney's sake."

Her eyes were lifted, her hands pressed upon her bosom as if she were communing with her dead lover. Her lips moved for a moment, and then she left the room.

Edmond Stolliker gathered up the letters she had dropped, thrust them into his pocket, and followed.

In the hall he met Ahbel.

"Take me to the conservatory, quick!" he commanded, briefly.

CHAPTER XV.

Carlita had never in her life undertaken anything so difficult as her entrance into that room. She was forced to stop outside the door in order to gain some control over her trembling lips, that she might speak the name and meet the eye of the man whom she felt she hated with all the strength of her soul.

It gave Edmond Stolliker time to gain his position in the conservatory, and enabled him to witness the greeting.

He could have desired nothing better.

She entered quietly, her long black robe trailing after her girlish figure in fascinating contrast,

and Stolliker observed all too clearly the whitening and compression of Pierrepont's lips as he went toward her in the old indolent, graceful fashion.

"I half feared you would not receive me, that you might be ill," he said, putting out his large, beautifully shaped white hand to take her cold fingers. "It was very good of you."

"I wanted—so much to know—all—you know—all that concerns—him," she faltered, in exactly the tone Stolliker would have had her use had he been able to suggest it. "I don't believe I have been in bed since—since you were here, and—"

"I was a brute," he interrupted, not looking at her—a fact which Stolliker observed, "to tell you so abruptly. I wanted to ask your forgiveness. There are times, you know, when a man forgets—everything, and is almost pardonable."

He had placed a chair for her before the fire, and she had sat down, her eyes fixed upon the blaze. She felt that a glance into his face would have dispersed all her courage, and she dared not risk it. But she knew that Stolliker would lose no point. [Pg 94]

Leith did not sit. He stood with his elbow upon the mantel-shelf, his head supported by his closed hand, looking into the fire also. Once he glanced toward her, moved nervously, and allowed his eyes to return to the fire again.

Stolliker grunted a curious "Umph!"

The silence grew unbearable at last.

"Won't you—go on?" Carlita asked, wistfully. "Won't you tell me without—without questioning? It is so hard, so hard!"

"You loved him—so—then?"

"Yes, I loved him," she answered, with quivering passion.

He glanced toward her again, but Stolliker could not quite determine what the expression in his quickly averted eyes could have been; whether pity, sorrow, remorse, or all three blended, but he distinctly saw the shiver that passed through the magnificent frame.

"I wish I could help you, but it is too late for that," he said, heavily. "Poor little girl! After all, Olney is to be envied, for at least you have loved him."

"You saw him—die?" she interrupted in a choking voice, utterly unable to keep silent and listen longer.

"No; he was—dead when—when I reached his side."

He had drawn himself up, stiffened, so to speak, as if nerving himself for a terrible trial.

"Then he left no message for me? Spoke no word?"

Pierrepont moved uneasily.

"He—he could not," he answered, hoarsely. "There was no time."

"He was shot—Jessica told me that."

"Yes."

"And through the heart?"

"Yes."

"I shall always hate them—my people—that they should have done so vile a thing, committed so causeless a murder. And there was no reason, was there?"

She lifted her eyes for the first time and saw the crimson flush that glowed upon his cheeks, the flush of shame. He hesitated for a moment, then answered heavily:

"None."

For a moment it seemed to her that she must cry out, that she must brand him "murderer;" but she subdued the wild desire by a wilder effort. She interlaced her fingers on her lap, and held herself closely for strength, then she summoned all her histrionic powers, as Stolliker had instructed her, and leaned slightly toward him.

"You have been—his friend—my friend, though I have been foolish enough not to recognize it until now," she said, loathing herself for the deception and yet continuing it. "But you will forgive me for all that and help me, will you not? You will be my friend in future as you were his in the past?"

He turned toward her eagerly, but controlled himself suddenly, and answered quietly, but with deep emotion:

"It is greater happiness than—I deserve."

"And you do forgive me?"

"If there were anything to forgive, with all my heart; but it is I who have always been the offender, not you."

"I am so alone, and—and he was all—I had!" she exclaimed, repressing a sob, which was, nevertheless, very audible.

"Do you think I did not understand that?" he cried, passionately. "Do you think there was a single [Pg 96]

word or act of yours that I did not comprehend? Why—There! Forgive me. I don't quite know myself of late. I am like some foolish, hot-headed boy, the yielding tool of every emotion. I wish I could make you understand how I appreciate the sweet trust of your generous friendship."

He took a step toward her, and placing his hand upon the back of her chair, bent downward until his lips almost touched her hair—not quite.

A tremor passed throughout her body, but she did not move.

"You accept it?" she asked, her voice little more than a whisper.

"As I would a pardon from God."

She started ever so slightly, but controlled herself again.

"And you will help me?" she asked in the same low tone.

"In all things so far as in my power lies."

"Thank you! thank you!" she murmured, lifting her intertwined fingers from her lap to her breast, and shrinking downward away from him just a trifle. "You will understand how I feel. You do not wish, any more than I, that he should sleep out there—in that lonely grave. You will help me to bring—his body here, and—and to find his murderer?"

Stolliker caught his breath hard as he watched the man—watched the cold, gray loam overspread his face—watched the stiffening of the joints and the slow lifting of the graceful form to an upright position.

The gray eyes were bent upon the dark head with an expression of horror which it was not necessary he should conceal, as she was not looking; but Stolliker observed that he pressed his hand above his heart, as if he feared she might hear its beating.

"I—I can't promise—that," he stammered helplessly. "It is so—useless. Of course, I will do all I can; but you can't understand the—the condition of the railroads there. It would be impossible—simply impossible—now, at least."

[Pg 97]

"Then—then later, when the—the condition of the country—has improved?" she gasped, hoarsely; and for a moment Stolliker feared she was going to faint.

"Yes, later," he assented, huskily.

"But—but the other?" she cried, almost fiercely. "You will help me with the other—you will help me to find his murderer?"

There was another silence, long and ominous. Somehow, Leith was leaning upon the mantel-shelf again, though neither Stolliker nor Carlita could have told how he got there.

"You don't know what you are asking," he said at last, in a dull, tense voice. "The place is so wild, so unreal. Wait for awhile. Wait until you have got over the first shock—the first horror of it all. Then, if you wish it, I will help you."

And with that she was apparently content.

"I may come again?" he asked shortly afterward, as he was leaving; and, mindful of Stolliker's words and her own oath, she answered:

"Yes, you may come again."

He pressed her hand and left her silently, passing out into the hall and out of the house without seeing Jessica's mocking face at the head of the stairs, though he might not have understood the scornful, triumphant smile upon it, even if he had.

He wearily closed the hall door upon himself, and as he slowly descended the stoop, he lifted his hat and pushed the damp hair back from his forehead.

"God!" he muttered, half aloud, "if I had suspected half how hard it would be, I should never have undertaken it even for her. Ay, verily, 'whom the gods would destroy they first make mad.'"

Stolliker watched him down the street, then joined Carlita upon the hearth-rug.

[Pg 98]

"I have to congratulate you upon playing your part superbly!"

"You heard—"

"Everything."

"Bah!"—with a shiver of repulsion—"it was a hateful part, a despicable part—"

"But one that is absolutely essential if you would discover and bring to justice the murderer of your betrothed husband."

"Then you think—"

"Pardon me; detectives have no right to 'think.' They must know. You have given me a clew, and it is worth working out; that is all. In the meantime, your part in the drama is to keep this man beside you as much as possible, night and day. Watch his most minute act, his lightest word, and report them all to me—everything. Let nothing escape. Don't trust your memory for a single day, but write everything down the moment he has gone. Take care that no act or word of his shall betray you into any exhibition of suspicion; and, above all, don't reject too much his overtures of affection. That part you must play with great care and finesse, neither being too quickly won nor too cold in your demeanor. You think you can assist me so far?"

"I will do it—that, or anything that may be required of me to bring this man to a punishment of his foul crime."

"Good!"

"And in the meantime, you—what will you be doing?"

"I? Oh, I shall start for Mexico by the first train that goes. These letters will give me all the data for that that I shall require."

"You have them—Mr. Winthrop's letters?"

"Every one, I think."

CHAPTER XVI.

[Pg 99]

Before leaving for Mexico there was a long, detailed conversation between Stolliker and Carlita, a conversation in which he fully outlined to her the part it would be necessary for her to play—a line of action to which she offered no word of objection, though her whole soul rebelled against such duplicity.

There was also a telegraph code agreed upon, by which cipher telegrams could be sent; a method used before, but always comparatively safe. A book was mutually agreed upon, in this instance "The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes," by Conan Doyle. The word, counting from the bottom of the page, was to be indicated by the first number, the page itself by the second; so that to read it would be impossible, unless the reader knew to what volume the numbers referred, as well as the edition selected.

They understood each other perfectly when Stolliker left to catch his train, and in his own mind there was not a doubt but that he should be able to prove Pierrepont's guilt with almost greater ease than he had ever settled a case before.

"It's too pretty a neck to be bound by a halter," he mused, as he took his seat in the train. "Adam lost Eden because of a woman—a woman who loved him; but this man will lose more than that, if I mistake not. He will lose not alone his life, but his soul as well, and for a woman who loves him not! It is a queer world, and man is the queerest animal in it. Instead of conscience making cowards of us all, passion makes brutes of us all, and we forget conscience and cowardice, too, under the intoxicant of a woman's smile."

After Stolliker had gone, the excitement which had seemed to brace Carlita for the emergency suddenly wore itself out, and for several days she was confined to her room, with a nearer approach to fever than she had ever had in her strong, healthy young life before.

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It was during those few days that a strange change came over Jessica.

She developed a sudden affection for her mother's ward that touched that poor, friendless young thing to the heart. She even refused to go to the opera the night that Carlita was threatened with delirium, and sat beside the bed, holding Carlita's hand while the physician was in the room, and bending over the patient once or twice with tenderest solicitude when there was a murmur of a name upon those rambling lips which she did not wish the doctor to hear.

And Jessica learned much in those few days, much that it would have been a thousand times better if she had never known; but Carlita was unaware of that.

She lifted the girl's hand to her cooling lips, and pressed it there passionately when she realized who it was that had nursed her so carefully.

"How shall I thank you?" she murmured, faintly. "I don't think I have ever appreciated before how good you are!"

"Perhaps we have never quite understood each other before," returned Jessica, in that low, melodious voice which none knew better than she how to assume.

"Ah, yes, it is that," answered Carlita, eagerly. "But now that I know how tender your friendship can be, you will not withdraw it from me? I am so alone, so pitifully alone in all the world! There is not one creature that belongs to me, not one that cares whether I live or die, not one to whom I could stretch out my hand for help, no matter what my needs may be. It seems to me sometimes that my heart will break from the heaviness of its loneliness and isolation. Let me love you, Jessica! Let me love you!"

[Pg 101]

There was a peculiar smile upon the Judas lips, a smile filled with fascination—a fascination which she was exerting upon that helpless girl as she had upon so many men, luring them to eternal ruin, and then she bent and pressed a Judas kiss upon Carlita's tremulous lips.

"You silly little sentimentalist!" she exclaimed, laughingly. "I should always have been your friend if you had not repelled my advances with such determination. There now"—moving the pillows into a more comfortable position—"we won't talk about it any more. You are weak and nervous. The first thing I know you will cry, then I shall cry, and then I shall never forgive you as long as I live for making my nose red. Did you ever read in a novel about how beautiful the heroine looks when she cries? That is the baldest kind of rot! I never saw a girl in my life who looked pretty when she cried. I am not presentable for hours afterward."

It was a charity in its way, this new friendship, for in spite of its odious treachery on one side, it kept Carlita from going mad in those first days, and later gave her courage to play the part which Stolliker had mapped out for her.

At the end of the fifth day Stolliker reached the City of Mexico. He telegraphed from there, but there was nothing beyond the statement of his arrival.

On the seventh Carlita was up and about again, very wan, very haggard, but still on the road to recovery.

She felt that there was no longer any time to be lost in carrying out Stolliker's injunctions; and so, when Leith Pierrepont's card was brought to her two days later, she arose and went wearily downstairs. [Pg 102]

"How you have suffered!" Leith exclaimed, as his eyes fell upon her.

Her own burned fiercely, and her lips trembled so that she could find no words in which to answer him.

He pressed her hand in silence, and led her to the same chair she had occupied that day when Stolliker was in the conservatory.

"It is so good of you to receive me," he continued, after a painful pause. "In memory of our compact of friendship, I have called every day to ask after you."

Her heart gave a great passionate bound, a mad bound of anger, at his presumption, she told herself; but her tone was calm, even serene, as she replied to him:

"Really? I was not told. Perhaps it was forgotten. It was very good of you to take so much trouble. Every one has been singularly kind and just, when I was fancying myself so cruelly alone, too."

"Never alone so long as you will consider me your friend."

"That is two I have now."

"Two? Who is the other?"

"Jessica."

"Oh!"

A shadow of disappointment crossed his brow, a disappointment which he made no attempt to conceal.

She laughed nervously.

"Jessica tells me that I have been such a fool," she said, in a tone that was quite new to her.

"Indeed? How?"

"She calls me 'little Puritan,' and says that my absurd morality has a Plymouth Rock cast. She has told me the reason I have but two friends."

"Has she? What is it?" [Pg 103]

"It is because I am too intense for this day and generation. People don't like it. Frivolity and lightness of heart are much more to their taste."

"But what of your nature? Does that count for nothing? Is that not to be taken into consideration?"

"One's nature is a matter of education, nothing more. If that has been faulty, it should be rectified as quickly as possible."

"May I ask how she proposes that you shall rectify these defects of education?"

"Why, simply by imitating other people at first."

"Herself, for example?"

"Certainly."

"By playing poker after the opera, you mean?"

"Perhaps, though not necessarily. You do not approve?"

"I approve of a woman or man following the bent of her or his own particular predilection," he answered, evasively. "If you approve of playing poker, I have nothing to say."

"But—"

"But—I should be very sorry," he said, sadly.

"You would—withdraw from that compact of friendship?"

"No; I should feel that you needed me all the more, and I should be in constant attendance, lest the moment should arrive in my absence when you might want my services most."

She looked up at him with a faint smile, into which she would have thrown more archness had the power to do so been given her, and exclaimed, playfully:

"You offer inducement rather than opposition."

He flushed and drew back slightly, something in word, or tone, or glance jarring upon his emotion. Somehow he preferred her coldest disdain to the remark that she had made, and yet there was nothing in it to give offense to any man. [Pg 104]

He walked to the other side of the fire, behind her chair, and changed the subject suddenly.

"When shall you be able to take up your music again?" he asked, irrelevantly.

"Soon, I hope," she answered, but with a little shiver.

He saw it, and his conscience smote him. He believed that he had wronged her.

"Carlita!" he cried, unconscious that in his pain he had used her first name. "Carlita, don't allow a morose and morbid desire to conceal your real emotions make you false to yourself and all those higher and better attributes with which God has blessed you. You have sustained a terrible shock. Don't let it turn the very beauties of your sweet nature into a curse. You want something to turn to in your hour of trouble. Let it be your music. God gave you a talent which He intended as a comfort and sustaining power. Call upon it now. May I play to you?"

She did not reply, she could not; but already he had wandered toward the piano. He sat down absent-mindedly and passed his hands over the keys.

It reminded them both of that other evening when he had played for her, and they sang together, that evening when he had told her of a love of which he had no right to speak, which had no right to exist. A great, wild, turbulent passion rose up in his heart against himself, numbing his fingers.

For the first time within his remembrance the keys beneath his hands gave forth a discordant sound.

He stood up suddenly and looked at her.

She too had arisen.

Her eyes were fierce, burning with raging passion. He thought he knew what thoughts were at work in her brain, and cried out feverishly: [Pg 105]

"God! How can a man live to curse himself for a momentary yielding to madness! Do you believe there is any forgiveness for it? Do you believe there is forgiveness for any sin, when the person against whom you have sinned is dead, when he can no longer hear you cry out your passionate remorse?"

She did not reply. She rose ghastly in her horrible pallor, and stood there shaking and trembling as if an awful ague had fallen upon her. She was striving to loosen her cleaving tongue when Jessica came into the room suddenly, with a swish of skirts and a bound that startled her.

"Halloo, Leith!" she exclaimed, in the old slangy way. "Glad to see you back again. The house has been like a funeral. Look at Carlita! Like a ghost, isn't she? And you tiring her out by allowing her to stand in this way. If you had been either a good physician or a good nurse, you would have drawn up that couch and have her comfortably bolstered up with pillows. Now, I'm going to send her upstairs, just because you have been so thoughtless."

"I'm afraid I deserve the punishment," he answered, meekly. "But if I promise not to do it in future you won't banish me, will you?"

"Not to any alarming extent," she returned, laughing. "Here you are, Ahbel! Take our patient upstairs, see that she is nicely tucked up and has a good rest. And now, sir, give an account of yourself. Where have you been this last week?"

But Carlita did not hear his reply.

Ahbel had led her from the room to her own, where she suddenly sat down beside the window.

"Leave me, Ahbel!" she cried, nervously. "I'll ring if I want you, but I couldn't lie down now. I must think! I must think!"

She didn't even know when the girl left the room, but, with her hands clinched in her lap, sat looking half frantically out of the window. [Pg 106]

What was it, she was asking herself, that he would have told her when Jessica entered? Could it have been a confession of his guilt? Would a guilty man have so spoken? What was it he meant? Was he innocent or guilty?

And, as if in answer to her unspoken question, a knock came upon the door, quick, incisive, as if the seeker for permission to enter realized the importance of her errand.

It was Ahbel.

"A telegram, miss!" she exclaimed, half breathlessly.

Carlita received it and tore it open hastily. It looked ordinary enough as it trembled in her hand, and yet there was something sinister in the array of figures as she flashed her eyes over them:

"2, 75, 107, 29, 12, 35, 18, 134; 24, 23, 18, 11, 126, 29, 23, 22, 55, 10, 324, 51, 23, 50, 135, 114, 45, 116, 19, 97, 17, 78, 4, 97."

Scarcely able to control her excitement, she sped across the floor to her escritoire, and snatched up the volume of "Sherlock Holmes" concealed there.

With trembling fingers she turned the pages and slowly counted out the words, horrible, ghastly in their import:

"The gentleman to whom you were engaged was not shot as you were told.

E. S."

Breathless, with alternate flashes of heat and cold traveling over her with such rapidity that unconsciousness was threatened, Carlita sat there staring at the words represented by the numbers in that telegram, understanding all the horrible import of it, yet unable to think connectedly after the first shock, until finally she flung up her hands and covered her wretched face passionately.

"Why should it affect me like this?" she cried, as if some awful hatred of herself were at work in her heart. "Why should it affect me like this? I knew that Leith Pierrepont was guilty of murder—knew it as well before as I know it now—and yet—and yet hope must have been at work within me, for this additional proof of his guilt is maddening. Why should he lie, if it were not he that committed the crime? Why should he wish to deceive me as to the manner of Olney's death? Good God! it seems impossible that a human creature, one of Thine own creation, could be so base; and yet it must be so—it must be so!"

And yet, for all her self-assurance, she snatched up the book again and once more toiled through the numbers, counting them out more slowly, more carefully, than she had done before, and feeling the hideous depression creeping over her with renewed horror as she realized that she had made no mistake.

And then, trembling so that she could scarcely hold the volume, she compiled a telegram to Edmond Stolliker in reply:

"I don't understand your message. Have you had body disinterred, and what does the knowledge imply? Answer at once if you have reason still to believe the man whom we suspect to be guilty."

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She felt better when it had been dispatched by Ahbel, with the injunction to the telegraph operator to be sure there should be no mistake made in the numbers; still she could not rest, but walked up and down the room, up and down, like the tigress that chafes against confining bars.

Half an hour afterward Jessica entered, her smile more fascinating than ever.

"Not lying down, as I commanded, you naughty girl!" exclaimed the female Judas, playfully taking Carlita by the shoulders and forcing her into a chair. "I actually feel inclined to dismiss your careless maid. What's the matter? You look in a fever of excitement."

"I'm afraid I am," admitted Carlita, with a wan smile. "I wish you'd let me go out for a little drive or—or—something. I feel as if the house were suffocating me!"

"A drive? Why, certainly; and I'll go with you, if you'll have me. I'll order the carriage at once," suiting the action to the word and ringing the bell. "What has upset you like this? Some news since you left the drawing-room? Ah, I see! a telegram. May I read it?"

She lifted the paper without waiting for permission, and made a little wry face.

"Great Scott!" she exclaimed, laughing. "What's all this algebra about? No, that's wrong; for, in algebra, letters stands for figures, and here figures must stand for letters. What does it mean, dearie?"

Carlita had arisen and stood facing her, her great burning eyes fixed upon the calm ones before her. Her cheeks were crimson with the excitement that seemed consuming her, and, leaning forward, she placed her hot fingers upon Jessica's cool wrist.

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"I wonder if I dare trust you?" she whispered, feverishly. "I wonder if I dare tell you what that telegram contains?"

Jessica smiled again. It was such a curious smile. It might have startled, and would have certainly puzzled, Carlita had she been in an analytical frame of mind; but she was too much upset mentally to think of that.

"Trust me!" exclaimed Jessica in a tone that simulated offense admirably. "If you have any doubts upon the subject, perhaps you had better not."

"Oh, forgive me!" cried Carlita, regretfully. "I am in too great distress to consider my words carefully, and I thought you would understand. We have grown to be so much to each other in these last few days—or weeks, is it? Let me tell you, will you not, dear Jessica? You know the solemn oath that I have sworn, and you will help me?"

"You mean about Olney?"

"Yes."

Jessica did not reply. A knock came in answer to her ring just then, and pushing Carlita back into her chair again, she answered the summons, then drew another chair up in front of her mother's ward.

"You startle me," she said, gently.

"I, too, am startled—frightened," answered Carlita, shivering. "Here is the translation of those figures—read it."

Jessica took the paper into her hand, and read aloud:

"The gentleman to whom you were engaged was not shot as you were told."

The paper fluttered from her hand. She lifted her eyes and allowed them to rest upon Carlita's, heavy, dull with apprehension. She was a magnificent actress. [Pg 110]

There was a long, dense silence between them, then Jessica's lips moved slowly.

"What does it mean?" she gasped, hoarsely. "What under heaven could have induced him to lie?"

Once again Carlita leaned forward, her scorching fingers touching Jessica's wrist in an uncanny sort of way that made the latter shiver.

"The truth is not upon the lips of—a guilty man," she answered, in a hollow, unnatural tone. "Forgive me, Jessica, but I heard your words the night he came with his awful story of Olney's—death. I heard you accuse—him to your mother. I know that you, too, believe him guilty."

She paused, but Jessica did not speak. She waited for her to continue, and after a moment the hollow voice went on:

"I went down to see him, hoping to hear more, and I heard you instead, accusing him to your mother. It has been a bond of sympathy between us. I have loved you because I knew you must hate him as I do."

"And yet you continue to receive him!" exclaimed the arch-hypocrite, half reproachfully.

She was scarcely prepared for the excitement her words provoked. Carlita sprang to her feet and walked hastily up and down the room, her hands clasping and unclasping, her cheeks crimson, her breath coming in little gasps.

"I know that you will hate me even as I hate myself for the despicable part that is forced upon me, but it is only to prove his guilt that I have undertaken it. It is only to bring him to a punishment of his dastardly crime; and, despise myself as I will—let the whole world despise me if it must—I shall play the part to the bitter end!"

She was at the other end of the room and could not see the hateful, cunning smile that lurked about the corners of Jessica's mouth as she said, quietly: [Pg 111]

"Then you know that he loves you?"

The beautiful, majestic head was bowed for a moment in shame, as the quivering voice replied:

"Yes, I know it."

"He told you—"

"Before Olney left for Mexico."

"He asked you to—be his wife?"

"Yes."

There was the old gleam of the serpent in the brown eyes, the greenish glare that Carlita must have understood had she been looking; but she was not.

Neither of them spoke for some moments. Carlita had paused, and was looking, in a distracted way, through the window, seeing nothing of the world that was stretched out before her.

Jessica arose and stood beside her before she was conscious of her approach. The curious tone of the hissing voice caused her to shrink away in a sort of nameless terror as the words reached her:

"And you want to prove his guilt; is that it?"

She hesitated for a moment—it seemed so ghastly, so unreal, so impossible—and then her voice came in a hoarse whisper:

"Yes, that is it."

"I will help you!" cried Jessica, in a voice filled with a desire for revenge so strong that it could not be subdued. "I will help you! I know a man down there, an old friend of the family. He will assist us. You think you have not a friend. I can see more clearly than you, because I—do not—suffer. You were right when you said that I believed in his guilt, and we will punish him—you and I—as man was never punished before. Meriaz will help us."

"How can I ever thank you!" cried Carlita, grasping the hand that was not withdrawn from her. [Pg 112]

Jessica smiled enigmatically.

"I do not care for thanks. Only let me help you," she answered in the same tone, that somehow sent a chill to Carlita's heart.

Then she turned away to answer a knock at the door.

"The carriage is ready, Miss Chalmers," the servant announced, "and a telegram for Miss de Barryos."

She had the telegram in her hand and the door closed almost before the sentence had been completed.

Carlita flew across the room and seized it, her cheeks glowing more crimson than ever, then fading to ashen white.

"Help me!" she gasped. "There is the book. Count the words from the bottom of the page while I

read the numbers aloud to you."

And placing both her weapons and ammunition in the hands of her deadliest enemy, they translated together the words:

"Body disinterred. Murder committed by suffocation. Everything points to person suspected. The necessity to play your part with consummate skill is greater than ever. Take care, and trust no one.

E. S."

But the warning had come too late.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The shock of the telegram seemed to impart to Carlita the strength she required for action.

She felt a new vitality, new courage pouring through her like the false, effervescent strength from wine, but she did not recognize its falsity. She felt herself capable of anything to bring Leith Pierrepont to justice, to bring to the gallows the craven coward that had robbed Olney Winthrop of life.

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"The carriage is here; let us go out!" she cried feverishly to Jessica. "I can be ready in five minutes."

She arose and placed the two telegrams with their translations in her desk, together with the volume of "The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes," and locked it carefully, while Jessica went away to her own room.

To her surprise she found her mother standing there, her hands pressed upon her breast, her haggard eyes wild with fear.

"What are you doing here?" cried Jessica, roughly, now that there was no longer a necessity to oil her treacherous tongue. "You look like a fright! Ever since that milk-sop, Olney, was reported murdered, you have gone about like an uneasy ghost. You've even neglected your hair until there is a black stripe as wide as my fingers down the middle of your head. For the Lord's sake, pull yourself together, and stop acting like a frightened school miss who has found a mouse nibbling at her bread and butter. Go and color your hair!"

"Jessica, have you no heart at all? What is it that you intend to do? Oh, I wish to God I had never consented to allow the child of another woman to come into our household. I wish—"

"Oh, let up!" interrupted her respectful daughter, carelessly. "You've done it, and there is no use in grieving over spilled milk. We've got her money, and I'll have a darned sight more of it before I get through with life, or I'll miss my reckoning."

"Jessica! Jessica, for the love of Heaven! what is it that you mean to do?"

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"Oh, rot! Don't stand there wringing your hands and whining like a whipped cur. If you had any blood in your veins you would help me, and not make difficulties the greater. What do I mean to do?"—her face darkening cruelly—"I mean to have the deepest and most complete revenge upon those two that woman ever planned. I have thought it all out carefully and well, and the best of it is, that she shall execute my every wish. I mean to ruin her body and soul. And as for him—well, his punishment shall remain my secret. And now there is something that I want you to do."

"Oh, Jessica, I can not! I—"

The girl turned swiftly and caught her mother by the wrist, her fingers closing upon it like bands of steel. Her eyes, burning in their fierce wrath, looked into those shrinking ones, and her voice came in a heavy, hoarse whisper:

"You will obey me, do you hear? You will obey me, or—"

She did not complete the threat. It was not necessary. The haggard eyes had dropped. A slow shiver had passed over the elder woman. She looked suddenly bowed and broken, and, for the first time in her life, old.

Jessica dropped her wrist, and turned away, a low exclamation of disgust dropping from her lips.

"I want to send for Meriaz!" she exclaimed, contemptuously.

"He is—here," stammered Mrs. Chalmers, helplessly.

"Here!" exclaimed Jessica, turning quickly, her interest returning.

"Yes."

"And you never told me?"

"I came to tell you now."

"And you beat about the bush in this whining way? Heavens! I sometimes wonder how it is that you can be my mother! Where is he?"

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"At the Holland."

"Send for him. Let him be here in my room at seven o'clock this evening."

"He—wants—money," faltered Mrs. Chalmers.

"Money? I thought to have to pay a higher price for his services than that. Certainly he can have money—Carlita's money," she added, maliciously. "Give him all he wants, but have him here at seven. I am going out to drive with your ward. Look here! There'll be a game of poker here tonight. It'll be a rattler, too, and don't you forget it! I want you to have your wits about you, and not go wool-gathering. Carlita will play."

"Carlita!"

"You look as shocked as if I had told you I intended to murder her. She must win. Win heavily, you understand?"

"She has consented to play?"

"No; but I mean that she shall before the evening is over. Take care that the supper afterward is exceptionally nice, and make sure that there is plenty of champagne."

"You mean that she shall drink that?"

"I do. I know her hot Southern temperament. There will be no half measures with her when she has once learned her lesson. A useless waste of time might be fatal to my plans, and I do not propose that there shall be a moment lost. I don't want you to come down there tonight looking as you do now. Clear up your lugubrious countenance, get that black stripe out of your hair, and come down as your old smiling self. If you fail me, you know well enough that there will be another added in my list for vengeance."

"Is it possible that you are human, Jessica?"

"And your daughter, my lady!" she added, with a mocking bow. "Bah! One would think that you were an angel! Don't forget that I know your life. Posing is not becoming to you. You are detaining me from my sweet friend. Au revoir!"

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Ten minutes later she was tucking the robes around Carlita in the victoria with as much tenderness as a loving sister could have shown, and as they were driving through the park she carefully broached the subject upon which she had spoken to her mother.

"Look here, Miss Priscilla," she began, half laughing, in her boyish, fascinating way, "the time has come for you to get out of this Madonna life you are leading. I am going to take the reins in my hands. Do you know what I have done?"

"No! What?"

"I have made arrangements to have a great blowout at the house tonight, and you are to be the principal attraction."

"I?"

"Yes. Did it ever really come home to you with great force, Carlita, that you are a wonderfully beautiful girl?"

"Flatterer!"

"Not at all: it's the solemn truth. If you are really serious in desiring to work out the end you have in view about Olney, you must bring Leith Pierrepont to terms as quickly as you can. There is absolutely nothing that will do it like feeling that you need a protector. In spite of the crime that he has committed, he is really a great prude himself, or poses as one, which is quite the same thing. He will not like to have the woman whom he wishes to make his wife playing poker, and it will bring him around more quickly than anything. Come, now; will you join us tonight?"

It never occurred to Carlita to look into the logic of the speech. She was restless, nervous. She wanted to do something that would help her to forget for even such a short time, and Jessica's victory was infinitely easier than she had any idea it would be.

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"Yes, I will join you," she answered, feverishly, feeling a sudden elation in knowing that she would be doing something to which he would object. "But I don't know how to play."

"You know the cards?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then that will be quite sufficient. You'll learn the rules of poker in five minutes, and that is about all of the game that two-thirds of the people know who play it, particularly those who consider themselves experts. I told mamma to have a supper prepared. We'll have a lark, and don't you forget it. We shall accomplish your object sooner than you anticipated."

"How shall I thank you for your help?"

"Wait until it is done, and your object is attained, then, perhaps, you may see a way. What have you got to wear tonight? It must not be black."

"I have a white gown."

"We can make that answer with flowers. Suppose we drive to the florist's, and then on home, to make sure that everything will be in readiness?"

"I am willing."

A gleam of color had sprung already to Carlita's pale cheeks, in anticipation of the evening. She

had determined that the old reserve should be thrown completely aside, and that she would be the gayest of the gay. She was comforting her shrinking, sickening soul by the reflection that it was for Olney's sake—to discover Olney's murderer.

And so they returned to prepare for the evening, both of them in a whirl of excitement, though for far different reasons.

CHAPTER XIX.

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It seemed to Carlita that it was impossible that so much could have been accomplished in the few short hours that had been allotted to the florist; and yet, when she descended to the drawing-room, the mantels were banked with flowers and the rooms were decorated as if some grand ball were in progress.

Her gown had been rearranged by the deft fingers of Jessica's own maid until it seemed impossible that it could have been one of the last year's fashioning. The bodice was décolleté and over the back and across the shoulders a fall of magnificent old lace had been arranged, falling in jabots from the front of the shoulders. A soft old piece of "the cloth of silver" was laid in cross plaits over the front, after the fashion of an old fichu, and fastened at the waist with superb diamond buckles which had belonged to her paternal grandmother. On the shoulders, fastening the lace, were diamond butterflies, their wings raised as if they had but alighted for the moment, and were even then ready to wing their way again. The broad, round belt was caught with a diamond arrow in the back, while in the hair a beautiful bow knot of the same gems caught the rolls of blue-black hair together.

Her throat and arms were bare save for a row of diamonds about the wrists.

It was really a picture of superb beauty that she presented as she stood there in the door of that artistically decorated apartment, and one that no man could look upon unmoved.

There was a glitter in Jessica's eyes as she observed—a glitter of malicious hatred—and for a moment the small teeth closed upon the crimson underlip.

"Curse her!" she muttered, in voiceless hatred—"curse her! She shall rue the day that she robbed me of Leith Pierrepont's love! There is nothing so sweet in life as vengeance!"

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But she went forward with a bewilderingly fascinating smile upon her lips.

"Ah, chérie, how lovely you are," she exclaimed, clasping her arms in delight. "If I were a man, I should commit any folly, any madness to win you. I even think I might emulate the young Lochinvar and steal you away bodily. I can almost find it in my heart to forgive the man who would commit a crime in order that he might possess you."

"Hush!" exclaimed Carlita, with a slight shiver. "I never felt such a sneak in my life. My courage almost fails me at times. Have I the right to do evil that good may come?"

Jessica shrugged her shoulders slightly.

"You must be the judge of that," she answered, lightly. "It is your lover who has been murdered, not mine. It was the man who was to have been your husband who lies out there, treacherously lured to his death, given no chance for self-defense, suffocated like a rat in a hole, not even given an opportunity for escape. It was your—"

"For the love of Heaven, hush!" cried Carlita, all her lovely color forsaking her. "You are right—you are right. I should be a coward—worse than that, an accomplice—did I fail to make him pay the penalty of his crime."

"Take care. There is the bell."

She took Carlita by the arm and led her quickly into the conservatory, in order that she might have time to recover herself, speaking to her in the old, soothing voice, knowing her power as well as did the treacherous sirens of old.

An hour later there were two tables for poker formed in the drawing-room. At one of them Jessica and Carlita sat with Redfield Ash, Dudley Maltby and Hugh Beresford. At the other there were six persons.

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"We are to teach Carlita tonight!" exclaimed Jessica, gayly, to the men at their table. "I assure you she will be an apt pupil, though it is her first attempt. I spent a whole hour this evening giving her points on the game. Don't be surprised if you all lose your good ducats, for you well know the luck of a beginner. How many cards, Carlita?"

"Two, please."

"Three of a kind already? I shall be very careful, I assure you, how I go up against your hands. There you are! Now, Dudley, open the ball and make it lively."

"Not on a pair of deuces," he answered, with a short laugh, throwing down his cards. "I'm afraid Miss de Barryos has robbed the pack."

The betting was really very small, the limit being one dollar, and no one with a hand worth much except Carlita. The pot was finally awarded to her without seeing her hand, and once more the cards were dealt.

This time she called for one, and a groan went around the table.

"What is it?" asked Jessica, laughing. "A flush or a straight?"

But Carlita only smiled and held her cards closely.

There were some rather good ones against her this time, and the betting became lively; but as she raised the bet again and again one backed down and then another, until she finally proved herself the victor once more.

"Let me see what you had!" exclaimed Jessica. "Just as a matter of fun, you understand, though it's not in accord with the rules of the game. A bob-tail flush, as I live, and full a hundred to the good!"

There was a shout of laughter from the men at the wisdom of their new opponent, and the capital manner in which she had won their money, and as the noise continued, the name of the new arrival which the servant announced was drowned:

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"Mr. Pierrepont!"

It gave him an opportunity to pause at the door. For a moment he did not recognize Carlita in her white gown, flashing as she was with diamonds, the flush of excitement coloring her lovely cheeks to the hue of the wild rose, and when he did an expression of such pain darkened his eyes as must have attracted the attention of every one who observed him. But no one did except Jessica, and he had had ample time to recover himself before the laughter had subsided.

He went forward in the old debonair manner and stood behind Carlita's chair.

"Who won a hundred with a bob-tail flush?" he asked, carelessly.

"Carlita!" answered Jessica, putting out her hand to welcome him. "And she did it with the coolness of a man who had spent his life in the business. I predict she will become one of the best players in New York. Come and join us. Here is a chair for you."

"Thanks, no," he answered, after a slight hesitation. "I don't feel up to it tonight. I'll watch you for a moment, and perhaps you'll let me play something for you on the piano later. No, don't urge me, Maltby. I really couldn't. Do you like the game, Miss de Barryos?"

There was something almost wistful in the question, but Carlita threw up her head with a sort of defiance and answered in a tone that contained a metallic ring:

"Very. It is fascinating. I really think I shall never want to do anything else."

Leith sighed slightly.

He was silent, striving to account for the sudden and mysterious change in her, and yet for some reason unfathomable he dared not ask her the cause. He watched them for a few hands, and then wandered to the piano, playing a few selections in which there was so little heart that it wearied him.

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Once or twice he got up to go, but some invisible power seemed to chain him to the place. He could not leave.

It was not until eleven o'clock, when supper was announced, that he got an opportunity of saying a word alone to Carlita.

"And so you are trying to unlearn Puritanism," he said to her, with a little wistful smile upon his lips that made him so singularly handsome. "Do you think you will like the change from saint to satyr?"

"I was never a saint, and there is no reason why I should be a satyr," she answered, forcing herself to smile in return. "Puritanism must be an awfully trying thing to one's friends."

"Not to the friends who love you."

"Our friends never love us unless we are interesting to them."

"Friends who love you because you entertain and amuse them are not worth having. They desecrate the name. And friends who would degrade you are demons in disguise, who are tempting you to eternal ruin, branding your soul with the crest of Satan in order that you may make them laugh."

For a moment Carlita glanced up with a mocking smile upon her lips. Ah, verily was this the "devil quoting scripture." A murderer—the murderer of her lover, prating to her of her soul!

"You ought to go into the Salvation Army," she cried, compelling her tongue to speak lightly. "Are you without sin that you are willing to cast a stone?"

"God knows I am not; but is a future denied to man because of a blackened past? Heaven knows I would give all the years to come if I could cleanse my soul of sin and stand before you and my God for one brief hour a pure man."

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A wild light gleamed in her eyes. She bent forward away from him, not daring to look at him. Her voice was scarcely more than a whisper, and yet he heard the words:

"You have sinned so deeply, then?"

He paused, lifting the heavy hair from his white brow, as if its weight oppressed him.

"Yes," he answered.

"How?" she panted.

Another pause, then slowly:

"I can not tell you now, but some day I will. Some day when—"

"When what?" she whispered, breathlessly.

He leaned forward and whispered in her ear:

"When I know that you love me, even as I love you!"

CHAPTER XX.

Carlita's heart was beating so that Pierrepont's words were almost drowned in the sound. It seemed impossible for her to reply. She had grown dizzy and blind suddenly, and it was with a relief that was almost hysterical that she welcomed a young man who interrupted the tete-a-tete.

She knew perfectly well that that was not what Stolliker would have had her do, that she was losing an opportunity that she might never be able to regain; but she could not help that, and when one of the men who had played at the other table bent over her to inquire how she had enjoyed the game, she looked into his face with an interest, an animation, that caused Pierrepont to turn away with a weary sigh.

The supper was of the best; but when she left the table, it would have been impossible for Carlita to have told one thing that had been served. It seemed to her that she had passed the time in a state of hypnotism, living, moving, acting while her senses were governed by some other power than her own.

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And yet she jested with a blithe merriment that brought again the old expression of cynicism to Pierrepont's countenance. Jessica had reserved the seat beside herself for him, and he slipped into it when there was nothing else to do.

"Is not our little Puritan charming tonight?" she asked, with an animated smile. "I never imagined that Carlita could be so bewitching. I fancy that half the men in the room are in love with her. Did you ever see her so beautiful?"

"Never so beautiful," he answered, with affected lightness; "but much more charming many times."

"You approve of the Puritan type, then?"

"I am the strongest believer in individuality, and she has lost hers tonight. She is as out of place as—as—you would be in the role of Priscilla."

"I am not quite sure whether you intend that as a compliment or the reverse," returned Jessica, laughing; "but analysis is such a stupid thing. At all events she gives promise of being one of the best poker players I have ever seen, and while that may not be altogether a recommendation for a woman to the clerical class, it certainly is to the persons whom Carlita is liable to meet. But let us talk about yourself. Do you know, I fancy you are not looking well."

"It is all fancy, I assure you."

"No, it is not. You are pale, dark under the eyes, and disturbed looking."

"Biliousness, I give you my word."

"No. I'm afraid you got a germ of some sort of disease in Mexico. You have never been yourself since you returned from there."

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He was eating a deviled kidney, sandwiched between two broiled mushrooms, but pushed it away from him as she spoke. The faintest perceptible frown gathered between his eyes.

"Imagination!" he answered, with a short laugh.

"You liked Mexico, then?"

"I loathe it!" he returned. "I wish to God I could never hear the name mentioned again. I wish to God I had never seen the place!"

There had been a lull in the conversation, and the words, low as they were spoken, were heard from one end of the table to the other. Carlita glanced up. A ghastly whiteness overspread her countenance. For a moment it seemed to Jessica that she was going to faint, but young Beresford handed her a glass of champagne which she drained before taking it from her lips.

Jessica's small teeth set angrily.

"If she believes him to be guilty," she muttered, mentally, "why does this new evidence of his guilt upset her like this? Curse her! She thinks she can deceive me; but she shall see—she shall see!"

But she only smiled above her wrath, and turned again to Pierrepont.

"How you are changing from the indifferent, nonchalant man you used to be, whom nothing could arouse from the even tenor of his way. There are absolutely traces of passion in your speech nowadays."

He bestowed a smile upon her which sent the blood tingling through her veins, and said in the

old drawing, indolent way:

"There have always been traces of passion in my nature."

It was just such a speech as in the old days had convinced her, without further declaration from him, that he loved her; and as memory returned of those times, she was forced to bite her lip to keep the angry, bitter tears from her eyes. She saw now how little there had ever been in it, saw how little he had ever really cared, and a fierce hatred of him leaped to life in her breast, a hatred that was all the more savage because its very essence and flame was the wild, passionate love for him which she had not the least power to control.

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"What frauds you men are!" she exclaimed, forcing herself to speak lightly, though her heart still ached poignantly. "There is so little in your words and so much in your manner of saying them. No wonder you break our hearts, and then still your conscience by making yourselves believe that you were not in fault, that you had said nothing by which your honors were compromised."

"Do you believe that hearts break?" asked Leith, mockingly.

"Not the heart of the 'new woman,'" answered Jessica, laughing. "She is too familiar with the genus homo."

"The 'new woman' has no heart. She is all brain."

"Then you acknowledge that woman has, until recently, had a 'corner on heart,' so to speak, and that man for all time has been without one, being a creature simply of brain?"

"Did I say so?"

"Practically, as the 'new woman' is only taking her place in the front walks as man's intellectual companion."

"Perhaps you are right; I don't know. It seems to me sometimes as if men, and women, too, would be better off without hearts. It has caused more sin than it ever prevented a thousand times, and has created more misery than happiness a million to one. For my own part, if I could dispense with the very necessary organ, it would give me the greatest relief possible."

"Does that mean that you are in love, Pierrepont?" questioned Redfield Ash, with his mouth rather too full of food to be altogether intelligible.

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"Did there ever live a man worthy of the name who was not in love?" returned Leith, gallantly. "I love all women."

"For the sake of one?" asked young Beresford, with a sentimental glance toward Carlita.

Before Leith could reply, Jessica was on her feet.

"This is not a confessional!" she cried, lightly. "Now, we are going to award you gentlemen just thirty minutes for your wine and cigars. At the end of that time we shall expect you promptly in the drawing-room."

"It is too much!" exclaimed Beresford. "I for one am willing to forego the cigar in this occasion."

Jessica hesitated a moment, then, with a half glance at Carlita, exclaimed:

"If Miss de Barryos does not object, you may have the men in the drawing-room. Does smoke nauseate you, Carlita?"

Carlita laughed.

"I used to light my old friend the gardener's pipe, and I am sure he never had a new one oftener than once in five years."

The men followed at once, and Jessica paused only long enough to give instructions to the butler. When she reached the drawing-room, Carlita was already seated at the piano.

Her voice was a trifle weaker, from lack of practice, than it had been the last time Leith heard her sing, but it was infinitely sweet, and was greeted with a vociferous round of applause which neither one nor two songs would still; and then, stepping to the piano, Leith asked her if she would undertake the duet from "Aïda," which she had sung with him on one occasion.

She hated him for the request, and yet nothing under heaven could have caused her to decline. There was almost defiance in her eyes as she arose and yielded her place upon the stool to him.

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It was a magnificent thing, sung with wonderful depth of feeling and power of expression, and was a vast surprise to those present. Carlita wondered afterward how she had ever been able to complete it, but she heard his words of praise above all the rest, though they were fewer and spoken scarcely above his breath.

"What an artiste you will make—what an artiste you are! God! it is enough to make a Christian of a man to listen to you. And how you have improved since we sang that together the last time. I wish you would let me sing with you often. It is like being permitted a glimpse into paradise."

He had risen, and was standing with his back to the piano, looking down at her. The others were all around them; but suddenly they seemed to separate, no one knew how or why. They had heard no announcement of a new arrival, but as they stepped apart they realized that Jessica was standing there, her fingers touching the arm of a dark-visaged man whose aspect certainly was not pleasant.

There was a tremulous smile upon her lips, half expectant, half triumphant. She seemed to have forgotten them for the moment, but went forward straight up to Leith, who was not looking

toward her, but down at Carlita.

"Mr. Pierrepont," she exclaimed, speaking rather louder than usual, "I want to introduce you to a gentleman from Mexico. Senor Meriaz, Mr. Pierrepont!"

Leith glanced up. There had been a flush upon his cheeks, brought there by the pleasure of singing with Carlita, but as his eyes rested upon the man before him, his color vanished, and from brow to throat a ghastly pallor overspread his face, that the least observant could not fail to marvel at.

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He caught at the edge of the piano, then recovered himself almost as suddenly as he had lost his self-control.

But it was Meriaz who replied to the introduction, Meriaz whose voice alone was heard.

"Senor Pierrepont and I have met before!"

Then deliberately the dark-browed Mexican, who possessed not an element of refinement or gentlemanliness in his entire make-up, turned his back upon the elegant man of the world.

CHAPTER XXI.

There was a sensation in the drawing-room over which Mrs. Chalmers presided.

They were not looking at that lady, or they might have seen her pallor under all the artificial color of her complexion, and would certainly have noticed the nervous interlacing of her long fingers as they twined themselves about each other, and the little gasping breath that came through her parted lips.

Carlita alone seemed to retain her absolute composure.

Not a detail of the situation had escaped her, not even the angry compression of Leith Pierrepont's lips as Senor Meriaz turned his back and calmly sauntered to the other side of the room.

Young Beresford laughed constrainedly, feeling that something must be done to lighten the situation.

"Pon my soul, Pierrepont," he said, in a stage whisper, "if looks were poniards, you wouldn't be alive at this moment. Evidently you didn't hit it off with your friend from Mexico. What was it? One of your usual escapades with a beautiful senorita? His daughter, perhaps?"

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Leith had never come so near having a downright affection for the light-headed individual in his life.

"I never had the pleasure of an acquaintance with Senorita Meriaz, though I have met her," he said, nonchalantly; "but I am not fond of her father."

"It seemed almost as if your dislike extended to all things Mexican," said Carlita, lightly, marveling at her own coolness.

"Not to all things," he exclaimed, gallantly. "I believe you are partly Mexican."

"We must all adore angels," said Redfield Ash, with a bow to Carlita, "whether they be Mexican, Hindoo or heathen Chinee, and such you have proven yourself tonight by the beauty of your exquisite voice, Miss de Barryos. Won't you sing for us again? or are you weary?"

Carlita could never tell what impulse moved her, nor how she happened to yield to it, but she looked up into Pierrepont's face wistfully, and said, slowly:

"Will you accompany me? Your playing would convert a linnet to a nightingale."

He smiled the pleasure he felt, and seated himself at once; but his mind seemed preoccupied, for while he played the notes of the selection she placed before him, there was not the spirit—the exquisite coloring that usually characterized his playing, Carlita observed, watching with ceaseless intent.

Suddenly she seemed to have forgotten to hate herself for the despicable part she was playing—to have forgotten everything in the interest that surrounded the central figures in her little drama. She was like the detective who forgets he is a spy, under the excitement of a human chase.

After the song was finished, there was another call to the tables for the poker to begin again, but neither Pierrepont nor Meriaz joined them. Leith retained his seat at the piano for a time, then suddenly rose.

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The game was progressing hilariously. No one seemed to observe the fact that he had left the piano. Meriaz was seated a trifle back of Carlita, watching her hand, and as she glanced up she saw Pierrepont look at him. There was a slight uplifting of the eyebrows and the faintest movement of the head toward the door, and then he turned and went out.

Five minutes afterward, Meriaz arose leisurely, and after walking about the room quietly, looking at statuary and dainty objects of vertu, he followed in the direction Leith had indicated.

Apparently Jessica had been oblivious of the by-play, but Carlita looked toward her imploringly.

"I wonder if you could excuse me for a very few minutes?" she questioned, her excitement making her voice low and strained.

"Why, certainly," answered Jessica, sweetly. "Is the heat of the room too much for you?"

"I—I don't know; but I will not be long absent. You can play without me?"

"Oh, yes!" answered Jessica, laughing. "Perhaps some of your luck will flow over to my side. My chips are getting pitifully low."

She did not even glance up as Carlita left the room; but there was a curious twitching at the corners of her mouth when she saw Carlita leave by the same door by which Leith and Meriaz had made their exit.

Carlita did not pause to think. She was keeping her oath to the dead. She did not remember that what she was about to do was dishonorable, unwomanly. She had sworn that she would put all consideration of self behind in this search for the murderer of her lover, and she was doing it. [Pg 132]

She was in time to see Meriaz walk calmly into the library, through the open door of which she had seen Leith, and then the door was closed upon them.

She hurried swiftly through the hall and lifted a portière at the back end, through which she passed into the adjoining room, separated from the library only by a Japanese portière. The light was out in the room that screened her, and was burning brilliantly in the room that contained them, so that she could see and hear everything without fear of being seen.

"What has brought you here?" she heard Leith demand, indignantly, of the repulsive-looking Mexican who stood before him.

It was rather a change from his shrinking and the bold manner of the Mexican when they had been presented in the drawing-room, and she listened breathlessly for the answer.

"To see you!" returned Meriaz, his black, cunning eyes fixed greedily upon Leith's face.

"What for?" demanded Leith, towering over the short, bulky Mexican in his majestic rage.

"You know perfectly well," answered Meriaz, with a hateful grin. "I've come to find out the whole of the situation that made you so anxious that none of the story of young Winthrop's death should ever get to this section of the country."

"And you have found out?" questioned Leith, proudly.

"Oh, yes! You know me well enough to know that it doesn't take long to do that. You are in love with Miss de Barryos, the fiancé of the murdered man."

"May I ask who gave you this information?"

"It was not necessary that any one should. I'm not blind. But, anyway, you know how perfectly you are in my power." [Pg 133]

"In what?" cried Leith, forgetting himself for a moment, and thundering the word out so that Meriaz lifted his hand warningly.

"There is no use in your giving the snap away until that becomes necessary," he said, with despicable cunning. "I am not going to peach, provided you make it to my interest to keep quiet."

"What the devil do you want?"

"Money."

Leith hesitated. Even under his mustache both Carlita and Meriaz saw how his lips were twitching, how white they had grown.

"Pouf!" exclaimed the Mexican. "Why do you hesitate? You got all of his money, and you can surely give up that for protection."

Carlita half expected to see Pierrepont throttle the wretch before him, but instead he turned away and sat down before the writing-desk, leaning his elbow upon it and shading his eyes with a hand which trembled.

"I suppose you are right," he said, dully, after a long pause. "How much do you want?"

"Five thousand—now."

"And when you have got it, do you promise to take yourself back to Mexico or any place out of my sight? Do you promise that this cursed business shall be buried between us?"

"Yes, I promise; but you will leave me your address so that I can write to you occasionally."

"You know the address well enough without my giving it to you. There is one thing more. Will you answer a question?"

"If I can."

"How did you happen to know Miss Chalmers?"

A curious expression crossed the face of the wily Mexican.

"I knew her when she was a child," he answered, evasively. "I knew her father. It was quite natural that I should come to call when I came to America." [Pg 134]

"But not natural that she should bring you into her drawing-room to introduce you to her friends," returned Leith, forgetting that he was not very complimentary. "Have you told her

anything of this story?"

"Not a thing."

"You swear it?"

"I swear it!"

There was another short pause, then Leith threw out his hand deprecatingly.

"All right," he exclaimed. "There is my card with my address. Come there tomorrow at twelve and I will give you the five thousand. And now, go back to the drawing-room and I will follow you as quickly as possible so as not to attract attention."

The Mexican left the room without another word, and feeling old and stiff, Carlita crept away from her position beside the door.

She had seen Leith's head bowed upon his arms which rested upon the desk, and somehow there was a great lump in her throat which she felt would burst into hysterical sobbing if she stood there watching him.

The last doubt was gone now, but there was no triumph in the convincing proof of his guilt.

She went out upon a little side balcony and stood there with the cold night air blowing upon her heated face. She never knew how long she stayed there, but she was aroused at last by a mild flood of tears that came pouring uncontrollably from her eyes and hearing her own voice in her ears sounding strange and eerie to her strained senses:

"My God—my God! if it were only I who had died—if it were only I!"

CHAPTER XXII.

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It was a marvel to Carlita ever afterward how she had the strength to drag through the apparently endless hours of that evening, and yet after that outburst of passion there alone under the pitiless stars, she was to all appearances calm as a stoic.

She said good-night to Pierrepont as smilingly as to the others, and even permitted him to clasp her cold fingers for a moment as he took his leave.

"Do tell me everything!" exclaimed Jessica, when they were alone. "I have been feverishly anxious for them to go for two hours, because I knew there was so much that we should wish to talk about."

But she only shook her head and pressed the hand of her Judas wistfully.

"Not tonight," she answered, barely able to keep the sobs out of her voice. "I am nervous and tired. Tomorrow. Wait. You shall know everything then, and you will help me to decide what I am to do."

And Jessica, who knew all that would be told to her on the morrow as well then as she ever could know, put aside her curiosity gracefully.

"Of course, you poor, little tired child!" she exclaimed, soothingly. "I should have had more care for you and have put them out long ago. Come to your room and let me be your maid. I'm going to give you a nice soothing bromide, and tomorrow you will be as good as new."

She would listen to no denial, but dismissed Ahbel, and did not leave her charge until she was well tucked up in bed with the bromide swallowed, then she turned out the light and left the room softly.

Once outside the door, she paused and looked back with a sneering smile.

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"You poor little fool!" she muttered. "You poor little fool! I know you already a thousand times better than you know yourself. I could tell you things about the state of your own heart that would surprise you, I fancy. At all events, it is something which you must not suspect until my plot has been worked to the end. Upon my word, matters are shaping themselves to my will better even than if I had planned the circumstances of it all."

But whatever may have been her intention in the matter, her bromide worked to a charm, and the following morning Carlita arose refreshed from a profound sleep. Her cold plunge quite restored her, and she descended to the breakfast-room as bright and beautiful as if nothing had ever marred the serenity of her young life.

After breakfast she and Jessica talked long and earnestly in the privacy of the boudoir, a conversation in which she detailed to Jessica what she had purposely overheard the evening before, and then they conferred upon what course had best be pursued for the carrying out of their plan.

"You see!" exclaimed Jessica, when she had been appealed to for advice, "the conversation which you overheard has proven to you that this man Meriaz can be bought. Now, the question is, are you willing to give more for this information than Pierrepont is for his silence?"

"I would give my fortune to the last farthing!" cried Carlita, excitedly.

"Well, don't be foolish and give that away to Meriaz, or he would be just hog enough to demand

it. My own opinion is that he has come down rather light on Pierrepont, and when he has pocketed that five thousand, with no evidence in the hands of Pierrepont that it has been given over, he may be willing to sell his story to you for another five, if you drive your bargain hard, or ten at the outside. It isn't a good plan to squander money on a scoundrel like that when you can prevent it. You say that his appointment with Pierrepont is for twelve?"

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"Yes."

"Then I will write asking him to be here at two. It is eleven thirty now," looking at a little Dresden clock upon the mantel-shelf. "If my opinion is worth anything, I should say that you are very nearly at the end of your dilemma, and I certainly think you have gotten out of it very easily."

Carlita did not reply, but sighed wearily. There was no elation in her success, on the contrary her heart ached as it had not done when she had been informed of Olney's death, and a mist stood before her eyes as she sat beside the window that prevented her seeing the objects in the street.

And yet she took the note when Jessica had completed it, and sent it by her own maid to the address upon the envelope.

It seemed to her that the hours would never pass between twelve and two, and yet when the announcement was made to her that Senor Meriaz was awaiting her in the library, she could not go down and face him. She loathed him with a passionate repulsion, and her whole nature rebelled at the interview that must follow, yet she nerved herself to it, and was stately in her calmness as she entered the room where he waited.

"You sent for me, senorita?" he said, bowing to her with the innate politeness of even the lowest Spaniard.

"Miss de Barryos," she corrected, calmly.

"Was I mistaken, or did Miss Chalmers tell me that you also were Mexican?"

"My father was a Mexican, not I. I do not know the country," answered the girl, who but a few short months ago had loved to hear tales of travel there, and had spoken the liquid, musical language with such delight. "I sent for you, Senor Meriaz, upon a most unpleasant errand."

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"I can imagine nothing unpleasant connected with—Miss—de Barryos," he answered, watching her shiver curiously.

She took no notice of his words, but continued, even more coldly than before:

"By design, senor, I overheard the conversation between you and Mr. Pierrepont in this room."

"By design, senorita?"

"Yes," she answered, haughtily. "I was a witness of your presentation to him; I saw him motion to you to follow him from the drawing-room, and a moment afterward I followed also. I was behind that portière there when your conversation took place."

"Well, senorita?" he said, coolly.

"I must ask you once more not to call me that."

"I beg your pardon. Custom causes me to use it unaware."

She inclined her head slightly, and continued:

"Senor Meriaz, you are aware, as you informed Mr. Pierrepont in that conversation, that I was the betrothed wife of Mr. Olney Winthrop, five thousand dollars of whose money was paid you today to conceal some secret concerning his death."

She paused, but Meriaz only bowed with profound indifference.

"You must understand," she went on, when she saw that he did not intend to assist her, "how very much interested I am in discovering everything connected with the death of my fiancé, and it was to induce you to tell me this secret that I asked Miss Chalmers to send for you today."

"What inducement do you offer, seno—Miss de Barryos?"

She hesitated a moment, then said, slowly:

"What inducement do you require, Senor Meriaz?"

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"Well," he exclaimed, greedily, passing his mottled tongue over his still more mottled lips, "it is quite true that Mr. Pierrepont paid me the five thousand today to preserve the secret; will you double that amount if I break my word and return his five thousand to him?"

"No. In the first place, the money did not belong to him. It belonged to the man who has been murdered, and whose murderer I intend to bring to the gallows, as he would desire. As his affianced wife, I tell you that you may keep the money, and to it I will add another five thousand if you tell me the story Leith Pierrepont wished concealed, if you will tell me how Olney Winthrop came to his death; but not a dollar will I add to that amount."

For a moment Meriaz hesitated, then leaning forward, with his beady eyes fixed upon her, he exclaimed:

"I may trust you?"

"I give you Miss Chalmers as my reference," she answered, coldly.

He leaned further forward, placing his arms upon his knees. He reminded her of some treacherous animal about to spring upon his helpless prey, and somehow she felt as she imagined

she would if she were alone in a forest, the victim of some repulsive beast.

"You want to know how Olney Winthrop came to his death," he said, speaking in a half-hoarse whisper, whose effect he had counted, "and you offer me five thousand dollars to tell you the story Leith Pierrepont would have concealed?"

"I do."

"Very well; I consent. Listen: Olney Winthrop was suffocated in a deserted mine. He was pushed down by some one with whom he was walking along the lonely road." [Pg 140]

She had risen slowly, her hands pressed upon her breast, her eyes wild with terror.

"And the person with whom he was walking," she cried, heavily, pantingly, "was—"

"Leith Pierrepont," he answered, sullenly.

She uttered a little half-strangled cry.

"You are sure," she gasped; "sure?"

"I saw it all," he said, slowly. "I saw them walking, saw them approach the mine, saw the shove, heard the fall and the awful cry as Winthrop reached the bottom. There was no possible way to save him, and Pierrepont knew that when he threw him to his death."

She stood there stonily, the quiet of death growing upon her.

"Can you prove this?" she asked, dully.

"Every word," he returned, cunningly, "if you offer sufficient—inducement. That was not included in the bargain."

CHAPTER XXIII.

Carlita stood there for some moments resembling nothing so much as some magnificent statue, her countenance just as stony, her face just as colorless, her form just as rigid. If she felt anything whatever—any emotion of horror, contempt, or triumph—there was no evidence of it—not even in the tones of her voice when she spoke at last.

"I have no objection to paying you for the proof which I shall demand that you furnish," she said, quietly; "but you must understand that it must be convincing—it must mean conviction. Accomplish this, and I will add ten thousand to the amount already agreed upon; fail, and you receive nothing beyond payment for your secret. Is this satisfactory?" [Pg 141]

She must have been unobserving, indeed, not to have seen the greedy roll of his beady eyes, the miserly clutching of his grimy fingers, as if he already felt the beloved gold in his too affectionate clasp.

And yet he bowed almost coldly, in his absolute control over himself.

"I have no fear of failure, *senorita*. Get him back to Mexico, and leave the rest to me," he said, indifferently. "I shall not regret to see him suffer for his crime, but a man must look to his own interest first."

A slight shiver of repugnance and contempt passed over her, but vanished quickly in the utter apathy that seemed to possess her.

She interrupted him almost before he had completed his sentence.

"Until after the—the trial, I shall expect your time to be mine, your services constantly at my disposal. I shall expect you to remain in New York until I tell you to go to Mexico, and to give all information that may be required."

"I understand that to be in the bargain, *senorita*," he returned, formally. "You will not find me shirking any of the responsibility I have undertaken."

"Very well. Leave your address upon that table, I shall send for you when I need you."

It seemed to her that it would have been impossible for her to stand there watching him until he had written it out and left the room. The very sight of him nauseated her—oppressed her with terrible loathing. She turned from him and left the room with that stately dignity which was so recently acquired a characteristic, and slowly mounted the stairs to her room, feeling worn and weary, as if some new and hideous affliction weighed upon her, instead of the accomplishment of a cherished revenge. [Pg 142]

She had scarcely deserted the library when, through the portière through which she had listened the evening before to the conversation between Meriaz and Pierrepont, Jessica glided with the grace of a shining serpent. She went straight up to Meriaz and smiled into his face with as singular a fascination as she had been wont to use upon her victims in society.

"Well," she exclaimed, half caressingly, "you have accomplished it?"

He laughed slightly—not a pleasant sound; but she did not shrink from it in the least.

"You put a good job in my way, little one," he said, familiarly. "Twenty thousand ain't picked up every day in the week. It was a lucky stroke for me the day I started for New York, but that walk

down by the old Donato Mine was a still luckier one. It ain't safe for us to talk too much here, for I have found that walls have ears just as often as little pitchers, and this room is a particularly good place for eavesdroppers. But there is one thing I want you to do for me, little one."

"What is it?"

"I want about five minutes' conversation with your mother."

"What about?"

He smiled.

"That is my secret—and hers," he answered.

"She has no secrets from me."

"Perhaps not, but I don't mix up my affairs in that promiscuous way. She may tell you, afterward, if she likes. Will you arrange it so that I can see her?"

For just a moment Jessica hesitated, and then said, quietly:

"Come with me; I'll take you to her boudoir."

And, knowing how her mother detested the man, knowing how she feared him, Jessica led him upstairs, and without seeking permission, ushered him into her mother's presence. [Pg 143]

She did not wait to overhear that conversation, but went at once to Carlita's room.

Carlita did not hear her knock, did not hear the door open; but Jessica found her seated beside the window, her head resting upon the back of her chair, her eyes closed, her hands upon her lap, every muscle seemed to be relaxed save those of the hands, but these were so tightly compressed as to give ample indication of the terrible mental strain which had well-nigh exhausted her.

There was time for Jessica to observe her closely before Carlita became aware of her presence, and a smile of absolute hatred was changed quickly to one of tenderest solicitude as the dark eyes suddenly opened and rested upon her face.

She went forward quickly and knelt by Carlita's side, clasping her waist with both arms.

"I thought you were sleeping," she said, gently, telling her lie as sweetly as if it were unvarnished truth.

"Sleeping!" returned Carlita with a little shiver, her voice heavy and dry and expressionless. "Oh, no! I don't feel as if I should ever sleep again."

"Then it is—true?"

"God! So cruelly true that it seems impossible! Why is it that fact is so much more ghastly in its horror than fiction?"

"He can prove it?" asked Jessica, allowing the question to go unanswered for want of knowledge to meet it.

"Yes," cried Carlita, with the first semblance of passion in her tone. "Prove it the most dastardly crime in all the annals of criminal records. Oh, my God! that man could be so false, so craven a coward!"

"But the act is not what you have to think of now," exclaimed Jessica, feverishly, "it is its punishment. What are you going to do?" [Pg 144]

"I have not thought. It seems to me that I am incapable of thought."

"But there is no time to be lost. If he should discover in any way that we suspect him, he would make his escape, and your opportunity would be forever lost. You must act at once."

"But how?" asked Carlita, hoarsely, her interest at piteously low ebb.

"Telegraph to Stolliker that you have the proof."

"Will you write it out for me? I feel so incapable, so helpless."

Jessica did not wait for any instructions, but went at once to the desk and wrote rapidly:

"Have every proof you seek of guilt of man we suspect in my possession. Obtain extradition papers at once, and return here without loss of time. Let me hear when this is received."

And then with only the assistance from Carlita of setting down the numbers in an apathetic way on a telegraph blank as she hunted them out, Jessica prepared it for transmission.

She did not leave Carlita alone after that, but tortured her with ways and means of completing her revenge, until it seemed to the poor, unhappy child that she should go mad under the sound of the well-modulated, musical voice. And yet she would not have been left alone for worlds. It seemed to her that in solitude madness lay, while longing for it with all her heart.

If you have ever suffered from some terrible shock, you will perfectly understand such inconsistency.

It was almost twelve o'clock that night when Stolliker's answer arrived, and even to send it then he had been forced to bribe the operator to open the office. [Pg 145]

Carlita's fingers trembled so that she could not hold the volume to search out the meaning of the

figures, but once more Jessica came to her aid.

"Send necessary affidavit at once. Even then much money will be required. Shall be forced to bring officer with me. Be sure suspect knows nothing of your movements and keep him near you as constantly as possible. If you lose sight of him, everything will fail."

And the reply was sent before either of the two girls slept:

"Call upon me for all money necessary, and spare no expense. Will send affidavit tomorrow morning. Your instructions shall be fully carried out."

And then Carlita found herself alone.

Where was the triumph over the murderer of her betrothed husband? Where was the exultation in bringing to justice so dastardly a criminal? Where was the wild joy in the fulfillment of an oath to the dead?

Was it expressed in the tight clasping of those interlaced fingers? Was it displayed in that passionate outburst of bitter, uncontrollable weeping?

God knows alone; for the heart of women is beyond human understanding, but after hours of groveling in the most exquisite anguish which she had ever known or ever dreamed of, she arose and crept into bed, turning out the light before she had undressed, because she was ashamed to face herself, ashamed to think of the bitterness of her agony, and yet understanding it no more than a child would have understood.

The curse of Pocahontas was following her with relentless severity.

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CHAPTER XXIV.

The next morning Carlita was feeling far from well. Her head ached, and there were dark circles under her eyes. She awoke with a sense of utter weariness of living, of the absolute desolation of life. There was a choking sob in her throat with returning consciousness with taking up the thread again and continuing in the old way that fate had marked out for her.

She felt a pity for herself that was not in keeping with her understanding of the situation, but she was too utterly miserable to think of analyzing sensations or emotions. She could fully appreciate the mental condition of the man who seeks oblivion at any cost to himself.

Before she had an opportunity to arise, Jessica entered, and, in her sweet, insidious way, persuaded Carlita that she was in reality ill, a thing which Carlita was by no means loath to believe, and with the tenderest solicitude soothed her into quiet, promising that she herself would attend to the affidavit which was necessary to forward to Stolliker, and that no point should be missing and no time lost.

And poor Carlita allowed herself to be made to believe that she was quite satisfied with the arrangement, and kissed Jessica gratefully that she was willing to undertake so much for her.

She even turned her face from the light and tried to go to sleep again when Jessica had gone upon her mission, but the sleep of the last few hours had been induced only through physical exhaustion. A pair of dark-gray eyes were looking reproachfully into her own, and a deep, tender, wistful voice kept repeating:

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"I will tell you when I am sure that you love me even as I love you."

And then she heard again all the tones of his voice, all the sweet, pathetic music of that duet from Aïda in the tomb, and gasping, half-hysterical sobs arose in her throat again, and she hid her face in the pillows for very shame as she had shut herself in the darkness the night before.

It was two days after that before she left her room.

Jessica brought her the affidavit before it was sent upon its mission to Stolliker, and she read it with a renewed sinking of the heart, but there was not a word uttered to prevent its going. On the contrary, she was feverishly anxious until it was on its way, even asking Jessica's advice about sending some one with it as messenger instead of intrusting it to the mails.

And then, after those two days, Leith's card was brought to her.

She shrank away from it, and a little cry of torture arose to her lips, but she repressed it bravely and arose, compressing her lips firmly.

"Can I be false to the dead as well as to the oath I have sworn?" she muttered to herself. "It is necessary that I should play this part through, and I will do it! You may trust me to avenge you, Olney, even if I die of self-loathing and contempt!"

"You are not well again!" Leith exclaimed, placing a chair for her as she entered the room. "You have been suffering."

"Only from neuralgia and sleeplessness," she replied, forcing herself to smile. "Insomnia is an old enemy of mine."

"And a most bitter foe," added Leith earnestly. "You need change of air. You ought to take a little trip abroad. Why don't you ask Mrs. Chalmers to take you? They talked of going a short while ago."

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"Perhaps I shall, later on, but not now. I am really not ill; you must not think it."

"You have never been yourself since—since Olney died. Do you know, I have been half afraid sometimes that—that I remind you of him, because—well, you know, because we were such good friends, and because of—of some things I was traitor enough to say to you. I can't keep silent when I am near you, when I see you, and I have no right to speak when you are in this distress—when I know that you do not care for me, and for that reason I have thought it better that I should not see you for awhile. I have come to say good-bye, Carlita."

He had not dared to look at her during the speech lest his courage should fail him, but he had stammered through it like a blind man groping through an unknown world. He had not seen her growing pallor, the expression of dismay, fear, misery—what was it?—that darkened her eyes. He only heard the quiver of her voice, that dear voice whose every intonation was like a throb in his own heart, when she repeated:

"Good-bye!"

Even then he would not look at her; dared not, because of that weak courage, but answered swiftly:

"Yes. It will only be for a time, until I can see you and not blurt out the story of my love at every breath, a story which could not but be hateful to you. But you will let me come back then, will you not? You will still let me be your friend?"

She did not reply, she could not. Stolliker's words were dancing before her excited vision in letters of fire:

"If you lose sight of him, everything will fail."

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Was she to keep her oath to her dead lover, or was she to let this man escape? She knew but too well that everything depended upon her.

For one moment her heart cried out madly:

"Why should you sacrifice everything that is womanly and honest in your nature because of your revenge?" And then she understood that she was lying to herself, deceiving her own soul in order to save herself from her own loathing.

And all that time he was standing there staring through the window, thinking of what he was giving up, of the loneliness of life when he should be able to see her no longer, and of the necessity that demanded it. He did not even hear her rise, did not see the awful, strained pallor of her countenance as she approached him, step by step, as if each one were attached with the most ghastly pain, but he did feel the touch of her fingers upon his arm, did hear the sweet tones of her lovely voice, hoarse and dulled as it was:

"It is necessary that you should go—until I—send you?"

He turned and caught her in his arms, pressing kiss after kiss upon her lips; but she beat him back from her, crying out her awful torture wildly:

"Don't! Don't! For the love of God, don't touch me! Can't you see what I am? Don't you understand all the treachery of it? Doesn't something tell you that I am taking advantage of your love to lure you to ruin and death?"

"Carlita! Carlita, what are you saying?"

He had dropped his arms from about her and staggered back, white to the lips.

The sound of her voice seemed to recall her as suddenly as his kisses had driven her mad. She pressed her icy hands over her mouth and groaned.

"I don't know," she moaned. "It is treachery to Olney, I think. It is—"

But he did not allow her to complete the self-accusation.

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"Oh, it is only that!" he exclaimed, "he would desire you to be happy. I know him so well, none better. He was so generous, so noble; neither living nor dead would he stand between you and happiness. Listen to me, Carlita, and then if you tell me to go, I will go, and if you tell me to stay, I will stay, God knows how gladly. You are alone in this world, pitifully alone. More alone than if you were in the heart of the forest; for even those by whom you are surrounded are not your friends and are striving to ruin you. I could not remain and witness it. I love you! Love you with the whole strength of my heart and soul! There is nothing I would not do to win you! I know that only a short time has elapsed since the death of your fiancé, but if he could speak, he would tell me to do what I have done, to protect you with my love, to save you from the ruin of both soul and body that threatens you. Carlita is it go, or stay?"

She hesitated only a moment, wondering in her heart which she hated most, herself or him, and then the word came in a gasping whisper:

"Stay!"

He caught her hand, but she shrank back in but too evident torture.

"Not yet!" she cried, breathlessly. "Not yet! It is too soon after—after his death. You would not wish it—yet. Whatever I may feel—oh, surely you understand! And yet—I can not—can not let you

—go!"

He actually smiled soothingly.

"And I shall not ask it until you yield it of your own will. Heaven knows I never expected so much, that I am the most undeserving yet the most grateful wretch alive. You have made me the happiest man under the sun, and though you have forbidden excess of expression, you will not deny me the right of an accepted lover beyond that. Carlita darling, look in my face and read, if you can, the pure and holy joy you have given me."

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She glanced at him for only a moment, then passionately covered her eyes with her hands.

"It is almost as—he looked," she groaned.

He smiled again indulgently.

"Poor little hysterical girl," he murmured, tenderly, without touching her, "you will overcome all this in time, but it is enough for me now to know that you love me. Heaven knows it is possession enough for the best of men. You will let me tell Mrs. Chalmers?"

"Oh, no, no, no!" she cried, huskily. "No one at all—yet!"

"As you will about that," he returned, gently, "but at least you must allow me to guide you in some things. You must yield especially in one. No more poker for my affianced wife. And you are that, my darling; let the story be told or remain a secret between us as you will, you are my affianced wife."

CHAPTER XXV.

Carlita was trembling so that neither affirmation nor protest was possible.

She would have run away, perhaps, and have hidden herself for very shame, but that the ability was denied her. She stared at him helplessly, hopelessly, a wild insane longing to tell him everything taking possession of her; but she shrank from the desire even more than from the lie she was enacting. She hated herself for wishing to be false to her oath, more than for the despicable treachery of her conduct.

It was a curious sensation, and intensified as she found herself thinking how handsome he was, how magnificent in his princely bearing, his grave face lighted with a smile, so tender, so wistful, as to transform his masculine beauty almost to pleading.

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She suddenly forgot that he was a murderer, after having that thought uppermost in her mind for weeks, forgot that his hands had taken a life in the most cowardly way that life ever had been taken, and of her own accord she put out her icy fingers and allowed him to clasp them in his warm throbbing palm.

Jessica, through the door-way of the conservatory, saw her, and an expression of fiendish malice left her lips, so illy suppressed as to almost betray her presence there; but both Carlita and Pierrepont were too absorbed to hear.

Leith did not draw her to him—he was too much a gentleman to offer an unwelcome caress—but pressed the little cold hand tenderly.

"You promise, my darling?" he whispered, so gently that Jessica ground her teeth in rage.

"Whatever happens," gasped Carlita, hoarsely, "I will promise you that I will not play again, and I will keep my word as sacredly as if the pledge were made to God!"

The impassioned speech, filled with fierce suffering, reached Jessica, and a cruel smile shot across her mouth.

"Ah, surely, it is a complete revenge!" she muttered, triumphantly. "What more can there be to be desired? Fool—fool! even she does not realize it all—yet!"

"I wish I could tell you how happy you have made me," returned Leith; the quiet joy in his beautiful voice thrilling through Carlita like some sweet strain of exquisite music. "It is not exactly the kind of betrothal which I had hoped for, which I had prayed for, but I understand how you feel so well, and I am so grateful. The absence from you would have been harder to bear even than death itself, but I would have borne it, rather than have distressed you with my presence. You have saved me that, love, and I think I appreciate the trust you have shown in me a thousand times more even than if you had opened your dear arms to receive me. Would you prefer that I should keep silent for the present, darling, and go on just as we were before, apparently, save that I shall have the precious knowledge of your love in my heart?"

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"Yes, oh, yes," she moaned, covering her face with her hands.

"Your will shall be my law," he answered. "But you will not punish me if I forget occasionally and say some word that you had rather would have remained unspoken, will you, sweetheart?"

He could not hear the words that came in stifled whispers through her fingers, but going closer to her side, he passed his hand across her hair caressingly.

"There. You are distressed and upset," he murmured, with infinite tenderness. "I will go now. Tomorrow you will be more yourself, and we will talk the matter over quite calmly together. I can

scarcely realize that the dream of my life is to be a reality. I can scarcely credit the fact that this great happiness is mine at last."

He paused and hesitated like a bashful boy, the debonair man of the world grown timid in the presence of this mastering passion, then said in a tone so low that it scarcely reached her:

"Will you not say 'God keep you, Leith,' before I go?"

She could scarcely control the cry that was wrung from her heart. She could not lie with the name of God upon her lips. She was doing evil that good might come, but she could not go so far as that.

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She looked up at him with an anguish which he could not comprehend. Her white lips trembled piteously. Her hands were twisted about each other in a manner which he had never seen before, and for a moment he was frightened. And then he found himself listening intently to her mumbled words, almost inaudible, incoherent:

"Ask nothing of me today, Leith. I can not—say—Oh, my God, have pity upon me, and go!"

She flung out her hands passionately, and he caught them in his tenderly, and pressed his lips upon them.

"Remember," he said, softly, "that my love is as steadfast as the grave. There is no demand you can make which it would not yield. Rest, my love, and have a little pity upon yourself. Your sensitiveness, your conscientiousness is too great, if such God-given gifts can come in superabundance. Little one, go pray to the Blessed Mother to help you and to show you the right way in this trouble, from which I am shut out."

He had been holding her hands in a close, warm clasp, and as his voice ceased he lifted them again and kissed them, without passion, but with the tenderness of incalculable love, and then he passed out, leaving her standing there like some crushed autumn rose.

The accepted lover, the betrothed husband, worshiping at the shrine that had apparently blessed him with the greatest favor that he had ever prayed for, went down the stoop with a sigh upon his lips, instead of the smile of exultant joy, and the girl who had promised herself in marriage sank down upon the floor in the place where he had stood, sobbing in that tearless way that echoes through a broken heart.

It was a long time before Jessica could sufficiently control herself to venture to her side, but when she did she put her arms about the shrinking girl and lifted her as gently as a sister might have done.

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"What is it?" she questioned, as if she had not been a witness of that scene. "What has happened to upset you like this, dear one? Has—he been here?"

"Oh, don't touch me!" gasped Carlita, struggling to her feet. "I am the greatest sneak on all God's earth, a greater criminal even than he! I have prostituted the noblest of Heaven's sentiments. I promised to be the wife of a murderer, allowed him to kiss my hands—and all to lure him to ruin and death—to ruin and death! Will not God Himself turn from me in loathing for my treachery? Have I the right to sin that punishment may come to another? Has not He said, 'Vengeance is mine! I will repay?'"

It was with the greatest difficulty that Jessica concealed her hatred and disgust. She stepped back slightly and folded her arms curiously across her breast.

"You should have thought of all that before you began this—investigation," she said, calmly, "before you swore the oath that bound you soul and body to the dead. The laws of your country tell you that murder is punishable with death."

"And yet Christ Himself repealed the old Mosaic law of 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.'"

"I am not going to argue with you on the religious side of your position; I did not even know you considered that at all when you bound yourself to your vengeance of the dead. At all events, you have gone too far now to withdraw from the stand you have taken. The affidavit of an eye-witness of his crime has gone on its mission to your own detective. In a fortnight at most, he will be here with the papers of extradition which you yourself have ordered"—watching her victim shiver with a delight that was fiendish. "You have even notified him that no expense was to be spared in the punishment of the criminal, and I don't see how it will be possible for you to withdraw from the position now."

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"And you think it is right?" she groaned. "You do not think that I have sinned beyond pardon?"

"I think you would sin beyond pardon if you were to allow the murderer of your betrothed husband to escape!" exclaimed Jessica, speaking the words in a curious, sibilant way that gave them a horribly discordant sound. "Do you know what you would force the world to believe—for matters have gone too far now for concealment from the world?"

"No; what?"

"Remember, you compel me to do this. I would spare you if I could."

"Go on!"

"You would force the world to believe that you allowed the murderer of your affianced husband to escape—because of a guilty passion—because you had fallen in love with him."

Not a sound escaped Carlita. She drew herself up, and a fierce pang like death shot through her

heart and eyes. Even then she did not realize the full force of the awful truth that had been so cruelly thrust before her.

She looked Jessica straight in the eye for one moment, then said, stonily:

"It is enough! The world shall not say that, for Olney's sake! I will see the ghastly play through to the bitter end!"

Then she turned and walked out of the room as steadily as if she had not been bent and broken with grief less than ten minutes before.

Jessica watched her go, allowing her scornful smile full play as she realized that she was alone.

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"That shot told in more ways than one," she said, sneeringly. "I think her suffering will be all that even I could desire. Was ever vengeance so perfect and complete as mine?"

CHAPTER XXVI.

Carlita was sleeping fitfully.

The morning had broken brilliant and balmly, as an indolent day in idle spring, with the usual inaccuracy of our unstable climate. Through the neglected slats of her shutters the sun crept in delicious defiance, and after a time awakened her. She arose and opened the shutters wide, then lay back upon the bed, her arms stretched out like those of an infant in his idle longing to clasp the golden beam. She had forgotten the old ache in her heart for the time, but life was suddenly recalled to her by the gentle opening of her door and the entrance of her maid.

"Good-morning, Ahbel," she exclaimed, lazily. "Is the morning as glorious as it looks, or is poor humanity deceived by the brilliancy of the sun?"

"It is like a perfect day in summer," answered the maid; "it is even more beautiful than it looks. Here is a letter for you. It is so early that I feared to bring it lest I should disturb you; but the messenger is waiting, and insisted that you should receive it at once. There is also one for Miss Chalmers."

Carlita raised herself upon her pillow and took it, an expression of interest in her dark eyes. She broke the seal, and as the first words met her eye, would have flung it from her but for the presence of her maid. As it was, she compressed her lips angrily, and read it calmly:

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"DARLING CARLITA: I arose with the lark this morning, my breast too small a space for the confinement of my great joy, and find the day so superb that I have planned a little excursion in which I know you will be interested. You have never seen my yacht, the 'Eolus.' I have her now at the yacht club pier at the foot of Twenty-sixth Street—ordered out of winter quarters for the trip I expected to take, but will not, thank Heaven!—where she is rocking in the gentlest breeze of the year, longing to welcome the presence of her sweet mistress. Won't you come out for a little cruise? It will be indescribably beautiful today. I have written to Jessica, asking her and Mrs. Chalmers, and shall find Redfield Ash or Dudley Maltby, and perhaps Colonel Washburn for Mrs. Chalmers, if you will only consent. Of course you can come back any time that you may get tired of it, if you are not a good sailor; but I assure you that the day is too fine for danger from *mal de mer*, even if you are the worst on record. Don't disappoint me, darling. If you consent, I will send up for you at ten-thirty, so that you can be at the pier at eleven, sharp. It will be impossible for me to come myself, as there will be considerable that will require my attention. The bay is magnificent. Anticipating a day of elysium,

"Yours faithfully unto death,

"LEITH."

The very sight of the name distressed her, bringing back all the horror and suffering, the very mental exhaustion of the evening before. She hated him still more that he had intruded upon her forgetfulness, her happy oblivion of the moment, and sprang from the bed, intending to pen a hasty refusal.

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Her escritoire stood in the corner by the window, and as she sat down, the sun streamed through, touching her shoulder with a warmth that was caressing.

She paused, with the pen poised in air, and looked out.

How smilingly beautiful nature was!

She saw the bay, in imagination, smooth as a mirror, scarcely a ripple marring its surface. There were white sails dotted here and there fluttering in the soft breeze. Further off was the brown, beaten shore, in happy contrast with the indolent life upon the water, and over all the golden sun streaming down in unforbidden splendor.

The imaginative picture was too attractive to be resisted.

As she sat there, still hesitating, Jessica came in with her note open in her hand. She had flung a negligee over her night-dress, and while her hair was disheveled, the dancing light in her eyes made her almost beautiful.

"Of course you'll go!" she exclaimed, breathlessly. "Leith says that he has written to you. I have already awakened mamma, and she is getting dressed now. Won't it be delicious? I never saw a finer day in March, and it would be simply sinful not to take advantage of it."

"You think I ought to accept?" asked Carlita, wistfully.

"Think? Great heavens! you hadn't thought of declining?"

"Certainly."

"Then put such madness out of your head at once. Leith Pierrepont has one of the nicest yachts afloat. It isn't the largest, and it isn't the fleetest, but I'll venture to say that none of them can surpass her in luxuriousness. Write your note and accept for all of us."

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Carlita hesitated again.

"Oh, I can't!" she exclaimed. "I can't write it. You do it, won't you, dear?"

"Of course, I shan't!" cried Jessica. "You must do it yourself!"

Once more Carlita's eyes wandered out to the sunlight, she who had lived under its scorching rays for the greater part of her life, and loved it, then she turned wearily to her desk and again dipped the pen in ink.

What should she say to him? How begin a note of acceptance to this man? She shivered, and then became conscious that the ink had dried upon her pen again. She thrust it back into the well, realizing that thought would accomplish nothing, in this instance; she must trust to inspiration.

"So charming an invitation could not be refused on a day like this," she wrote, hastily. "I love the sea. Expect us promptly at eleven. I accept for Mrs. Chalmers and Jessica as well as myself. With gratitude for the thought that suggested so delightful an excursion,

CARLITA."

She dispatched it to the messenger, and then the details of costuming was begun, Jessica almost like a child in the delight of anticipation.

And very *chic* they looked in their pretty gowns as they stood upon the old pier below the Bellevue Morgue, the breeze almost too light to even wave the skirts of their dresses.

Dudley Maltby, Colonel Washburn and Leith were waiting for them, with the pretty bright dory at the foot of the stairs swaying gently on the water, manned by two sailors in fresh, artistic costume.

"How good of you to come!" exclaimed Leith in a low tone, as he pressed Carlita's hand. "I was so afraid you wouldn't, that it seemed to me the messenger was gone a week. Come, let me put you in the dory. Take care. That step is wet and may be slippery. There is the 'Eolus' lying over there. Doesn't she look proud of the trust I am putting in her today by allowing her to carry so precious a life?"

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"She is very—handsome," stammered Carlita.

In spite of the brilliancy of the day, she was wishing with all her heart that she had not come; but as her eye caught sight of the yacht she sighed with a pleasure which she would have been more than human not to feel.

As Jessica had said, she was not so large as some, but to a practiced eye would have appeared about one hundred and seventy-five feet over all, a length that precludes the possibility of cramped quarters for a small party, so trimly built, so dainty and tasteful a little craft, that the most unappreciative could have regarded her with nothing but pleasure.

As Carlita ascended the lowered steps, carpeted gayly in brilliant red Axminster, attended by her careful knight, she saw the fittings of the luxurious deck, great deep chairs, huge broad couches, upholstered with a richness of material that seemed extravagance even in a man of great wealth, with pillows strewn about that were artistic enough to have occupied a place in the most costly *boudoir*.

Nor were the saloon, sleeping apartments, drawing-room and library behind in point of attraction, and Carlita clasped her hands in delight as one suite, of unusual beauty, was shown her.

"I am going to have this refitted for you," Leith said, as he bent above her dark head caressingly. "I have in my mind now just what the draperies shall be, worthy of the goddess they will surround."

"It is already fit for a princess!" exclaimed Carlita, forgetting all about the past and the future in her present pleasure.

"But not comparable to what it will be. I am so glad you like it."

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"The greatest of Sybarites must necessarily do so."

"Let us go on a long cruise in her for our wedding-trip, will you? Or should you grow tired of so close a companionship with me?"

The question broke the spell again.

Suddenly the atmosphere seemed to grow hot and stifling to her. The smile upon her lips drew to a worn line of suffering and care. She pressed her hand upon her heart and answered faintly:

"Let us get into the air. It is close and—and oppressive. Where are the others?"

He looked at her curiously, wistfully, just a trifle reproachfully, then exclaimed contritely:

"What a selfish brute I am! Always forgetting my promises in the light of my own desire. Forgive me, won't you? I promise not to offend again today. Come. The others have all seen the yacht and are on deck. We will join them. You are quite sure that you have forgiven me?"

She looked up at him with a little smile, but it was very pitiful, so filled with misery that it cut him to the heart. His fingers had wandered toward hers, that rested lightly upon his arm, but they dropped at his side, unable to touch her.

In silence they went up the companion-way and on to the deck.

CHAPTER XXVII.

With as much majestic grandeur as a small craft can exhibit, the "Eolus" steamed down the river and out into the bay.

The water was not quite so smooth as Carlita had pictured it, but rippled and danced in the sunlight, reflecting the opal tints in blinding splendor. White sails were dotted here and there over the inviting surface, while along the gray, winter-worn shore the golden rifts were piled up, lending a fictitious beauty that was entrancing.

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It would have been sufficient to fill an artist's soul with rapture just to lie idly at full length on one of those superb couches, living in the exquisite loveliness of Dame Nature, and Carlita stood gazing about her in a sort of rapt wonder, her eyes wandering slowly from the superbly appointed deck—with Mrs. Chalmers sitting over next the starboard rail, with old Colonel Washburn bending over her in a cavalier devotion, and Jessica to the port, with Dudley Maltby sitting facing her—to the water, and on down the bay out to where a white line of sand stretched alluringly, sparkling like myriads of scintillating diamonds.

An absolute silence seemed to infold the scene, broken only by the gentle caress of the water upon the sides of the tiny ship—a silence that made it all appear like that mythical experience of Ulysses when he listened to the seductive voices of the sirens. Carlita clasped her hands in breathless delight.

"I will be happy today," she murmured, a trifle hysterically. "I will put all past and future away, and be happy for this one little day as if there had been no yesterday and would be no tomorrow. This day shall encompass time, and I will feel the full joy of living once!"

As if in answer to her, a voice spoke in her ear:

"Come and let me make you comfortable. See, I have placed a couch for you where the sun will shine upon you, but will not be in your eyes, and I have brought some books to read to you. Will you come?"

She turned at once and obeyed, half defying her own sensitiveness in her efforts to yield to that determination to be happy.

It was a broad, long couch, upholstered luxuriously in a magnificent dark green that contrasted perfectly with the tones of the sea. She threw herself upon it, allowing her delight almost passionate play in her features, and permitted Leith to pile pillows under and about her in gorgeous profusion; then, when she looked as comfortable as even he could desire, he drew up to her side a very low chair and took a volume out of his pocket.

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"Are you fond of Tennyson?" he asked. "If you have a favorite, name it. I believe most of them are in the library."

"Is it Tennyson you have there?"

"Yes."

"I know my favorite so well, let me hear yours. Read me what you like."

She said it so sweetly, so tenderly that he flushed with pleasure. It was so different from her manner of late that it touched him. He might have been still more impressed if he had been able to read that passionate cry in her heart that kept repeating itself over and over again:

"I will be happy for this one little day—I will be happy."

At first she could scarcely hear the sound of his voice for the cry in her own heart, but gradually it ceased under the soothing influence of his tone, and as if in answer to a prayer for mercy, the awful future was shut out completely, pitifully hidden in the idly passing present.

He turned the leaves of the book for a moment, then came to that sweet old poem that has stirred the heart of every lover of Tennyson with sympathy, "Locksley Hall," and read it as only a man with a voice like his can read. When he came to the last line, he thought she was sleeping, she had grown so quiet, so motionless; but after a moment of silence she stirred slightly and said in a low, dreamy tone:

"Do you believe that—that which you read:

"Can I think of her as dead, and love her for the love she bore?"

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No; she never loved me truly. Love is love for evermore?"

He thought he saw the trend of her thoughts, and answered, softly:

"Who can say? We are so often mistaken in the language of our hearts. How should we know, when we listen to it for the first time, whether the love is that of admiration, of sympathy, of the loneliness of our own souls, of the desire to be loved, or of such love as that to which Tennyson refers? When that love comes, Carlita, the 'love that is love for evermore,' the least comprehensive of us will know, will understand, though we may have erred on former occasions."

She did not reply, but lay there silent, motionless, her eyes almost closed, but looking out from under the lids dreamily at the gently changing world, her beautiful hand lying palm upward on one of the sofa pillows like a rose-leaf that has turned toward the sun.

If he had not loved her before, his artistic soul would have loved her then for the very unconscious grace, the poetical charm of her lovely person.

He feared that he had saddened her, and so turned to something in lighter vein, his well-modulated voice making music with the waves.

"What a poem life would be if all the days were like to this," she said when he had finished.

"It would lose its charm through lack of contrast," he returned, smiling. "How glaring the sun would grow if there were no shadow. How dull the water would appear if there were no land beyond. How oppressive the silence would become if the hum of wider, broader, busier life were stilled forever. And, over all, how palsied and colorless would the whole world be if there were nothing beyond, nothing but the limited stretch of a few brief years, with no hope of the marvelous universe to come, governed by the supreme power of Perfect Love. We have learned something beyond lotus-eating in this kindergarten in which God has placed us, and we love the languid hour of absolute repose, because we have been so long in the schoolroom, learning the lessons which He has set for us, lessons of bitterness and strife, as well as those of contentment and love. Life without contrast would be as dull, as inartistic, as cloying as a picture of sunshine without a shadow, as a poem without a strain of sadness."

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Her eyes wandered toward him, seeing all the earnestness of his countenance, all the absolute belief in the future that his words implied. She turned them away again, out over the water, but even there she saw him reflected in her imagination, his yachting cap pushed back, his face flushed, his eyes gravely earnest, as handsome a picture of perfect manhood as the hand of Divinity had ever painted.

Not long afterward they were summoned down to luncheon, a merry meal enjoyed by all; but it was with a sense of relief and rest that Carlita wandered back to her couch again as soon as she could leave the others.

The afternoon was waning. Already a hazy red was beginning to glow in the western sky, that had changed from gold to pink in opalescent splendor. The wind was freshening with the dying sun, and the caress of the waves licked higher upon the dainty craft.

Leith went below and had wraps brought in profusion; but about Carlita he placed them himself, tucking them in carefully that she might not feel the influence of the breeze.

"You will not care to get home too early?" he asked, caressingly. "The moon will be superb, and there will be no roughness to speak of. You will remain a while?"

"I wish it would never end," she returned, dreamily.

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He smiled with the delight of a lover, that slow, sweet smile for which she had begun to watch with pleasure.

"You don't know what happiness your words give me when I remember that I have been your only companion," he said softly. "How beautiful you are as you lie there with that crimson glow just touching you! You are a tropical plant, Carlita, and should be grown in a tropical country. Warmth suits you. The bewildering delight of flaming colors make you like some superb bird of plumage. You will love Italy with a sort of savage delight, I fancy. You have never traveled?"

"No."

"What a world of pleasure there is in store for you, what almost rapture! Our own country, while beautiful, has none of the mythological and historical memories that make other countries a constant poem. One gets so weary of the newness and glitter of it all, just as we should have grown of that gorgeous old sun but for this Heaven-sent gloom. There is a greater element of romance in most of us than practical, particularly we who are removed from the sordid compulsion of living-getting. We want to fancy ourselves once in awhile as knights of the olden time, performing deeds of valor for our Helens of Troy. See! The sun is going out. He has illuminated the old brown shore to positive glory with his good-night kiss. Do you remember the sweet old poem of Percy Shelley?"

He leaned forward, with that beautiful smile in his eyes, and repeated it in his musical voice:

"The fountains mingle with the river,
And the rivers with the ocean;
The winds of heaven mix forever,
With a sweet emotion.
Nothing in the world is single;
All things, by a law divine,

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In one another's being mingle—
Why not I with thine?

"See! the mountains kiss high heaven,
And the waves clasp one another;
No sister-flower would be forgiven
If it disdained its brother;
And the sunlight clasps the earth,
And the moonbeams kiss the sea—
What are all these kisses worth,
If thou kiss not me?"

He was looking down at her still with the smile in his eyes, the light of incalculable love, and she was looking up at him, totally unconscious of the expression upon her tremulous lips and in the depths of her beautiful eyes, totally unconscious of the wistful permission that expression contained.

And then suddenly—how, neither he nor she could tell—as the laughter of the others below reached them, he leaned forward and his lips were pressed upon hers, gently, yet lingeringly, lovingly, and then he lifted his head—unrepulsed!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

And still Carlita did not move. She lay there staring up at him, as if some intoxicant had got into her veins, paralyzing motion and emotion. She was not conscious of sensation, and yet she saw the light of unutterable happiness in his eyes, and understood it perfectly.

He put out his hand and clasped hers with reverent devotion. His lips moved, and she heard him whisper:

"Thank God! my darling, I know that you are mine at last!"

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His lips touched the pink palm as it lay upturned in his, then, with a shiver of returning consciousness she realized that the others were coming upon deck.

She rose swiftly, nervously.

"Let us go back at once—at once!" she exclaimed, hoarsely. "I—I think I am—ill!"

But, for all the assurance of illness, she went hastily toward the others and greeted them with almost hysterical lightness.

Leith looked after her in some surprise, then an indulgent smile flitted over his handsome mouth.

"Poor little girl!" he murmured. "She is trying to be so loyal to Olney, and Heaven knows I admire her for it! Perhaps I should be less generous if I were not so sure that she never loved him. God bless her, my beautiful one!"

He went below and gave the order to the captain, then returned to his guests on deck.

The wind had grown very fresh, with the usual variableness of late March, and they soon found it necessary to go below; but, even there the greater part of their pleasure was over, for the yacht was pitching considerably as the force of the wind and waves increased.

Leith observed that Carlita was nervous almost to the border of hysteria; and to cover her condition from the others, he sat down to the piano and tried to play; but the effort met with no great degree of success, and he turned upon the stool and monopolized the conversation for a time.

He observed, too, that a sort of constrained silence had fallen upon Dudley Maltby, and that he looked toward Jessica with a curious expression, which faltered and fell as her eyes were cast in his direction.

"Halloo!" muttered Leith, below his breath. "Has that poor little devil been getting his wings singed? I wonder what the little Chalmers is up to now? Poor Dud! He is really too good a fellow to get under that domination. I wish to the Lord I had not asked him."

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And then before his soliloquy was ended, he heard young Maltby say to her softly:

"Come into the library. There is a book I want to show you."

The look she cast upon him was not lost upon Leith.

"Good heavens!" he muttered. "What has the poor chap done? She's not in love with him, that's certain, but that she has got it in for him for some reason is equally certain."

But he could not follow, even if he had so desired, as Mrs. Chalmers was addressing some questions to him; but he saw Jessica stagger against her young cavalier as the yacht lurched, saw him place his arm about her, and then—they disappeared.

Had he been able to penetrate behind that portière, he might have seen the wretched boy holding her hands in an impassioned clasp, his eyes strained and blood-shot as he gazed into her smiling ones.

"It is utter folly, utter madness," he was saying. "I can't give you up. I tell you I love you. Pouf! How empty the word sounds. I feel like a man drunk with opium in your presence. Jessica, you must be my wife!"

She smiled daintily, charmingly.

"Your wife!" she exclaimed, lightly. "You can't mean that, when you once said that it was as much as a man's reputation was worth to be seen in my box at the opera."

He dropped her hands and flushed crimson.

"How do you know that I did?" he inquired doggedly; then, as he realized that he had practically acknowledged the truth of her statement, he cried passionately: "I was the greatest cad under heaven, and I am willing to give the lie to my words by making you my wife in face of all the world. Jessica, I love you! Will you not listen to me?"

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"Even if I were willing to forgive you, think of the folly of it all," she said, laughing at his earnestness. "You know the terms of your father's will. You would have less than ten thousand a year if I became your wife."

The poor imbecile did not pause to inquire how she had found that out but cried eagerly:

"But surely that would be enough. It would not be what we have been accustomed to, but with love at the helm, surely we could steer our little craft!"

She laughed aloud lightly, but still not without a certain fascination.

"Oh, Dudley!" she exclaimed, "you are not a nineteenth-century boy at all. You belong to mediæval times, and have been born at least a hundred years too late. Come and let us go back to the others. This yacht is pitching dreadfully. We have quite a sea on, and I am not the best sailor that ever lived, by any means. Oh, I say, come off! You are a magnificent Knight of the Doleful Countenance. Do you want to give away to all those people the nonsense you have been saying to me? Now smile and look happy, like a good boy. Just try to imagine that I have made you every promise you can possibly desire. Who knows but that I may, some day?"

He took heart from her chaff and returned with her to the others, because he felt that he could persuade her to remain no longer.

Leith, Colonel Washburn and Mrs. Chalmers were carrying on a heated discussion, while Carlita sat apart at a table looking listlessly through a book of engravings, not a subject of which could she have told a moment later.

"Do you think we are going down?" asked Jessica, lightly, as she joined them. "It would be too disastrous a termination to our charming day."

"Not much danger, I fancy," replied Leith; "though it has grown too rough to be pleasant. It is rather tempting the fates to venture out at this season."

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"Oh, but how perfect the day has been!"

"But for the wind, the evening would have been more so. We shall not be late getting in, however. The captain assures me we shall be at the pier by nine o'clock."

"It will be rather dangerous landing in the dory, won't it?" asked Colonel Washburn, who was old enough to think of his personal comfort above all else.

"The tide will be high enough for us to go up to the pier," replied Leith. "We are due there just about the change."

"That's luck," somebody murmured.

But it seemed to Carlita that the time would never pass. The day had been so short, so piteously short, and those hours of the evening so endless! It seemed to her that she would have given all the world for five minutes alone, and yet she dared not leave them, knowing that Leith would follow her.

Even yet she had not confessed to herself the awful secret that was harrowing her soul, and there before them all she dared not think.

It seemed to her that the happiest moment of her life was when some one announced the fact that they had arrived at the pier, and Leith came to conduct her on shore.

But for the wind, the night would have been magnificent. The moon was full, the cold, white rays glinting over the waves in soft, almost phantom beauty.

Out in the stream were numbers of vessels buffeting the wind and tide, which was at rapid ebb, and on either side the twin cities lay, their lights twinkling like millions of brilliant stars.

Leith stepped upon the pier and lifted Carlita beside him. Then, as the others would have followed, the shrill scream of a childish voice reached them, swept by the wind from the end of the pier, a cry that sounded like the death-call of some wild bird of the forest:

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"Papa! papa! I've waited almost an hour, and mamma is dying! They sent—"

But the end of the sentence was never reached. There was a splash, and then:

"Good God!" exclaimed a man upon the end of the pier. "He's fallen over."

Quicker than thought both Leith and Carlita had dashed forward just in time to see the tiny dark form swept out by the cruel tide, his little head just visible above the crest of the wave.

Singularly enough, none of the men upon the yacht seemed to have heard the scream, and not a hand was extended toward the boats.

And yet there was not an instant to lose.

"The boat; quick, captain!" Leith shouted hoarsely. "A child overboard!"

But the wind seemed to sweep the voice away down the stream instead of toward the lurching craft.

The small head was nothing but a speck now in the moonlight, and then it disappeared altogether.

Before any one could realize it, there was another splash, and Carlita knew the next moment that Leith's coat and vest were lying at her feet, that Leith himself had already gone in pursuit of that drowning child; and then a woman's shriek rose wild and clear upon the night air.

She bent forward eagerly, and distinctly heard the man next her exclaim:

"Take care, lady, or you'll be over next!"

But what cared she?

She was watching the dark head in the moonlight, watching the progress he was making, saw the small speck beyond as it arose again to the surface, and then—who can compute time in instants like that—she knew that Leith had seized the child!

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Already he had turned again, and was coming toward the pier, but wind and tide were too strong against him.

An agony of wild, intolerable fear arose in her heart. She knew nothing of what was going on around her, further than the knowledge that centered in the danger of those two, and that, she realized with a horrible anguish that was past all understanding.

She saw him struggling, struggling, saw the white face lifted in the moonlight as if beseeching assistance; and once more her voice rang out clear as a liquid bell under her ghastly fear:

"A thousand dollars—five thousand dollars to the man that saves his life!"

But already the boat was launched, and, as her last words fell upon their ears, it shot out from under the end of the pier and made straight toward the hapless pair.

CHAPTER XXIX.

It was the work of moments after that.

There were strong, willing hands at the oars, and the tiny boat leaped the waves like a bird on its errand of mercy.

But even when Carlita had seen them drag Pierrepont, with his tiny burden, into the boat safely, even when she saw it approaching her again, valiantly struggling against the swiftly ebbing tide, she could not remove her strained, haggard eyes from it, could not loosen the clutch of her rigid fingers from the bosom of her gown just above her heart.

She did not seem to realize that he was safe until he stood upon the pier beside her in the moonlight, dripping wet, yet smiling happily while he deposited the half drowned child into the arms of his father, who had grown as hysterical as a woman, and turned to her.

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She was looking up into his face, her own cold and gray as if frost had touched her very soul, and there was something in it that frightened him.

He forgot how wet he was, and before all those people he threw his arm around her and drew her to him.

"Carlita, darling!" he exclaimed, anxiously. "Are you frightened? See! We will neither of us be the worse for a little wetting."

"Thank God, you are safe!" she cried, and then—her face was hidden against something wet, and her tears flowed.

When she recovered her composure sufficiently to know what was going on about her, she heard something of how it all had happened.

The child was the crippled son of the chef on board the "Eolus." His mother had been ill for days, and was taken rapidly worse toward nightfall; so bad, in fact, that when the doctor was summoned he gave no hope beyond the hour.

Knowing where the anxious husband was, a neighbor had sent the boy to the pier to await the return of the "Eolus," in order that there might be no delay in his arrival; but the minutes passed, and as the boy grew more anxious and tearful, his hysterical unrest increased, so that when the "Eolus" really did arrive, he could control himself no longer, and the accident resulted through his too anxious desire to reach his father quickly.

"You should have told me your wife was ill," Leith said to the man, kindly. "Pleasure is not so essential that we can purchase it at such a cost to others."

"I feared to lose my place, sir," the chef answered sadly. "And they are not so easy to obtain. I could not afford it." [Pg 176]

"Have I been so stern a master?"

"The best and kindest, sir. What gentleman but you would have risked his life, as you have done, to save a servant's crippled boy? I owe you his life, and I shall not forget it!"

"Nonsense! Some one else would have saved him if I had not. You'd better get the poor little fellow home as quickly as you can. I fancy he has a very uncomfortable load of salt water."

"He's got rid of most of it, I think, sir."

"But there is cold to avoid. Take one of the rugs and wrap him up well. I hope you'll find it better with your wife than you anticipate."

"Thank you, sir."

And then Leith remembered himself, and slipped into his coat and overcoat, wrapping it about him snugly.

"Ugh! This wind doesn't make the water warmer," he exclaimed, lightly. "Ladies, I regret that my condition won't allow me to drive you home; but I'm sure Maltby will take my place. Old fellow, I'm trusting you with a very precious burden. Miss de Barryos has promised to be my wife."

"I congratulate you with all my heart!" exclaimed Maltby, shaking his hand heartily. "I thought I had discovered a secret when I heard her offer five thousand dollars to the man who would save your life."

"You did that, Carlita?"

But her choking reply, if there was one, was drowned in the sound of congratulations that followed.

"It was absolutely necessary that I should tell him that," Leith explained to her as they walked down the pier together, he still leaving a trail of water behind him. "I kissed you before them all, and held you in my arms, you know. You are not angry, darling?" [Pg 177]

She did not reply, only looked at him, but he seemed to be satisfied with the look, for he smiled with that ecstatic sort of grin that comes only to the happy lover's countenance.

It was a silent drive homeward. Even Jessica leaned in her own corner of the carriage, oblivious of Maltby's remarks, until he, too, ceased to make an effort at conversation. Mrs. Chalmers' face was so white and drawn that it reminded him of the return home from a funeral, and he was glad when the carriage stopped before their door and he had said good-night.

The day had ended disastrously for all except poor Leith, who was living in the Fool's Paradise, and the three women entered the house, going at once upstairs without exchanging a word.

At Carlita's door Jessica paused, but the unhappy girl exclaimed pleadingly:

"Not tonight, dear. I feel as if I should go mad to face any one tonight, even my own conscience."

"As you will," Jessica murmured calmly.

She stood there until the door had closed, shutting Carlita in, and then a cold, scornful, half-triumphant laugh escaped her.

Her mother caught her arm in a grasp like iron.

"For God's sake, come away!" she gasped. "What is this thing that you have done? What is this vengeance that you are planning?"

"That I have almost accomplished," corrected Jessica, looking into her face with a fiendish sort of chuckle. "Never mind. I shall not tell you. With your white-livered cowardice you might ruin it at the last moment, and it shall not fail. Oh, go away, with your eternal whining! Do you think that I will forgive her for winning his heart away from me? Do you think I will forgive him for playing fast and loose? I hate them both as fiercely as you know I can hate, and they shall feel the fang of it to the last day of both their lives!" [Pg 178]

Carlita's maid followed her to her apartment almost at once, and placed in her hand one of those little yellow envelopes that turned her faint and sick even before she had broken the seal.

"You may go, Ahbel," she exclaimed, wearily. "I shall not need you this evening."

"But the back of your jacket is quite wet, Miss de Barryos. At least you will let me remove that."

Carlita allowed herself to be divested of it rather than speak, then watched her maid with wistful longing as she left the room. When she was alone she looked at the telegram in her hand, hesitated, even put her fingers to the seal, then flung it upon the table, far from her.

"I can't—tonight," she gasped. "I am so tired—so tired that I can not look out the numbers. They would make me dizzy and—and—"

She ceased her excuses suddenly and flung herself in a chair beside the window, then seeing the moon, she arose and turned down the gas, opening the shutters that it might flood the room. She sat still feeling strangely warmed by the cold rays. She was looking backward through a little time, at that dark head upon the crest of the waves, risking life to save a crippled child whom he had never seen before. She was living through her own torture again with a curious, gentle thrill of ecstatic pleasure, and then her heart gave a great, wild throb as she saw him beside her upon the old pier, and—felt his wet, cold, but still impassioned, kiss upon her lips.

She hid her face as she remembered that—the face that had suddenly flushed there under the silent, never-betraying presence of the old moon, but, strangely enough, it was not with shame but thrilling, unacknowledged joy. There was a smile upon her mouth as she removed her hands, and putting out her hands swiftly, she caught the damp jacket from the back of the chair where Ahbel had hung it to dry, and pressed her lips again and again upon the place where his arm had touched.

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And then an expression of wild dismay sprang to her eyes. The smile fled from her lips. A hoarse cry arose in her throat.

"It can't be—it can't be!" she moaned; "that what she said is true. My God! it can't be that a curse like that has been sent upon me!"

She paused breathlessly and suddenly, with the jacket still clasped in her hands, her eyes raised to the face of the moon; she went back further in memory, and saw herself lying upon the couch on the deck of the yacht, heard his softly murmured words as he repeated Percy Shelley's poem, felt the touch of his lips, warm and sweet upon her own again—and then, for the first time, understood it all.

All the desire for happiness that one day, all the wild longing to forget the past, all the breathless sweetness of those moments alone with him, the heavenly joy of that unrepulsed caress, the agony of terror when his life was threatened, the exquisite happiness that was almost pain when he was safe once more beside her, with his arms, wet and dripping about her—Dudley Maltby said she had offered five thousand dollars for his life. God! she would have given her whole fortune and have gone through life a beggar for every one of the after years, if they had numbered a thousand, to know that he was safe.

She laughed aloud, such a strange, unfathomable laugh, and staggered to her feet.

"Five thousand!" she cried, still laughing, though there were glistening tears in her eyes that seemed to blind her. "Five thousand! Let it go at once—at once! I will draw the check and send it to the captain of the 'Eolus,' to be filled in with the name of the man who did it. Five thousand! I wish it were every cent that I possess! I wish—"

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She turned swiftly, excitedly, and turned up the gas, then as she would have approached her escritoire, her eye fell again upon the yellow telegram lying there like a sentinel.

She took it up recklessly and tore off the envelope, defying the figures to harm her; but it was not in cipher. The cold, plain, torturing words flashed before her eyes:

"Everything ready to leave the moment papers arrive. No fear of failure now.

"STOLLIKER."

CHAPTER XXX.

"No fear of failure now—no fear of failure now!"

The words danced before her eyes in living, piercing flame of scorching fire. "No fear of failure now!" and her heart just awakened to the fact that she loved this man whom she had hounded to destruction. "No fear of failure now!" What was that small, weak blundering affection she had borne Olney Winthrop compared with this maddening, anguished passion that was tearing her very soul to despair? What was that frail, misunderstood liking, that sympathy that was almost pity, to this swirling, eddying tumult of adoration that filled her breast to bursting?

And Stolliker had assured her, with a note of triumph in the words which not even the electric transmission had had power to destroy, that there was "no fear of failure now."

She had told herself in those first days that she hated him; but now she understood it all, cruelly, bitterly—understood that she had deceived herself because she had heard those hateful words of Jessica's about her birth; had heard his light laugh, and that it was a scorching, searing jealousy that had tormented her—nothing else. And now she was punished—punished!

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If she had but allowed herself to acknowledge the love that Heaven had sent her, she might have saved him the crime that he had committed; and, oh, pitiful God, how well she understood that, too, now! She had loved him from the beginning—from the beginning! No other love had ever for an instant occupied her heart. And this was her punishment!

It was she who had fixed the crime upon him; she who had set the blood-hound of the law upon his track; she who had paid thousands of dollars for his conviction! And now it was too late to undo that which she had done—too late to withdraw that evidence which she would have walked blind and barefoot over the whole world to destroy.

And God had sent this bitter grief, this awful despair upon her because she had presumed to take His authority in her own erring, human hands. It was but just; and she loved him—she loved him!

She acknowledged it with a ghastly delight that brought sickening anguish to her very soul. She loved this murderer!

But what was she that she should judge him? Surely she had been punished enough for sitting in judgment.

And now, what should she do?

Let him go to the ruin and death to which she had betrayed him? Lift no finger to prevent the crisis which she had wrought?

The thought maddened her.

The telegram was clutched between her fingers. Never pausing to consider, she turned and fled from the room down the hall to Jessica's door. She tore at the knob and flung it open.

Jessica was alone, fastening her white negligee at the throat. She turned, but was not kept long in suspense by her visitor. [Pg 182]

"For the love of God, look—look!" Carlita cried, as she thrust the telegram before the eyes of her supposed friend.

And taking it calmly from the shaking hand, Jessica read it aloud:

"Everything ready to leave the moment papers arrive. No fear of failure now."

"Well," she exclaimed, making no attempt to conceal her smile of triumph, "surely you could desire no more?"

"Desire no more!" repeated Carlita, hoarsely. "You don't understand; you can't—you can't! For God's sake, think for me! This must be stopped at once—at once!"

"Are you mad?" demanded Jessica, coldly. "What are you talking of?"

"Of this hideous crime that I have brought about!" gasped Carlita. "Those papers must never reach him—reach Stolliker. It must be prevented at the cost of my very life, if needs be! We must give up everything to purchase silence from Meriaz. Oh, Jessica, for the love of Heaven, help me!"

"Help you defend a murderer? Help you protect a criminal?"

"Don't—don't! You don't understand, I tell you. It was I who drove him to it—I who should be punished, if punishment must come to any one! He loved me. I did not know the meaning of the word then, but I know now—my God, so cruelly well! Jessica, listen, and then comprehend all my humiliation, if you can. I—I, who was the betrothed wife of Olney Winthrop—I, who swore that infamous oath to the dead—I, who have mercilessly hounded a fellow-creature to the very jaws of perdition, love him so well that I would take his crime upon my own shoulders—yes, upon my own soul, and stand in the presence of God, stained and branded, to save him! I am ready to stand your contempt, your loathing, if you will but help me! Pity me—oh, merciful God, pity me!" [Pg 183]

She had fallen upon her knees at Jessica's feet, her head bowed in her hands, her suffering too deep for tears. But the woman witness did not offer to touch her; she stepped back and folded her hands coldly.

"You are too late," she said, with rigid cruelty. "The papers will be in Stolliker's hands early tomorrow morning."

A cry of horror left Carlita's lips.

"Tomorrow!" she groaned. "Tomorrow! It can't be true—it can't be true!"

"It is," replied Jessica, in that hard, pitiless tone. "And even if it were not, what would there be for you to do? When Meriaz made the affidavit purchased by you, the testimony went into the hands of the law. Do you think the law will wilfully see a murderer go unpunished because you—love him? You must abide the consequences of your own act. You have bought the proof of his guilt, you have practically brought him face to face with the hangman's noose, and it is too late for you to withdraw from the position you have taken. You said you would see the play through to the bitter end, and there is no course left for you but to do it."

"But I did not understand!" Carlita groaned. "I did not know!"

"Did not know that this guilty passion lurked in your breast? Did not know you had fallen in love with the murderer of one lover? Verily, it is worthy reason!"

"Do you think I mind your contempt? The very lash brings some ray of comfort to my soul. Go on! I know now I deserve it all. Say everything, only find some means to help me."

"There is no help—none earthly and I would not if I could. I am not aiding and abetting criminals. I have fallen in love with no branded Cain. If you can save those papers from reaching their destination, and then close the mouth of Manuel Meriaz for all time to come, you may hope to save this scoundrel lover, but until you do his fate must lie in the hands of an outraged law." [Pg 184]

But Carlita seemed not to have heard the latter part of the sentence at all. Her hands had suddenly dropped from before her face, and into the despairing eyes there leaped a ray of hope that irradiated her whole countenance. She appeared for a moment to be thinking deeply; then arose without a word, and was hurrying toward the door, when Jessica started forward and caught her by the wrist.

"Where are you going?" she demanded, huskily, her excitement showing itself in her usually clear voice.

"To him!" cried Carlita, passionately. "To him—to tell him the whole foul story of my contemptible sin—to warn him of his danger and beseech him to fly!"

Jessica laughed—the hatefulest sound, perhaps, that had ever issued from those handsome lips.

She dropped Carlita's wrist, and placed her back nonchalantly against the door.

"Do you think that I will let you go?" she demanded, coldly, calmly. "Do you think that I shall let you leave this room?"

"You would not prevent me? What revenge have you to win?"

A crimson flame seemed to lick out from the brown eyes, and a dull red glow flashed into the oval cheeks. She stretched her arms across the door and bent her head toward her victim.

"What revenge have I to win?" she repeated, allowing all the hatred of her nature full expression. "What revenge have I to win? Listen and you shall hear. Before you came into our lives, he—Leith Pierrepont—loved me. But for you I should have been his wife. I loved him. Puff! what do you know of love? What is your paltry, pitiful affection for him compared to what mine has been? But he turned from me to you—overlooked my love for your toleration—passed me by, forsook me, and I determined that he should pay for it with the last drop of blood in his body! I hated you both, and from the very first I have seen how it would be. Did you think I did not know of your love for him? Do you think I should have left you so long alone, had it not been to allow it to grow until you should suffer all that I had in store for you? Did you think I meant that you should rob me of everything that made life worth living, and then escape my vengeance? You do not know me!"

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A sneering sound like a laugh left her lips—hard, cold—sending the blood tingling through Carlita's veins with stinging rapidity. She had drawn herself up, all the Mexican fire of her nature aroused and in action. The pleading anguish had all vanished, and only stern command remained.

"Stand aside!" she exclaimed in a voice as clear and ringing as it had been hoarse and supplicating before.

"Where are you going?" asked Jessica, imitating the tone.

"To Leith Pierrepont," answered Carlita, ignoring subterfuge.

Again Jessica laughed.

"You must be mad!" she replied. "Do you think I will be robbed of my revenge in the eleventh hour?"

"Let me pass!" Carlita commanded again, going a step toward her.

"Never!"

For one dramatic moment the two determined women faced each other, and then began a physical struggle for mastery.

There was not a sound, not a cry until they both tripped over a small embroidered footstool and fell, Carlita's head striking the sharp edge of a table.

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Jessica arose at once, panting, flushed, but Carlita lay there, still as death, her face upturned, but expressionless.

With fiendish hatred Jessica looked down upon her, even touched her with the toe of her slipper, but there was no movement to show that it had been felt.

Calmly, deliberately, Jessica regarded herself in the mirror, saw that her gown was in order, then walked to her mother's door, and throwing it open, said with cool distinctness:

"You'd better come into my room for a moment. Carlita tripped over a stool and has hurt herself."

CHAPTER XXXI.

"How is Miss de Barryos?"

Manuel Meriaz was standing facing Mrs. Chalmers who had risen to greet him, endeavoring to conceal her expression of repugnance, and succeeding poorly, a smile upon his coarse lips which was far from attractive, though he endeavored to make his voice gentle, even human.

"All right again, I fancy," replied Mrs. Chalmers, wearily.

"Still a prisoner?"

She made a gesture of deprecation.

"Jessica seems to have gone mad these last few days," she answered. "She must realize how impossible it is for this to go on longer, but she will listen to no reason, hear no argument. She will confide nothing to me, but is like a wild creature if I attempt to speak to her."

"Let her alone," advised Meriaz, indifferently. "Stolliker will be here tomorrow, and it will all come to an end quickly enough then."

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"Stolliker here tomorrow? Who told you?"

"Jessica."

"Then she has talked to you?"

"No; nothing further than that. He telegraphed from Washington yesterday that he would stop off

in New York while the Mexican officer, with an interpreter from the office here, would go on to Albany for the signature of the governor to those papers. By tomorrow night, or the next at furthest their bird will be landed, and then I fancy Jessica will let your beautiful ward take her own course."

"Shall you return to Mexico with them?"

"Certainly. That is necessary in order to pocket the rest of the money."

Mrs. Chalmers could not quite control the sigh of relief that bubbled through her lips in spite of effort.

Meriaz smiled.

"You will go with me, Louise?"

"I?" she stammered.

"Yes. You have always told me that it was a question of money that kept us apart. With the start I shall have when this trial is over I should have to be a poor financier indeed, if I could not make my fortune."

"But you will—wait until you have made it?"

"Ah, no! You will give me the encouragement of your presence."

She looked up at him helplessly, like a bird under the influence of a serpent, and saw the expression of his countenance. It was almost diabolical in its fiendish intent.

She shrank backward, and he sat down opposite her.

"My dear Louise," he said slowly "you and I have played at this game long enough. There was a time when I was fool enough to believe in you. There was a time when you led me on, inducing me to do your bidding, let that be what it might, merely for a word in recompense, flung at me like a bone to a starving dog; but I have learned something different now. I am grateful to you for my education. No one to look at me would believe that there was a time when I was a gentleman, when people called me handsome, when I was a dashing man of the world, who might have captured the richest senorita in all Mexico. You are responsible that I did not, my dear Louise. I loved you then, and there is nothing under heaven that you might have commanded which I would not do. You knew your power, and you used it. Well, Louise, the tables have turned. I don't love you now. Perhaps I have grown too old to love. Perhaps I have forgotten how; but I know my power over you now, and I mean to use it."

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"What are you going—to do?" she stammered, hoarsely.

He leaned toward her, fixing her with his beady eyes, and answered calmly:

"Marry you—and give my daughter her honest name!"

"For God's sake, hush!" she exclaimed, springing up and glancing about her in alarm.

He put his hand upon her arm, and forced her gently into her seat again.

"Any one would think I had proposed a crime," he said, quietly, "from your frightened tone and exclamation. I don't call it a very bitter revenge, do you, that I propose to make you my wife? I don't call it a great hardship, that for the first time in all your life you will be able to face yourself and the world as a legal wife, bearing the name of a husband that is willing to claim you before all the world!"

"What do—you mean?" she gasped, her voice almost uncontrollable in its tremulousness.

"Don't imagine that you can deceive me!" he exclaimed, contemptuously. "I am quite aware that Bertram Chalmers was a myth. I know your life, Louise, year by year, day by day, almost hour by hour, from the time you were a school-girl, and even before. There is not an incident that I could not repeat to you with such exactitude as to be almost startling. I doubt if you could recite it so well yourself. But there are only a few years with which I have to do. You were young, beautiful, and you abandoned it. What did you care whether it was brought up in the hut of a peon, or left to die in the sun-scorched swamps? I saw you then and loved you, in spite of your heartlessness, for we know little of sin in Mexico. It is only love that affects us. I was the only person about that attracted you then, and you yielded to me your smiles for the time, only, as I afterward discovered, to make me your tool, to force me to do that which you could not do yourself. I became your dupe, your accomplice at cards—no matter what. I do not regret a single sin that I ever committed for you, a single folly. If you had loved me, you would have found that I knew better than most men how to be a devoted slave, but you didn't. And after a time you returned to America. What became of your abandoned little one? I know, Louise!"

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"You—know?"

"Yes."

"She lives?"

"It can't be that you are interested after all these years!" he cried, mockingly. "Yes, she lives."

"Where? For Heaven's sake, tell me!"

"In Mexico, known as—my daughter. Ah! you see I loved you better even than you thought. She has grown to be a beautiful woman, but not like her mother. Your hair in those days was dark,

Louise, though your eyes were blue. Her eyes are dark. Her hair black as night. Brought up in that tropical climate, she possesses all the attributes of a Mexican, even to the hot, ungovernable temper—tender and impulsive as a child under love's direction, but a fury, a very fiend, when opposition comes. She wants to know her mother, Louise."

"You—you have—told her?" the dry, stiff lips questioned.

"Everything! She even knows the secret of Jessica's birth, the—"

"Ah!"

"Did you think I did not know that?" he questioned calmly in answer to her little, inarticulate cry of horror. "I thought I told you that everything was an open page to me? Shall I tell you what it was I told her, Louise?"

No answer came, only the anguish in the burning eyes. He went on pitilessly:

"I told her that Jessica is—my daughter. Great God, woman! did you really think you could deceive me? Did you really believe I did not know? I have only bided my time, waiting, waiting, because, as you said neither of us had a sou with which to bless ourselves. With all your swindling and lying and cheating you did not make enough even for your own support, and I had nothing to add to it to speak of. But now things are different. I shall have a start. It will enable me to work the mines, which are of great promise, and I want my daughter to bear her proper name."

"You mean to tell Jessica this story?"

Meriaz shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

"You are an expert at manufacturing stories. If you can invent one that will deceive her and still induce her to do my will, I shall have no objection to you telling it. Otherwise, she must know the truth."

"Have you no mercy?" moaned the woman, wringing her hands together helplessly.

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"What mercy had you upon me? What mercy had you upon that poor little helpless child whom you abandoned? Why is it that it is always the person who has done most harm in the world that is always crying out for mercy? Did you think you should be allowed to go through the world scot-free, you who have worked so much harm, you who have driven so many men to desperation, and broken the hearts of countless wives? I am not taunting you with your sins; why should I? Heaven knows I have no stones to cast; but when my time comes I shall face my punishment with as much indifference as I have committed crime. And, after all, what is it that I am offering you? Is it so great a shame to be the wife of any man, you who have borne no name that was justly yours since you wilfully dropped the one your father gave you? Louise, when will you be my wife?"

"You must give me time!" she groaned.

He bowed.

"I have already given you twenty years in which to consider it," he returned, lightly. "I suppose another day will make no difference. I give you, then, until tomorrow, when Stolliker returns. I go as a member of that party, remember, and you must accompany me. We shall be a happy family; you united to your long-neglected child, I to my daughter whom I have allowed you to keep during all these years. I shall expect your answer when Stolliker returns to take his prisoner."

CHAPTER XXXII.

Carlita was seated beside the window in her own apartment, her hands folded listlessly over the folds of her white negligee gown, her head resting against the back of her chair as if she suffered from physical as well as mental exhaustion.

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She seemed to have grown old in those few days. There were heavy lines about her mouth, and under her eyes dark circles that gave her a curious expression of dumb anguish. She had lost in flesh, until her cheeks appeared hollow and gaunt.

She glanced up when the door opened suddenly; but there was neither wonder nor interest in the look—scarcely even intelligence.

It was Jessica who had entered, and behind her was Edmond Stolliker, the detective. Miss Chalmers went forward and leaned indolently against the corner of the dressing-table, looking coldly at Carlita; but Stolliker stopped short, scarcely believing his patroness to be the same beautiful girl who had engaged him upon a murder case so short a time before.

He was too good a detective, however, to allow his surprise long expression, but listened with interest while Jessica said:

"Carlita, this is Mr. Stolliker, your detective. I told him that you were ill, but he insisted upon seeing you, or delivering his message to no one. Tell him he may speak out plainly in my presence."

The last sentence was almost a command and Stolliker saw the white, almost transparent hands drawn closer together in the lap, the colorless face showing a dawning interest, a strange light creeping into the leaden eye.

"Miss de Barryos," he exclaimed, taking a step toward her and stooping suddenly, "I very greatly regret that you are ill!"

"It is nothing," she returned, no trace of the old musical voice noticeable in the hoarse, expressionless tones.

"I am sure what I have to tell you will aid in your recovery. Everything that you most desired has been accomplished. Even before the papers arrived bringing the affidavit of Manuel Meriaz, I had an officer prepared to start at once, the only thing required being the signature to our requests for extradition. We stopped over in Washington and secured the consent of the Secretary of State; then I returned here at once, while Carpano, the Mexican officer, with one of the interpreters from our office, went on to Albany for the signature of the governor. I expect him to return this evening. We shall make our arrest as quickly as possible after the papers are in my possession. Presumably, therefore, it will take place tonight, as Pierrepont will be most liable to be found in his rooms at that time, and we want no error now that we have succeeded so far."

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Carlita did not speak. But for that curious, dull light in her eyes, Stolliker might have doubted that she heard him at all. He waited for a moment, then continued:

"With your permission, I will wait upon you tomorrow morning, after he is in custody, to make a full and complete report before we return to Mexico with our prisoner and Manuel Meriaz, the witness who is of such vital value to us."

She merely inclined her head ever so slightly; and feeling more uncomfortable than he had ever done under the most trying of circumstances, Stolliker glanced toward Jessica.

He observed the smile of triumph and contempt which she could not conceal.

"I think that is all, Miss Chalmers," he said, carelessly.

She led the way from the room; and as they were passing through the hall, Stolliker caught sight of Ahbel, his niece. He made a quick deft sign to her, which she answered simply by a glance.

"You say this arrest will be made tonight?" Jessica questioned, before he left her.

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"I think so."

"At what hour? You need not be afraid to trust me. I am absolutely in the confidence of Miss de Barryos. She and I have sent the telegrams to you together, and translated yours in return. I know the development of this case step by step. Manuel Meriaz was an old friend of my father."

Stolliker bowed.

"It will be impossible for me to say the exact hour that the arrest will be made," he returned. "The train from Albany is due about nine o'clock. Good-afternoon, Miss Chalmers."

He left by the front door, but two minutes later was admitted noiselessly by the servants' entrance.

"What's up?" he asked of Ahbel, when they were secure from interruption.

"I don't know," she returned. "I can't make out."

"Then you are a poor assistant for a detective. How long has Miss de Barryos been ill?"

"Only a few days."

"What caused it?"

"She tripped over a stool in leaving Miss Chalmers' room and hurt her head. She was unconscious for so long that the doctor feared concussion of the brain; but she seems to have avoided that extremity, though she is not in the least like herself. There are times when I think she has lost her mind. She rarely ever speaks, but sits by the window doing nothing, apparently not even thinking."

"Humph!" muttered Stolliker, remembering the suddenly dawning interest in the sunken eyes.

"How long has this been going on?"

"It was a week ago yesterday that the accident happened."

"She and Miss Chalmers were great friends?"

"Yes; but what struck us all as strange was that Miss Chalmers did not go near her when the accident happened, nor for two days afterward, though it occurred in her room."

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"Humph! Does Pierrepont come here now?"

"He has been here every day to inquire for Miss de Barryos, most days twice."

"Who sees him?"

"Miss Chalmers."

Stolliker lifted his eyebrows slightly.

"How long does he remain?"

"Not long. He has seemed dreadfully depressed since Miss de Barryos' illness."

"Is there anything else?"

"I don't think so."

"The whole case strikes me as a very singular one," said Stolliker, musing. "My own opinion is

that we shall have another one to ferret out as soon as Pierrepont is safely off our hands. I want you to help me, Ahbel. You think you can?"

"I can try."

"Keep your eyes on Miss Chalmers and notify me of everything she does. If she enters Miss de Barryos' room, be sure you hear the conversation that takes place, and send me a detailed account of it at once. I'll have Tommy Ferris opposite. If you want him put that scarlet geranium in the window and he will come at once. If there is anything that you can do for Miss de Barryos, be sure you do it. My opinion is that she is a prisoner in her own room."

"A prisoner?"

"Yes. Now that I have suggested the idea, is there anything you can remember that would confirm the suspicion?"

"Yes, there is, but I should not have thought of it. Unless Miss Chalmers is in her room the nurse never leaves, not for a single moment. She even sleeps there at night and watches me when I am in the room like a cat would watch a mouse. She even refused to allow me to go in at all for a time."

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"Ah! I thought so. Bide your time, and if you get a chance, go in there when Miss de Barryos is alone. You might manufacture some excuse for getting the woman out for a moment. My own opinion is that Miss de Barryos is suffering from some terrible mental trouble, and this apparent apathy is simply feigned to carry some point she has in view. You must help to discover whether I am right, or whether her accident and the worry over this case has caused the dreadful change in her. Remember, I depend upon you."

"I will do what is possible, for her sake, I know she was in some terrible trouble; but the night of the accident she seemed in better spirits than for a long time."

Stolliker did not wait to hear more, but slipped out of the house as noiselessly as he had entered, only pausing to whisper one sentence into his niece's ear:

"Be sure you inform me of everything Miss Chalmers does."

She smiled without reply and closed the door upon him, then went slowly upstairs, wondering how she was to obey his injunction and what there would be to report. It was her first experience in detective work, and she was naturally excited.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Jessica stood alone in her room reading a note which a messenger had just left. The hand that held it trembled slightly, and she walked nearer to the window to read, although the light was still good, as it was not late.

"MY DEAR JESSICA"—she read—"I will be unable to call this afternoon, on account of a matter of grave importance, but shall be most anxious about Carlita. You are so good to me—have been so good during all this distressing illness of hers—that I am sure you will not think it too much trouble to send me a line concerning her condition, which will reach me upon my return at eight o'clock this evening. Please let it arrive as near that hour as you can, so that I may receive the latest news, and know if any change has taken place. Yours gratefully and affectionately,

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"LEITH PIERREPONT."

She read it through the second time, then crushed it in her hand, smiling grimly.

"Eight o'clock," she mused. "And Stolliker said the train from Albany arrived about nine, with the Mexican officer on board. I wonder if you would have written in a hand so firm if you had been aware of the sword that hangs above your head, my dear Leith? I wonder if the consuming tenderness of this great affection will receive a shock when you hear the truth tonight? How little we know in the morning the climax of the day!"

During all the remaining hours of the afternoon she sat quite still, thinking, thinking, planning, only once going to Carlita's room, but returning to her own when she saw that all there was as it had been. She even locked the door upon her mother, and would allow no entrance. She denied her maid admission, but going to the door, exclaimed:

"A cup of tea—that is all. But strong, strong—strong, mind you!"

She took it with her own hands, locked the door, drank it without either sugar, cream, or even lemon, and then with steady hand began to dress herself.

She had never been so careful in the arrangement of her hair, never so particular in the selection of her costume, never so dissatisfied with herself when the operation was completed.

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It was a street-gown she had donned, but not the tailor-made which she ordinarily wore on such occasions. It was a little French thing in tan and cerise, with a tiny violet bonnet that sat jauntily upon her well-poised head, and to one less exacting than herself had never appeared to better advantage. She was really more than beautiful, more than fascinating as she turned from the mirror and looked at the clock.

"A quarter to eight," she muttered. "I shall be waiting for you when you arrive, my dear Leith, instead of the note you expect."

She drew on her gloves, and then alone and unattended left the house.

She had not ordered her carriage, but when she reached the corner called one and gave the address to the coachman. She dismissed him at the door of Leith's apartment. The hall-boy looked at her curiously when she requested to be directed to Leith's apartments, but showed her there without a word, and Leith's valet admitted her to his presence.

"Mr. Pierrepont is at home," he answered in reply to her question. "He came in not five minutes ago."

Leith turned and came swiftly toward her when he saw who it was that had entered, taking both her hands in his and pressing them softly, as some of the color brought by the cutting March wind receded from his cheeks.

"What is it?" he asked swiftly. "Something must have happened to bring you. Carlita! How is she?"

A little curl of scorn flashed over Jessica's lips. Carlita! Always Carlita! She was risking her reputation in coming to him, yet his first thought was of Carlita!

She paused to draw off her gloves before replying, he watching her breathlessly. He placed a chair for her, but she motioned him aside and stood leaning against the mantel-shelf, as she had often seen him do in happier times. When she spoke, there was a repressed, nervous hoarseness in her tone that gave a sort of uncanny earnestness to her words.

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"I have not come about Carlita," she said, "save incidentally. It is something connected with—you, with your own vital interests, that has tempted me to brave the censure of the world—to risk my reputation."

Leith smiled.

"It is not quite so bad as that," he said, soothingly. "My reputation is not so dreadful that your own is compromised by coming to my rooms."

"There isn't time to stand on trifles," she interrupted, dropping her arm from the mantel and going a step nearer to him. "Moments are precious, and yet I find it very difficult to say that which I must. You are standing in the most deadly peril! At any moment it may be too late to save yourself—and I have come to warn you!"

"What can you mean?" asked Leith, the smile fading.

"You are accused of the murder of Olney Winthrop!"

"I? Are you mad?"

"Heaven knows I wish I were, but it is too infamously true. Even now the detective, with an officer from Mexico, are here to arrest you and return you there. And the woman whom you have loved, the woman you would have made your wife, the woman in whose pretended illness you have shown such interest, is the person who has hatched the plot, who has bought your conviction, who has won the contempt and loathing of all men by promising to become your wife in order to betray you to the gallows!"

She had gone up to him and was looking up into his eyes, which had become glassy and blood-shot, but after a moment's awful pause he turned from her with a little gesture of disbelief.

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"Good God!" he muttered. "To accuse—her—of that!"

"It is true! I swear to you it is true!" cried Jessica, desperately. "It was she who accused you to the detective whom she sent to discover proof of your crime. She told him that you loved her, that you had killed your best friend in order that you might steal his promised wife from him. She sent Edmond Stolliker there, had the body of Olney Winthrop exhumed, and discovered that you had lied, that he had not been shot, but had been suffocated in a mine!"

Pierrepont groaned.

She paused just long enough to allow her words full force, then continued rapidly:

"She detained you by her side by every means at her avail until Stolliker should obtain such proof as was necessary for your conviction, and while he was there seeking it, paying thousands of dollars for it if necessary, for she had put her entire fortune at his command, Manuel Meriaz came here. You remember the evening at our house? You and he left the drawing-room together. She left the poker-table and followed. She listened to your conversation from behind a portière that screens the library from an anteroom, and the following day she sent for Meriaz. She purchased from him a story, bought it with gold, of how you had gone for a walk with Olney, and when you were in a lonely and deserted place, you had pushed him down the old Donato Mine, where he was suffocated with the gases before any one could go to his assistance. She had him make affidavit to this, and sent it to Stolliker in Mexico. On this story he has obtained papers of extradition, and will arrest you tonight."

"And Carlita has done this?"

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"She has."

"But less than a week ago she offered five thousand dollars to the man who would save my life!"

"It was in order that she might not lose her cherished revenge at the last hour. She promised to

be your wife to keep you here. She loathes you with all the fierce hatred of her Mexican nature."

Pierrepoint groaned. There were so many things that he remembered in that moment. Her desire that their engagement should not be announced, her cry to him: "Can't you see that I am only doing it to betray you to ruin and death?" Was not that confirmation of what Jessica had said? He groaned again.

"And she believes me guilty of this crime!" he cried, covering his suffering face with his hands. "She believes that I killed Olney, and in this dastardly way!"

His back was toward Jessica. She crept up to him, and before he was aware of her intention her arms were about him, those shining, seductive arms that she knew so well how to use.

"Ah, Leith," she murmured, softly, "if she had really loved you, she would have known you never did it; but the toils are about you so strong that Hercules himself could not break them. There is but one way, dear, and that lies in my power. I can save you, Leith. I have thought day and night since all the details of this sickening story came to me, and I have found the way. I—oh, Leith, you will forgive me in an hour like this, will you not?—I love you! So well, that not even your indifference has had power to kill that love! I would go through life your too willing slave but to be permitted to love you, to be near you, to serve you. You have thought me hard and cold and cruel sometimes; reckless, too, and careless of what I did, but it has only been because of this indifference of yours which has been killing me! Look in my face and read the truth, Leith! See! I have lost all shame, all fear! It is swallowed up in my great love. I can save you, dear, and I will, and all I ask in return is that you let me love you. I do not even ask for yours in return, now, because I know when you have seen the depth and strength of my devotion, it will come in time! Leith—darling—will you let me save you?"

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"Save me from what?" he questioned, stonily.

"From the cruel death that she has prepared for you! From the shame and humiliation she would heap upon you! I tell you she has bought your conviction with her gold!"

"And what is it that you propose to have me do?" he asked, his voice hard and cold as iron.

"Fly with me!" she exclaimed, breathlessly. "Only until such time as this story can be proved in all its falsity. Show her that you do not care. Show her that she has not hurt you with this foul lie that she has concocted. Leith, come with me!"

He laughed aloud, his mouth rigid and drawn while the grewsome sound escaped, and loosened her fingers from his neck.

"No!" he cried, heavily. "I will await the officers she has sent here. I will stand the trial she has prepared."

"But there will be no possibility of escape for you. I tell you that, innocent or guilty, there will be no possibility of escape!"

"Then I will die upon the gallows!"

"Leith, you must be mad! Is the thought of life with me so hard to bear? Is death at her hands preferable to life and love at mine?"

"Yes," he cried savagely, fiercely, "it is! If she has purchased my ruin, she shall have it. If she wishes me to stand trial for this crime I will do it!"

"For God's sake, listen to reason!" Jessica panted. "You can't know what you are doing. You can't realize what those people are."

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"Do you think I would fly from a crime I never committed?"

"But they will give you no opportunity to prove your innocence. They will lock you up in one of their awful prisons, from which there will be no escape but death. What care have they for life? What is a soul to them? If they would kill you for a coat, they would betray you to the gallows for less than a hundred dollars. For the love of Heaven, listen to reason! Hark! There is a ring at the bell. It must be Stolliker and the officer. Leith, the last moment is here! Think quick, and answer me! Will you let me save you?"

"No!"

"Oh, Leith, Leith I love you! It is life with me or death for her and without her. Listen: they are in the hall. For God's sake, come!"

He did not speak. His face was white and set as marble. His lips were compressed to a straight line; his eyes burned fiercely. He threw his arm about her and led her quickly to a side door. She thought he had yielded to her entreaties, but he thrust her inside the room without even a murmured word of thanks for her effort to save him, closed the door and turned the key in the lock, then faced the other door through which his visitor must enter.

Already it had been flung open.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"Carlita!"

The name escaped him in a hoarse, gasping cry as she staggered across the room toward him, her frail strength almost exhausted in her effort to reach him. She would have fallen there at his feet, but that he caught her in his arms, and as he would have placed her in a chair she caught the lapels of his coat and held herself close to him by the very strength of despair.

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"No!" she gasped. "Give me courage by the strength of your touch to tell my awful story. If you turn from me I shall die before it is finished, and then all will be lost! I told you that I was betraying you to ruin and death, but you would not believe me, would not listen. Great God, Leith, it was so hideously true! Do you know what I have done? Will you despise me, when you have heard, as I despise myself?"

He looked down at her. Knowing what he knew, he still could not keep his arms from supporting her. Knowing what he knew, he could force his lips to say no word of blame.

"Let me hide my face while I tell you!" she cried, concealing it in his bosom. "I have betrayed you! I have sought your ruin! I discovered that you had killed Olney Winthrop—see? I can say it without so much as a shiver now—and I have put you in the hands of the law with every chain of the ghastly story complete. They are coming even now to arrest you. There is not a moment to lose. You must go at once!"

He held her back from him and strove to look at her downcast face.

"Why have you come here to tell me this?" he asked hoarsely. "Now that you have about accomplished your revenge, why do you warn me of the danger?"

It never occurred to her to wonder at his apparent knowledge of it all. She only cried out in an agony of remorse:

"Why, don't you understand without my telling you? Don't you see it all? I love you! Surely you know that. Surely you have read it from the beginning, even when I was so hideously unconscious. I have loved you from the first, best of all, and I love you now as it never seemed possible that any human thing could love. I would give my life, my very soul itself to undo this awful thing that I have done!"

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"And yet you believe me guilty of this crime?"

"What right have I to judge you?" she cried, feverishly, endeavoring to remove her face from his gaze. "What do I know of your temptation? Oh, just God, it is that which has cursed me! I shut my eyes to the sweetest sentiment He ever put into a human soul, and set myself up to usurp His authority—to avenge! This is my punishment. See, Leith, I do not endeavor to conceal my face. I do not try to hide my shame. If you go to the gallows, I go too, for the crime is half mine. I have striven not to lose my reason during these last few, awful days when I was kept a prisoner in my own room, from which I have only now escaped in order that I might know all that was taking place, in order that I might die with you!"

"Wait, Carlita! You are speaking so wildly that I don't quite follow you. You say—"

"There isn't time!" she gasped. "There isn't time! They may be here at any moment, and you must make your escape before they come. I will find some means of throwing them off the track—of preventing their following you until your escape is assured. But you must go at once—at once!"

He looked at her curiously, a strange expression crossing his face.

"With you?" he asked.

"I will follow you, if you wish it!" she cried, desperately. "You can find some means of communicating with me—of letting me know where you are—and I swear I will come to you when you send."

"Believing me to be a—murderer?"

She shivered.

"We will never mention that between us," she groaned. "We will begin a new life—a new life in a new country—and forget. Oh, Leith, there is no more time! For God's sake—for my sake—go!"

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He smiled and kissed her.

For some reason the ghastly whiteness had disappeared from his countenance. He held her very closely in his arms, observing that she did not shrink from the embrace. He lifted her face so that her lips rested close to his own, as he said gently:

"How great must be the strength of love when innocence does not turn away appalled at guilt. Darling, suppose I should tell you that I do not fear the coming of these men? Suppose I should tell you that I do not fear the investigation of all the world, because I am innocent of the crime with which I have been charged—because I was not even by when Olney was pushed into the Donato Mine?"

She staggered back from him, her face growing whiter, more sunken than it had been before. She did not touch him then, but as he would have taken her again in his arms, motioned him back, passing her hands across her eyes to clear her vision.

"I thought to spare you and—and him," Leith cried swiftly, hurrying through the tale, because he saw how she was suffering; "but I have realized now that nothing under heaven will justify a lie. That was my sin, Carlita; but nothing beyond that, I swear to you. Half an hour ago I would have scorned to justify myself in your eyes, but such love as yours does not come into the lives of many men. Listen, darling. Even in those old days when you scorned me, I loved you so well that I

wished to spare you any pain that it lay in my power to save you from. I knew your pure white innocence and the suffering it would entail upon you to discover that the lover you had chosen in preference to me was not the man you had pictured him. Carlita, a woman's idea of a man—particularly a young girl's brought up in the untarnished school you were—and a man's idea of a man are not the same. You demand purity of him as he demands it of you, and while Olney was my friend—while I loved him like a brother—I wished to save you from a knowledge of—his past. Two years ago, when Olney was in Mexico he met a girl with whom he thought he fell in love. She was a hot-blooded Mexican, who loved him in return, but with a sort of savage ferocity. She was the daughter of Manuel Meriaz. When Olney left Mexico there was some kind of an understanding between them—a relationship with which I would not offend your pure ears. But Olney forgot her in a short time. When he went back to Mexico, I believe he had ceased to remember her very existence; but she had not forgotten him. She and her father were at the mines. She reminded Olney of his old promise to marry her. She even pleaded with him to keep his word. She loved him fondly, and—well Carlita, he should have made good his broken troth, because there was a—a little infant in Mexico—a tiny dead child, upon whose tomb there was no name."

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"Great God!"

"Olney could not be brought to see the justice in her claim, because he loved you, and one day, after a violent scene, in which she besought him to make good the old promise, for their dead baby's sake, there, under the desolation of the forsaken mine, where she had summoned him for a rendezvous, she pushed him to his death. I swear to you that I do not believe she meant to kill him, and so, in pity for her blighted life, I tried to save her from the punishment of her crime—to save him from the shame of public infamy, and you from the bitter knowledge of it all. Manuel Meriaz knew this story. He cared little enough, Heaven knows, for the disgrace of the poor girl, so long as he could gain money through it, and so I bought his silence, which he had discovered was of value to me because of my affection for Olney and my love for you. Carlita, before God, this is all the truth!"

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They were both so interested that they had not heard the opening of the front door again, nor the low-spoken words in the hall, for Carlita had fallen upon her knees at the feet of the man she loved.

"Father in heaven, the punishment is greater than I can bear!" she was crying aloud, in her agony. "Innocent! Innocent, and I have—"

But already she was in his arms, the wild words hushed by his passionate kisses.

"Darling," he whispered, "my full forgiveness is measured by the magnitude of your love. I should have told you—I should have trusted you."

And then, as he lifted his head, he saw two men standing already inside the door—Stolliker and the Mexican officer in uniform.

CHAPTER XXXV.

In all his experience as a detective, it is doubtful if Edmond Stolliker was ever so surprised as at the tableau that faced him as he entered Leith Pierrepont's room.

He stood there dumb, stunned, too bewildered to speak, and it was Leith himself who came to his assistance.

He put Carlita aside, gently placing her in a chair, where she sat rigidly upright, her eyes fixed upon the two men helplessly, hopelessly, in spite of her belief now in Leith's innocence, her hands clasped tightly, then he stepped forward.

"Gentlemen," he exclaimed, proudly, though as nonchalantly as he had ever spoken in his life, his handsome head flung up, not defiantly, but inviting examination, "I know why you have come here; have just heard it from the lips of this young lady—my affianced wife, and I am ready to go with you. It would be useless for me to assert my innocence of this infamous charge to you, as I know you are compelled to do that which your commanding officers have instructed you to do, but I hope there will be no scene about the arrest whatever. I will accompany you quietly wherever you desire, only stipulating that I be granted a few minutes' conversation with Miss de Barryos, in your presence if needs be, though I confess I should prefer not."

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It gave Stolliker time, and he managed to catch his breath.

"It is not at all necessary, sir," he said, recovering from his half-dazed stupidity. "The fact is, that Carpano has just received a telegram from his chief which makes it unnecessary for you to return with us to Mexico at all."

"What!"

Carlita had sprung to her feet, a tide of crimson color surging through her cheeks, brow and throat, a wild light had sprung to her eyes, and the exclamation was little more than a hoarse cry of gladness wrung through her white, tortured lips.

Leith stepped quickly forward and placed his arm about her for much required support. Stolliker smiled.

"The fact is, sir," he continued, "the telegram announced that a search of the Donato Mine revealed a scrap of paper which Mr. Winthrop had torn from a note-book before the gases of the mine overcame him, upon which he had written something to the effect that he had fallen there purely by accident, and that no one was responsible but his own carelessness. But it seems from the meager details we have been able to gain so far, that when the contents of the scrap of paper became known, Senorita Meriaz fell into violent hysteria, claiming that he had written it to screen her, for she had pushed him there to his death, intending to kill him. She testified to the statement, before witnesses, and then—it may be that her heart broke, poor girl, for the telegram contains the further information that she died less than an hour afterward."

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For all the fact that Carlita's arms were about his neck, in spite of the presence of those two supposedly unsympathetic men, and that Carlita's tears were flowing freely in wildest happiness, a shadow of regret lay in Leith's grave eyes.

"It is the happiest fate that could have overtaken her," he said, gently. "Heaven knows I am sorry for her, and would have shielded her had the power been left me, but her own misery was too great to be borne. And now may I ask how it happened that you came to tell me this?"

"It seems rather a peculiar story to me, sir," Stolliker answered, "understanding as little of it as I do, but you or Miss de Barryos may be able to supply all that I can not tell. When I went this morning to call upon Miss de Barryos, the manner of my reception and the fact that I was denied admission into her presence until I had declined to take a report at all, aroused my suspicions. Then when I was conducted to her apartment, Miss Chalmers remained there refusing to allow me a moment alone with my patroness. I was forced to tell the details of the situation to her, she apparently being as familiar with the history of the case as I was, perhaps more so. I observed that while Miss de Barryos was evidently listening intently to all that I was saying, she was suppressing all evidence of it, therefore betraying to me the fact that she did not wish Miss Chalmers to share her feeling upon the subject, and further, that she was evidently striving to appear more ill than she really was, though Heaven knows it was bad enough. I concluded, therefore, that her quiet was the result of acting in the presence of Miss Chalmers."

"Which it was!" cried Carlita, earnestly, turning toward him again.

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"I therefore concluded that, as I had been denied admission and then permitted to see her under Miss Chalmers' espionage, that Miss de Barryos was kept a prisoner."

"A prisoner!" cried Leith, a flash in his gray eyes that was dangerous.

"It is quite true!" exclaimed Carlita, excitedly.

"It does not take a detective long to jump at a conclusion under those circumstances," said Stolliker, with a smile. "I then questioned my niece, Ahbel, who is Miss de Barryos' maid, and had my suspicions confirmed. I instructed her that she was to closely watch Miss Chalmers, and report to me, through a medium which I named to her, any movement made by Miss Chalmers. Before that, however, Miss Chalmers insisted upon knowing what time the train from Albany would arrive, and what time the arrest would be made. As I did not trust her, naturally I did not tell the exact truth. At ten minutes before eight I was notified that Miss Chalmers had left the house. At eight, I knew that she had entered this one."

"This one!" gasped Carlita. "Jessica has been here?"

"Yes," answered Leith. "I will tell you everything in a moment. Go on, Mr. Stolliker. Your story interests me."

"I had instructed my niece, Ahbel, that she was to induce the nurse to leave Miss de Barryos alone with her for a moment, using any means that lay in her power, and this injunction also she carried out. She had Miss Chalmers' own maid summon her, then when Miss de Barryos was alone, Ahbel went into the room. Miss de Barryos knows the rest. She told her maid that it was a matter of life and death that she should leave the house at once, and instructed by me, that Miss de Barryos was to carry out any wish she might express, Ahbel quickly threw a dress over her negligee, and—Perhaps you can tell the sequel of the story better than I can, Mr. Pierrepont," exclaimed the detective, with a merry twinkle in his penetrating eye. "At all events, when this telegram was received, I knew where to find her, though I confess I thought she had come for the purpose of thwarting some scheme of Miss Chalmers', and I wanted no harm to befall her."

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Leith extended his hand, and with cordial warmth the detective took it.

"I thank you!" he exclaimed in the old way that charmed men and women alike. "You might have worked great harm to me, but you did it in her interest. You have been her friend, and I can harbor nothing against you after that, even if I would. She has had few enough of them, poor child."

"I am glad to have served her, and still more glad that I have been saved the unhappiness which this cruel mistake would have given me if it had gone further. If I may be permitted to congratulate you both, sir, I will retire. May I have a few minutes' conversation with you in the morning? There is the treachery of Meriaz to be considered. Perjury is no light offense in this country, particularly when a foreigner plots against the life of a United States citizen."

"Very well. In the morning at ten. It will give us both time to think the matter over. If you will have the kindness to send Miss de Barryos' maid here with a satchel containing the requisites of a lady's toilet you will add to the favor you have already done."

"It will give me pleasure," returned Stolliker, shaking the hand Carlita extended.

Then he and the Mexican officer, who had been a silent and non-comprehensive witness of the scene, left the room together.

Leith opened his arms and Carlita flew into them.

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"My darling," he whispered, "the clouds lasted but a few moments with me, and yet I seem to have suffered for years. What must not all this cruel time have cost you? Sweet one, believing me a murderer, how is it possible that you could have loved me?"

"Don't ask me!" she cried, shivering in his embrace. "Don't ask me. How is it possible that you could love me after all my treachery? I accepted you, held you near me, allowed you even to kiss my lips, in order that I might betray you to the gallows. Was it not the kiss of Judas?"

"The kiss that weakened through love," he answered, drawing her even closer. "Ah, darling, in spite of all, even the treachery you aver, you could have offered me no greater proof of your love than you have done tonight. Do you think that I can ever forget that you would have sacrificed all the years of your life in order to bring forgetfulness to a murderer? Do you think I can forget that you would have shared my exile, with the promise that no word of unfaith should ever escape you? The Good Book says: 'Greater love hath no man than this, that he give his life for his friend.' But that was more than life, Carlita. It was hope and honor and life as well. What suffering would I not have endured to know you love me like this?"

She allowed him to soothe her and kiss her trembling lips to quiet, murmuring as he did so:

"Thank God you did not die the night you saved the child from drowning before I had obtained your forgiveness. I should have gone mad through grief and remorse if I had heard this story too late."

"Then you really offered that five thousand for my life in order that you might have me punished, as you thought I deserved?"

"No! Upon my soul, no! I was not so bad as that. It was the first time I had fully realized the strength and breadth of my love for you. It was the first time I knew that all my whole being was infolded in yours, and it was for my own life I offered the reward, as well as yours. It was not of vengeance that I thought then, but only love—only love!"

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"My darling!" he murmured, tenderly. "Then it was not all truth she told."

"She? Who?"

"Jessica."

"She is here?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

With his arm about her, he crossed the room, turned the key in the lock, and threw open the door, behind which Jessica stood.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

Did you ever observe the devilish glare in the eyes of a caged hyena, the fiendish, cat-like grin upon his repulsive mouth when he knows he is denied the prey he covets? There is no other animal in captivity or out that has the same expression of countenance, the same half-cringing, diabolical treachery both in face and the sidelong movement of his body.

Just such an expression Jessica wore when Leith threw open the door which separated him from her. There was no other egress from the room than through that door or he would not have found her there; but she came forward after a moment of profoundest silence throwing up her head defiantly, the hateful grin receiving sound in a discordant laughter.

"Well," she exclaimed, lightly, approaching the mantel-shelf carelessly and taking up the gloves she had thrown there, "I have played—and lost. Others have done so before, better players than I, too, perhaps. You think you will escape the crime you have committed? Ha! ha! A forged telegram to a minion of the law is not a difficult thing, and I shall know how to discover the forgery. My hand is not quite played out, you see. Because Miss de Barryos loved the murderer of her former lover is no reason why he should escape the punishment of his crime. She has evidently been as anxious to pay out her money to have him escape as she once was to secure his conviction, but even forged telegrams are traceable, and I shall know where to find him when I want him."

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"You will not have far to look," said Leith quietly.

"If it were to the ends of the earth, I should find you and your half-breed wife, your—"

"Silence!" exclaimed Leith, the first gleam of anger coming to his eyes. "Not a word of disrespect to her. As for myself, I do not care. You are so powerless as to be almost pitiable. I understand perfectly the detestable part you have played—the false friend, endeavoring to poison the mind of innocence, the serpent creeping through the grass at nightfall in your effort to work harm and ruin. I have known all along that you were striving to harm Miss de Barryos, from the very first day that I met her under your disreputable roof."

Jessica laughed aloud—a laugh that would have slain had the power been given her.

"You were not loath to visit it, in spite of its being disreputable!" she exclaimed, sneeringly. "You never neglected an invitation. Where was the first place you went upon your return from India? In whose box did you linger longest at the opera? At whose side were you content to sit from morning until night, until she came with her cursed Indian beauty? Your vaunted virtue is of very recent birth! Do you forget that I know the story of Lena Moore?"

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"How dare you mention that name—here!" thundered Leith, the passion of his tone frightening her. Then, remembering himself, he continued, more quietly: "As you said but now, my dear Jessica, you have played and lost. Why not retire gracefully from the table? You have done all the harm you can. Even the shameless story you would have repeated but now would not shake the faith of my promised wife—would not kill the love she bears me. But I do not propose that you shall pollute her pure ears with the story of a folly long since dead—the folly of a mere boy in the hands of a designing woman—but one which ended before harm was done. And now, go! Say to your mother that her ward is under the protection of her betrothed husband, and safe. I should be inclined to pity you but for the wrong done to this sweet and inoffensive child."

Jessica's lips curled scornfully.

"Pity me!" she repeated. "Why? Because you think I love you? Upon my word, your vanity blinds you, indeed! It was only your money that I craved—only the wealth with which you could surround me—only the position in which you could have placed me. After all, it is not so flattering to a man's vanity that it need incite his pity."

"And you would have married a murderer—gone into voluntary exile—for wealth and position?"

It was rather a mean thing for him to say, when he knew so well that it was only the excuse of a baffled woman; but it was very human, and he was only that. There was a half-amused, half-disgusted smile upon his lips that angered her more than a volume of words could have done. She bit her lips to prevent the flow of demoniacal fury that possessed her, then calmly drew on her gloves.

"Good-evening!" she exclaimed, carelessly. "When you have convinced Carlita of the truth of your statement regarding Lena Moore, and have succeeded in convincing the world that the forged telegram from Mexico was genuine, then, perhaps, I may congratulate you; but until then I shall reserve my good wishes for your future. It will not strengthen the story you wish to palm upon the public that my mother's ward left her roof for the shelter of yours before she became your wife, and that privilege my mother will contest, as you may remember Carlita is not yet of age."

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Without so much as a glance toward Carlita, but with a stately bow in Leith's direction, she opened the door from behind and stepped out closing it upon herself.

Then she went downstairs swiftly, not waiting for the elevator, and into the street, her eyes blinded, her brain in a seething whirl of torturing madness.

Her turn had come at last!

She hailed a carriage and gave the address to the coachman incoherently, then sprang in and closed the door upon herself, eager to shut out the very sight of the world.

"Balked!" she muttered, fiercely. "Baffled just when success seemed within my grasp! Curse them—curse them both! I have plotted and planned for nothing. I have betrayed my unhappy mother into the power of that wretch Meriaz, and what have I gained? Nothing! Nothing except that he loves her more than ever. I have proven to him the very depth and power of her love while striving to demonstrate mine. I have placed her upon the very pinnacle I would have given my soul to occupy. And what have I gained? His hatred—his contempt—his bitter loathing! I have shut myself out from his presence eternally! And I loved him so! My God! I loved him so!"

She covered her face with her hands, and a wild storm of weeping burst from her, so overpowering that she did not know when the carriage had stopped, did not know when the coachman climbed down from his box and spoke to her, did not hear until he touched her lightly upon the arm.

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She scarcely remembered afterward how it was she got into the house; but she found her mother standing in the hall upon her entrance, looking like a wraith, in her white gown, with her still whiter face gleaming above it.

"Meriaz has come for his answer," she groaned, speaking the words almost before the door had been closed upon her daughter—"Meriaz has come for his answer! For the love of Heaven, tell me what I am to say?"

"Tell him," cried Jessica, bending forward, and curiously speaking the words through her set teeth—"tell him that he lied! That Leith Pierrepont is not guilty of murder! Tell him that news has come from the South, and Leith is free! Tell him that which he knows but too well, that it was his own daughter who was the murderess!"

No cry from the lips of woman ever equaled in mortal anguish that which fell from Mrs. Chalmers. She staggered back against the wall, her eyes wild in their insane rolling.

"His daughter!" she gasped. "Muriel Meriaz!"

"If that is her name," returned Jessica, sullenly. "You appear to know her better than I. Yes, she is the murderess. But what is that to you, or me, that you should turn the hue of death itself? What is that to you, or me, that you should gasp and moan as if you yourself were facing the gallows?"

We have lost our game; but I don't see why you should agonize over the daughter of a scoundrel like that—a creature whom you never saw; a—"

She was looking so intently at her mother that she did not see a man's form come into the hall, did not know of his presence there until his hard, iron fingers closed upon her arm; then she turned and looked into the scowling face of Manuel Meriaz.

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"Shut up!" he commanded, brutally. "You don't know what you are talking about, my fine lady. I'll teach you some day to call your own father a scoundrel. I'll teach you—"

"What are you saying?"

"That which is true. You never heard the story, did you? You thought only that I was familiar with a small slice of the past history of your family, but it never occurred to you that the Mexican whom you detested, in spite of all your expressions to the contrary, was in reality your own father. And this girl whom you have called a murderess is your sister! Do you hear that, my girl?"

"You are mad—mad!" panted Jessica.

Meriaz laughed aloud.

"Look in your mother's face and see if I am mad. Look in her face and ask her if I have lied. Look in her face and bid her tell you that I am not your father. Aha! you dare not, because you know I have spoken the truth. You are my daughter, and as such I propose that you shall be regarded in the future. You understand?"

But Jessica did not reply. She stood there for a moment, looking straight at him in a stunned, stupid silence; then, with never a word, she walked by him and up the stairs without a glance in her mother's direction, without a word of sympathy, without a thought for any one save herself, and up to her own room.

She closed the door behind her, and stood with her back against it for some time, then with a defiant gesture threw up her head and walked swiftly to her writing desk. She sat down and wrote hurriedly:

"MY DEAR DUDLEY,—A week ago you asked me to be your wife—swore you could not live without me. If it was the truth you spoke, if you meant the vows you swore that day, answer this note in person. I must see you at once.

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"Ever faithfully,

"JESSICA."

She sealed it, the smile half triumphant, half defiant still lingering upon her lips, called a messenger, and dispatched it at once to Dudley Maltby.

"Tomorrow morning," she muttered, "the papers shall contain the announcement of my marriage to the scion of one of the noblest houses in all America. Leith Pierrepont shall see that his power to hurt me was not so great as he thought, and I shall be saved from that beast, Meriaz."

She did not consider what was to befall her mother, did not think of her future at all, never even remembered her, but consumed the time of the messenger's absence in planning what she should say to Dudley Maltby, her lips curling with scorn as she imagined his joy at receiving her message.

She smiled grimly as she saw the messenger returning with a note in his hand, and received it with the calmest indifference, dismissing the boy with a haughtily murmured:

"That will do!"

Then, when he had gone, she tore the envelope from the missive, pausing to light a cigarette nonchalantly before she read it. She looked at it quite calmly, but the expression of her face changed curiously as she read:

"MY DEAR JESSICA,—You were wiser that day than I. I allowed my passion to carry me away, never pausing to think of the future, after the manner of all hot-headed lovers; but with your usual clear-sightedness and brilliancy of intellect you foresaw what the future would hold for us with barely ten thousand a year to drag us through a monotonous existence, and you laughed at my earnestness. You were quite right. Don't think for a moment that I am upbraiding you. On the contrary, I realize that you have done us both a great service, that the proposition I made would have been sheerest madness. Of course I understand that pity for me prompted your kind note, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart, but it is much better that I should not see you just at present. Thanking you for many happy hours in the past, believe me,

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"Very cordially yours,

"DUDLEY MALTBY."

She tore it up without any show of indignation whatever, and threw it into the waste basket, then rang for her maid.

"Is Manuel Meriaz still here?" she asked.

"No, ma'am," her maid replied. "He left half an hour ago, and—and—"

"Well?"

"He was arrested as he went down the stoop."

"Umph! I am going to my mother. She is in her room?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You may pack my clothing for a rather long absence, and tell Mathilde to do the same for my mother. We leave on Wednesday for Paris."

Her maid's exclamation of surprise was lost upon her. She was looking mechanically through the window.

"At least one fortunate thing has happened," she was musing. "But for the arrest of Meriaz we might have had difficulty in getting away. Now it will be quite easy. I shall require my mother's services, and so silence concerning the past is best, I suppose. I shall only tell her of the death of—of—this girl. If Dudley Maltby, my last hope, had not failed me, I need never have seen her again, but now—"

A shrug of the shoulders, intended to convince herself of her indifference, but failing signally, completed the sentence. [Pg 222]

CHAPTER XXXVII.

The transferment of the guardianship of Carlita from Mrs. Chalmers to Pierrepont was not a difficult thing, and he lost no time in making the application for it.

Nor was there loss of time in the matter of their marriage.

She had no friends whatever in that section of country, and so they were married quietly with only Dudley Maltby as best man and Ahbel and Stolliker as witnesses, and left, while April was yet in its infancy, for a long cruise upon the "Eolus," accompanied only by Ahbel and Leith's valet, besides the crew.

Carlita is a great favorite with the men, one reason being, perhaps, that she divided five thousand dollars between the two who brought Leith and his little half-dead burden safely back to her when death was threatening both.

The child did not die, nor yet did the mother in whose interests he had received his wetting, but there is a man upon the "Eolus" who would sacrifice his life at any time for its owner, who risked his own for a crippled boy.

They are very happy. So happy that a little anxious cloud gathered between Carlita's brows as she lay in her favorite nook upon the deck, her couch being the one she had used upon the day of that momentous little cruise that occupied less than one brief day, and yet seemed to have turned the current of all her life.

"What is it, sweetheart?" Leith asked, no shade of expression upon that lovely face lost to him.

"I was only thinking of the old days," she answered, looking up in his face with a devotion that would have banished the most unhappy memories. "Of some words my mother spoke to me before she died, of a curse—" [Pg 223]

"A curse!" interrupted Leith, lightly. "How very romantic! Do let us hear all about it."

"You needn't laugh," returned Carlita, allowing him to draw her very closely in the shelter of his arms. "It was serious enough, Heaven knows! It was the curse of Pocahontas. Jessica told you once that I was half Indian. While the component parts weren't exactly correct, the essence of the statement was true. There is the blood of the Indian girl in my veins through the maternal side."

"And a very noble girl she was," exclaimed Leith. "I'm sure John Smith the first would bear me out if he were here to speak for himself."

"Her marriage to John Rolfe, you know, was most unhappy. The only issue of the marriage was a son, but on her death bed, Pocahontas pronounced a curse upon his female descendants who should bear the trace of the Indian in her appearance."

"How very thoughtless of her. When it was John Rolfe who made her so unhappy, why couldn't she have made it the male descendants?"

"History sayeth not," returned Carlita, her humor lightened in spite of herself. "But it is a matter of fact that every dark member of my mother's family has suffered through that curse."

"But I have not heard what it was yet?"

"And I can't tell you the words; but the meaning was that if she dared love she should suffer ruin and death, either she or the man whom she cursed with her devotion. I told that curse to—Olney, Leith, when he was leaving for Mexico."

"And you really believe that is what caused your suffering and his death?"

She did not reply, but looked out dreamily over the water. [Pg 224]

"What nonsense, darling wife!" he said, gently. "You don't suppose that God would grant a mere foolish, wretched woman the power to curse the innocent of future generations, do you? You don't suppose that He would bring a helpless infant into the world for predestined misery

because some half-crazed creature in her blind ignorance uttered a speech that was superinduced perhaps by a grief too great to be borne in silence? Where would be the justice, and mercy, and wisdom of that? And what is your idea of God if not inseparable from those qualities which form His divine attribute?"

"You make me ashamed."

"Not ashamed, love, because you never really believed in it. It was only that the foolish repetition made you anxious. There is no channel without its turning point, dear, no life without its sorrow, and when yours came, you saw in it the curse which that poor, wretched woman uttered, and which others were foolish enough to repeat, that was all. In our love and belief in the goodness of God, we can afford to laugh at such nonsense as that, my darling. Promise me that you will forget it."

She gave the promise with her lips upon his, belief and faith and perfect love casting out fear.

Nevertheless, when her own little one was born, less than two years after, and she was told that it was an exquisite girl, her first question was:

"What is her complexion?"

"As fair as a lily," the nurse replied. "Her eyes are porcelain blue, her hair is like the sun."

And the sweet face upon the pillow flushed with pleasure and relief as she gazed up into the eyes of her husband, and murmured faintly:

"Thank God, Leith, there is no trace of the Indian there!"

THE END.

Transcriber's Notes:

Added table of contents.

Cover image may be clicked to view larger version.

The copy of the book used to produce this electronic edition was missing the back cover, which most likely would have contained an advertisement listing other titles from the Hart Series.

Normalized "Aïda," "fiancé" and "portière" to consistently include accent marks throughout the text.

Changed four instances of "to-night" to "tonight" for consistency.

Some questionable spellings (e.g. "balmly") have been retained from the original.

Page 8, changed "you" to "your" in "ruin your own life."

Page 15, changed "To-morrow" to "Tomorrow" for consistency with all other occurrences of the word in the text.

Page 23, changed "Leigh" to "Leith" in "Leith, old fellow."

Page 26, changed "under the son" to "under the sun."

Page 29, changed "rathed" to "rather" in "exclaimed rather suddenly." Changed "wth" to "with" in "with a sweetness."

Page 30, changed "which" to "with" in "earnest conversation with the language."

Page 50, changed "eles" to "else" in "else it will be of no avail."

Page 69, added missing quote before "the only one that I have."

Page 74, corrected typo "utterence" in "volumes in the mere utterance." Added missing comma after "I can't."

Page 85, changed "is is nine" to "it is nine."

Page 86, corrected typo "Barroys" in "do this for you, Miss de Barryos."

Page 89, corrected "patios" to "patois." Changed ? to . after "announced his death."

Page 96, changed "is" to "it" in "it was not necessary."

Page 108, changed "while" to "with" in "with the injunction."

Page 113, corrected "Adventure" to "Adventures" in second appearance of "Adventures of Sherlock Holmes."

Page 117, added missing end quote to "I have a white gown."

Page 118, changed "at" to "as" in "as if some grand ball."

Page 128, changed "through" to "though" in "though they were fewer."

Page 138, changed "that" to "than" in "more coldly than before."

Page 140, changed "fore" to "for" in "for some moments resembling."

Page 146, changed "chocking sob" to "choking sob."

Page 150, removed duplicate "let" from "can not let you."

Page 152, changed "musculine" to "masculine."

Page 153, added missing quote after "happiness is mine at last."

Page 157, changed "stredhed" to "stretched" in "arms stretched out."

Page 187, removed unnecessary quote before "She looked up at him helplessly."

Page 193, changed "accomplised" to "accomplished" in "has been accomplished." Corrected typo "ever" in "he had ever done."

Page 197, added missing comma after "with her own hands."

Page 208, changed "stod" to "stood" in "stood there dumb."

Page 215, changed "It" to "If" in "If it were to the ends of the earth."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CURSE OF POCAHONTAS ***

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