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Alex. McVeigh Miller**

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Title: My Pretty Maid; or, Liane Lester

Author: Mrs. Alex. McVeigh Miller

Release date: May 4, 2016 [EBook #51996]

Language: English

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

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NEW EAGLE SERIES No.682 15 CENTS

My Pretty Maid

By

Mrs. Alex. McVeigh Miller

*STREET & SMITH
PUBLISHERS,
NEW YORK.*

MY PRETTY MAID;

OR

LIANE LESTER

BY

MRS. ALEX. McVEIGH MILLER

AUTHOR OF

"Sweet Violet," "The Pearl and the Ruby," "The Senator's Bride,"
"The Senator's Favorite," "Lillian, My Lillian," and numerous
other excellent romances published exclusively in the
EAGLE and NEW EAGLE SERIES.



NEW YORK
STREET & SMITH, PUBLISHERS
79-89 SEVENTH AVENUE

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My Pretty Maid

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MY PRETTY MAID.

CONTENTS

[CHAPTER I. A DESPERATE CHANCE.](#)
[CHAPTER II. FATE IS ABOVE US ALL.](#)

[CHAPTER III. "MY PRETTY MAID."](#)
[CHAPTER IV. SECRET LOVE.](#)
[CHAPTER V. ROMA'S LOVERS.](#)
[CHAPTER VI. AFTER THE CRIME.](#)
[CHAPTER VII. GRANNY'S REVENGE.](#)
[CHAPTER VIII. THE BROKEN ENGAGEMENT.](#)
[CHAPTER IX. LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT.](#)
[CHAPTER X. ROMA SEEKS A NEW MAID.](#)
[CHAPTER XI. THE BEAUTY SHOW.](#)
[CHAPTER XII. "THE QUEEN ROSE."](#)
[CHAPTER XIII. EDMUND CLARKE'S SUSPICION.](#)
[CHAPTER XIV. ROMA FINDS AN ALLY.](#)
[CHAPTER XV. "A DYING MOTHER."](#)
[CHAPTER XVI. A LOVE LETTER.](#)
[CHAPTER XVII. A CRUEL FORGERY.](#)
[CHAPTER XVIII. LIANE'S FLEETING LOVE DREAM.](#)
[CHAPTER XIX. WHAT DOLLY TOLD.](#)
[CHAPTER XX. "AS ONE ADMIRES A STATUE."](#)
[CHAPTER XXI. A HARVEST OF WOE.](#)
[CHAPTER XXII. AT A FIEND'S MERCY.](#)
[CHAPTER XXIII. A MURDEROUS FURY.](#)
[CHAPTER XXIV. A STRAND OF RUDDY HAIR.](#)
[CHAPTER XXV. A TRUE FRIEND.](#)
[CHAPTER XXVI. TREMBLING HOPES.](#)
[CHAPTER XXVII. WHEN HAPPINESS SEEMED NEAR!](#)
[CHAPTER XXVIII. A SWORD THRUST IN HIS HEART.](#)
[CHAPTER XXIX. THE BRIDAL.](#)
[CHAPTER XXX. BEFORE THE DAWN.](#)
[CHAPTER XXXI. WHEN THE CLOUDS ROLLED BY.](#)

CHAPTER I.

A DESPERATE CHANCE.

"How fast the river flows! How it roars in my ears and drowns the sound of your voice, my dearest! It is bearing me away! Oh, save me! save me!"

The river was the stream of Death, and the lone voyager floating out on its rushing tide was a loved and loving young wife.

The frail white hands clung fondly to her husband's as she rested with her head upon his breast, and the faint voice murmured deliriously on:

"How it rushes on—the wild river! How it rocks me on its broad breast! It is not so noisy now; it is deeper and swifter, and its voice has a lulling tone that soothes me to sleep. Hold me tight—keep me awake, dear, lest it sweep me away to the sea!"

Ah, he would have given the world to hold her back, his darling, the dearest of his heart, but the rushing torrent was too strong. It was sweeping her away. [Pg 6]

Several days ago a beautiful daughter—her first-born after five years' wifehood—had been laid in her yearning arms.

But, alas! the first night of its birth, during a temporary absence of the old nurse from the room, the little treasure had been stolen from its mother.

Panic seized the whole household, and rigorous search was at once begun and kept up for days, but all to no avail.

The father was frantic, but, though he would have given his fortune for the return of the child, he was powerless; and now, as a sequel to this tragedy of loss and pain, his dear young wife lay dying in his arms—dying of heartbreak for the lost babe—poor bereaved young mother!

Tears rained from his eyes down on her pallid face as he strained her to his breast, his precious one, going away from him so fast to death, while outside, heedless of his despair, the golden sun was shining on the green grass, and the fragrant flowers, and the little birds singing in the trees as if there were nothing but joy in the world.

The old family physician came in softly, with an anxious, sympathetic face, and whispered startling words in his ear. [Pg 7]

A look of aversion crossed the young husband's face, and he groaned:

"Doctor Jay, I cannot bear the thought!"

"I feared you would feel so, Mr. Clarke, but all my medical colleagues agree with me that nothing but the restoration of her child can save my patient's life. It is the desperate chance we take when we feel that all hope is lost."

"Then I must consent!"

"You are wise," the old doctor answered, tiptoeing from the room, only to reappear a little later, followed by the nurse with a little white bundle in her arms.

The low voice of the delirious woman went babbling on.

"Darling," murmured her husband, pressing his lips to her pale brow.

"Yes, yes, dear, I'm going away from you. Hark!"

The sudden wail of an infant had caught her hearing.

Her dull eyes brightened with returning intelligence, she moved restlessly, and the nurse laid a wailing infant against her breast.

"Dear mistress, can you hear me? Here is your baby back again."

[Pg 8]

They had taken a desperate chance when all hope seemed lost.

By the advice of the consulting physicians, another child had been substituted for the stolen one, and, at its helpless cry, hope crept back to the mother's breaking heart; the rushing waves ceased to moan in her ears, silenced by that little piping voice, and the sinking life was rallied.

She lived, and the babe grew and throve in its luxurious surroundings, and the mother worshiped it. No one ever dared tell her the truth—that it was not her own infant that had been restored to her arms, but a little foundling. No other child ever came to rival it in Mrs. Clarke's love, and it was this fact alone that sealed her husband's lips to the cruel secret that ached at his heart. He feared the effect of the truth on his delicate wife, taking every precaution to keep her in ignorance, even to moving away from his own home, and settling in a distant place.

Though he never relaxed his efforts to find his lost child, the years slipped away in a hopeless quest, and Roma, the adopted girl, grew eighteen years old, and her beauty and her prospects brought her many suitors.

[Pg 9]

In his heart Mr. Clarke hoped the girl would make an early marriage, for he was tired of living a lie, pretending to love her as a daughter to deceive his wife, while an aching void in his own heart was always yearning for his own lost darling.

CHAPTER II.

[Pg 10]

FATE IS ABOVE US ALL.

It was six o'clock by all the watches and clocks at Stonecliff, and the girls at Miss Bray's dressmaking establishment hastily put up their work and were starting for home, chattering like a flock of magpies, when their employer called after them testily:

"Say, girls, one of you will have to take this bundle up to Cliffdene. Miss Clarke wanted it very particularly to wear to-night. Liane Lester, she lives nearer to you than any of the others. You take it."

Liane Lester would have liked to protest, but she did not dare. With a decided pout of her rosy lips, she took the box with Miss Clarke's new silk cape and hurried to overtake Dolly Dorr, the only girl who was going her way.

"What a shame to have to carry boxes along the village street late in the afternoon when every one is out walking! I think Miss Bray ought to keep a servant to fetch and carry!" cried Dolly indignantly. "Oh, look, Liane! There's that handsome Jesse Devereaux standing on the post-office steps! Shouldn't you like to flirt with him? Let's saunter slowly past so that he may notice us!"

[Pg 11]

"I don't want him to notice me! Granny says that harm always comes of rich men noticing poor girls. Come, Dolly, let us avoid him by crossing the street."

Suiting the action to the word, Liane Lester turned quickly from her friend and sped toward the crossing.

But, alas, fate is above us all!

Her haste precipitated what she strove to avoid.

Drawing the veil down quickly over her rosy face, the frolicsome wind caught the bit of blue gossamer and whirled it back toward the sidewalk. Jesse Devereaux gave chase, captured the veil, and flew after the girl.

She had gained the pavement, and was hurrying on, when she heard him at her side, panting, as he said:

"I beg pardon—your veil!"

A white hand was thrust in front of her, holding the bit of blue gauze, and she had to stop.

"I thank you," she murmured, taking it from his hand and raising her eyes shyly to his face—the brilliant, handsome face that had haunted many a young girl's dreams.

[Pg 12]

The dazzling dark eyes were fixed eagerly on her lovely face, and his red lips parted in a smile that showed pearly-white teeth as he exclaimed gayly:

"Old Boreas was jealous of your hiding such a face, and whisked your veil away, but out of mercy

to mankind I concluded to return it."

"Thank you, very much!" she answered again, and was turning away when Dolly Dorr rushed across the street, breathless with eagerness.

"How do you do, Mr. Devereaux?" she cried gayly, having been introduced to him at a church festival the evening before.

"Ah, Miss——" he hesitated, as he lifted his hat, and she twittered:

"Miss Dorr; we met at the festival last night, you know. And this is my chum, Liane Lester."

"Charmed," he exclaimed, while his radiant black eyes beamed on Liane's face, and he stepped along by Dolly's side as she placed herself between them, intent on a flirtation.

"May I share your walk?" he asked, and Dolly gave an eager assent, secretly wishing her girl friend a mile away.

But as she could not manage this, she proceeded to monopolize the conversation—an easy task, for Liane walked along silent and ill at ease, "for all the world," thought the lively Dolly to herself, "like a tongue-tied little schoolgirl."

[Pg 13]

No wonder Liane was demure and frightened, dreading to get a scolding from granny if Jesse Devereaux walked with them as far as her home.

Liane lived alone, in pinching poverty, with a feeble old grandmother, who was too old to work for herself, and needed Liane's wages to keep life in her old bones; so she was always dreading that the girl's beauty would win her a husband who would pack the old woman off to the poorhouse as an incumbrance.

She kept Liane illy dressed and hard worked, and never permitted her to have a beau. Marriage was a failure, she said.

"What was the use of marrying a poor man, to work your fingers to the bone for him?" she exclaimed scornfully.

"But one might marry rich," suggested innocent Liane.

"Rich men marry rich girls, and if they ever notice a poor girl, she mostly comes to grief by it. Don't never let me catch you flirting with any young man, or I'll make you sorry!" granny answered viciously.

[Pg 14]

She had not made her sorry yet, for the girl had obeyed her orders, although her beauty would have brought her a score of lovers had she smiled on their advances, but Liane had not seen any man yet for whom she would have risked one of granny's beatings.

How would it be now, when her young heart was beating violently at the glances of a pair of thrilling dark eyes, and the tones of a rich, musical voice, when her face burned and her hands trembled with exquisite ecstasy?

Old Boreas, why did you whisk her veil away and show Jesse Devereaux that enchanting young face, so rosy and dimpled, with large, shy eyes like purple pansies, golden-hearted, with rims of jet, so dark the arched brows and fringed lashes, while the little head was covered with silky waves of thick, shining chestnut hair? What would be the outcome of this fateful meeting?

Sure enough, as they came in sight of Liane's humble home, there was granny's grizzled head peeping from the window, and, with an incoherent good evening to her companions, Liane darted inside the gate, hurrying into the house.

But at the very threshold the old woman met her with a snarl of rage, slapping her in the face with a skinny, clawlike hand as she vociferated:

[Pg 15]

"Take that for disobeying me, girl! Walking out with that handsome dude, after all my warnings!"

"Oh, granny, please don't be so cruel, striking me for nothing! I'm too big a girl to be beaten now!" pleaded Liane, sinking into a chair, the crimson lines standing out vividly on her white cheeks, while indignant tears started into her large, pathetic eyes.

But her humility did not placate the cruel old hag, who continued to glare at her victim, snarling irascibly.

"Too big, eh?" she cried; "well, I'll show you, miss, the next time I see you galivanting along the street with a young man! Now, who is he, anyhow?"

"Just a friend of Dolly Dorr's, granny. I—I—never saw him till just now, when he asked Dolly if he might share her walk."

"Um-hum! A frisky little piece, that Dolly Dorr, with her yellow head and doll-baby face! I don't want you to walk with her no more when he goes along, do you hear me, Liane? Two's company, and three a crowd."

[Pg 16]

"Yes, ma'am"—wearily.

"Now, what have you got in that pasteboard box, I say? If you've been buying finery, take it back this minute. I won't pay a cent for it!"

"It's finery, granny, but not mine. Miss Bray sent me to carry it to the rich young lady up at Cliffdene, and I just stopped in to see if you will make your own tea while I do my errand, for I shouldn't like to come back alone after dark."

"Better come alone than walking with a man, Liane Lester!" grunted the old woman, adding more

amicably: "Go along, then, and hurry back, and I'll keep some tea warm for you."

"Thank you, granny," the poor girl answered dejectedly, going out with her bundle again, her face shrouded in the blue veil, lest she should meet some one who would notice the marks of the cruel blow on her fair cheek.

Her way led along the seashore, and the brisk breeze of September blew across the waves and cooled her burning face, and dried the bitter tears in her beautiful eyes, though her heart beat heavily and slow in her breast as she thought:

"What a cruel life for a young girl to lead—beaten and abused by an old hag whom one must try to respect because she is old, and poor, and is one's grandmother, though I am ashamed of the relationship! I fear her, instead of loving her, and it is more than likely she will kill me some day in one of her brutal rages. Sometimes I almost resolve to run away and find work in the great city; but, then, she has such a horror of the poorhouse, I have not the heart to desert her to her fate. But I could not help being ashamed of her when Mr. Devereaux saw her uncombed head and angry face leering at us out of the window. Never did I feel the misery of my condition, the poverty of my dress and my home, so keenly as in his presence. I do not suppose he would stoop to marry a poor girl like me, especially with such a dreadful relation as granny," she ended, with a bursting sigh of pain from the bottom of her sore heart.

[Pg 17]

The tide swept in almost to her feet, and the sea's voice had a hollow tone of sympathy with her sorrow.

"Oh, I wish that I were dead," she cried with a sudden passionate despair, almost wishing that the great waves would rush in and sweep her off her feet and away out upon the billows, away, from her weary, toilsome life into oblivion.

[Pg 18]

But here she was at the gates of beautiful Cliffdene, the home of the Clarkes, a handsome stone mansion set in spacious ground on a high bluff, washed at its base by the murmuring sea.

She opened the gate, and went through the beautiful grounds, gay with flowers, thinking, what a paradise Cliffdene was and what a contrast to the tumble-down, three-roomed shanty she called home.

"How happy Miss Clarke must be; so beautiful and rich, with fine dresses, and jewels, and scores of handsome lovers! I wonder if Mr. Devereaux knows her, and if he admires her like all the rest? He would not mind marrying her, I suppose. She does not live in a shanty, and have a spiteful old grandmother to make her weary of her life," thought poor, pretty Liane, as she paused in the setting sunlight before the broad, open door.

At that moment a superb figure swept down the grand staircase toward the trembling girl—a stately figure, gowned in rustling silk, whose rich golden tints, softened by trimmings of creamy lace, suited well with the handsome face, lighted by spirited eyes of reddish brown, while the thick waves of shining, copper-colored hair shone in the sunset rays like a glory. Liane knew it was Miss Clarke, the beauty and heiress; she had seen her often riding through the streets of Stonecliff.

[Pg 19]

"What do you want, girl?" cried a proud, haughty voice to Liane as they stood face to face on the threshold, the heiress and the little working girl.

"Miss Bray has sent home your silk cape, Miss Clarke."

"Ah? Then bring it upstairs, and let me see if it is all right. I have very little confidence in these village dressmakers, though Miss Bray has very high recommendations from the judge's wife," cried haughty Roma Clarke, motioning the girl to follow her upstairs, adding cruelly: "You should have gone round to the servants' entrance, girl. No one brings bundles to the front door."

Liane's cheeks flamed and her throat swelled with resentful words that she strove to keep back, for she knew she must not anger Miss Bray's rich customer. But she hated her toilsome life more than ever as she followed Roma along the richly carpeted halls to a splendid dressing room, where the beauty sank into a cushioned chair, haughtily ordering the box to be opened.

Liane's trembling white fingers could scarcely undo the strings, but at last she held up the exquisite evening cape of brocaded cream silk, lined with peach blossom and cascaded with billows of rare lace.

[Pg 20]

It was daintily chic, and had been the admiration of the workroom. All the girls had coveted it, and Dolly Dorr had draped it over Liane's shoulders, crying:

"It just suits you, you dainty princess."

The princess stood trembling now, for Roma flew into a rage the instant her wonderful red-brown eyes fell on the cape.

"Just as I feared! It is ruined in the arrangement of the cascades of lace. Who did it—you?" she demanded sharply.

"Oh, no, Miss Bray arranged it herself, I assure you," faltered Liane.

"It must be altered at once, for I need it walking out in the grounds with my guests to-night. You're one of the dressmaker's girls, aren't you? Yes? Well, you shall change it for me at once, under my directions. Hurry and rip the lace off carefully."

Liane's heart fluttered into her throat, but she protested.

"I—I cannot stay. I should be afraid to go home after dark. I am sure Miss Bray will alter it to—"

[Pg 21]

morrow."

"To-morrow! when I want it to-night? You must be crazy, girl! Do as I bid you, or I'll report you to your employer to-morrow and have you discharged."

Liane's throat choked with a frightened sob, and she dared not disobey and risk dismissal from Miss Bray and a beating from granny.

"I will do it, but I am terribly afraid to go home alone," she faltered, taking up the scissors and the garment.

"Nonsense! Nothing will hurt you. Here, this is the way I want it, and be sure you do not botch it, or you will have to do it all over again! Now, I am going down to dinner. I'll be back in an hour and a half, and you ought to have it done by that time!" cried the imperious beauty, sweeping from the room, though Liane heard her tell the maid in the hall to keep an eye on that girl from the dressmaker's, that she did not slip anything in her pocket.

The clever maid sidled curiously into the lighted dressing room, and, as soon as she saw the tears in the eyes of Liane and the crimson print on her fair cheek, she jumped to her own conclusions. [Pg 22]

"You poor, pretty little thing, did Miss Roma fly in a rage and slap your face, too?" she exclaimed compassionately.

"Certainly not!" the girl answered, cresting her graceful chestnut-brown head with sudden pride. "Do you think I would allow your mistress to insult me so?"

"She would insult you whether you liked it or not," the maid replied tartly. "She has slapped my face several times in her tantrums since I came here, and I would have quit right off, but her mother is an angel, and when I complained to her, the sweet lady gave me some handsome presents and begged me to overlook it, because her daughter was somewhat spoiled by being an only child and an heiress. So I stayed for the kind mother's sake, and if Miss Roma really did strike you in her rage over the cape, let me tell Mrs. Clarke, and she will reward you handsomely to keep silence!"

"But I assure you Miss Clarke did not strike me!" Liane protested.

"There's the print of her fingers on your face to speak for itself, poor child!"

"That mark was on my face when I came," Liane answered, almost inaudibly, out of her keen humiliation. [Pg 23]

"Oh, I see. What is your name?"

"Miss Lester—Liane Lester."

"A pretty-sounding name! I've heard of you before, Miss Lester—the lovely sewing girl whose grandmother beats her. All the village knows it and pities you. Why do you stand it? Why don't you run away and get married? You are so lovely that any man might be glad to get you for his bride."

The color flamed hotly into Liane's cheek. She was proud, in spite of her poverty, and it chafed her to have her private affairs so freely discussed by Miss Clarke's servant.

"Please do not talk to me while I'm sewing," she said firmly, but so gently that the pert maid did not take offense, but slipped away, returning when the cape was nearly done, with a dainty repast on a silver waiter.

"Mrs. Clarke sent this with her compliments. She heard about your being up here sewing, and felt so sorry for you."

Liane had not tasted food since her meager midday luncheon, but she was too proud to own that she was faint from fasting. [Pg 24]

"She was very kind, but I—I really am not hungry," she faltered.

"But you have not had your tea yet, and one is apt to have a headache without it," urged the tactful maid, and she presently persuaded Liane to eat, although not before the cape was done, so great was her dread of Miss Clarke's coarse anger.

The maid had adroitly let Mrs. Clarke know all about Liane, and now she slipped a crisp banknote into her hand, whispering:

"Mrs. Clarke sent you this for altering the cape for her daughter."

Liane was almost frightened at the new rustling five-dollar bill in her hand. She had never seen more than three dollars at a time before—the amount of her weekly wages from Miss Bray.

"Oh, dear, I can't take this. It's too much! Miss Bray only gets five dollars for the making of the whole cape," she exclaimed.

"Never mind about that, if Mrs. Clarke chooses to pay you that for altering it, my dear miss. She is rich and can afford to be liberal to one who needs it. So just take what she gives you, and say nothing—not even to her daughter, who has a miserly heart and might scold her for her kindness," cautioned the maid, who pitied Liane with all her heart. [Pg 25]

Liane cried eagerly:

"Oh, please thank the generous lady a hundred times for me! I love her for her kindness to a poor orphan girl. Now, do you think Miss Roma would come and look at the cape? For I must be going. Granny will be angry at my coming back so late."

"Here she comes now, the vixen!" and, sure enough, a silken gown rustled over the threshold, and Roma caught the cape up eagerly, crying:

"Ten to one you have botched it worse than before! Well, really, you have followed my directions exactly, for a wonder! That will do very well. You may go now, and if you think you ought to be paid anything for these few minutes' extra work, you can collect it off Miss Bray, as she was responsible for the alterations. Sophie, you can show the girl out," and, throwing the cape over her arm, the proud beauty trailed her rustling silk over the threshold and downstairs again.

"The heartless thing! I'd like to shake her!" muttered Sophie angrily, as she led the way out of the beautiful house down upon the moonlight lawn, adding: [Pg 26]

"I'll go to the gates with you, so you won't get frightened at Mr. Clarke's big St. Bernard."

"What a beautiful night, and how sweet the flowers smell!" murmured Liane, lifting her heated brow to the cool night breeze, and the pitying stars that seemed to beam on her like tender eyes.

"Would you like some to take home with you? You will be welcome, I know, for the frosts will be getting them soon, anyhow," cried Sophie, loading her up with a huge bunch of late autumn roses, "and now good night, my dear young lady," opening the gate "you have a long walk before you, but I hope you will get home safely."

Liane opened her lips to tell the woman how frightened she was of the lonely walk home, but she was ashamed of her cowardice, and the words remained unsaid. With a faltering "I thank you for your kindness; good night," she clasped the roses to her bosom and sped away like a frightened fawn in the moonlight, down the road along the beach, a silent prayer in her heart that granny would not be angry again over her long stay, and accuse her of "galivanting around with beaux." [Pg 27]

Sophie leaned over the gate, watching her a minute, with pity and admiration in her clear eyes.

"What a beautiful creature!—a thousand times lovelier than Miss Roma!" she thought. "But what a cruel lot in life. It is enough to make the very angels weep."

CHAPTER III.

[Pg 28]

"MY PRETTY MAID."

There was not a more nervous, startled maiden in all New England that night than Liane as she flew along the beach, haunted by a fear of drunken men, of whom Stonecliff had its full quota.

And, indeed, she had not gone so very far before her fears took shape.

She heard distinctly, above her frightened heartbeats and her own light steps, the sound of a man's tread gaining on her, while his voice called out entreatingly:

"Elinor, Elinor! wait for me!"

The sea's voice, with the wind, seemed to echo the call.

"Elinor, Elinor! wait for me!"

But Liane did not wait. She only redoubled her speed, and she might have escaped her pursuer but that her little foot tripped on a stone and threw her prone upon the sands.

Before she could rise a man's arms closed about her tenderly, lifting her up, while he panted:

"Elinor, what girlish freak is this? Why wouldn't you wait for me, dear?" [Pg 29]

Liane gasped and looked up at him in terror, but that instant she recognized him, and her fears all fled.

"Oh, Mr. Clarke, you have made a mistake, sir. You don't know me, although I know what your name is. I am Liane Lester!" she cried breathlessly.

He dropped her hand and recoiled in surprise, answering:

"I beg a hundred pardons for my apparent rudeness. I saw you flying along as I smoked my cigar above the hill, and your figure looked so exactly like my wife's that I flew after you. I hope you will find it easy to forgive me, for you do resemble my wife very much, and, although you are young and fair, you may take that as a compliment, for my wife is very beautiful."

"I thank you, sir, and forgive you freely. I have never seen Mrs. Clarke, but I have just come from your house, and was running home every step of the way because I had to stay till after dark, and I feared my grandmother would be uneasy over me!" faltered Liane, blushing at his intent gaze, for the wind had blown her veil aside, and her lovely features, pure as carven pearl, shone clearly in the moonlight. [Pg 30]

"And I am detaining you yet longer! Excuse me, and—good night," he said abruptly, smiling kindly at her, lifting his hat and turning back toward Cliffdene, while he thought with pleasure:

"What a lovely girl! She reminded me of Elinor when she was young."

Liane thought kindly of him, too, as she hurried along.

"What a noble face and gracious voice! Miss Roma Clarke is blessed in having such a splendid father."

She had only granny, poor child; coarse, ugly, repulsive, cruel granny. She could not even remember her parents or any other relation. A lonely childhood, whose only bright memories were of its few school days, a toilsome girlhood, robbed of every spark of youthful pleasure; coarse scoldings and brutal beatings. It was all a piteous life—enough, as Sophie, the maid had said, to make the very angels weep in pity.

Strange, as she hastened on, how Jesse Devereaux's eyes and smile haunted her thoughts with little thrills of pleasure; how she wondered if she should ever see him again.

"Perhaps Dolly Dorr will make him fall in love with her, she is so pretty, with her fluffy yellow hair and big turquoise-blue eyes," she thought, with a curious sensation of deadly pain, jealous already, though she guessed it not.

[Pg 31]

The night was still and calm, and suddenly the dip of oars in the water came to her ears. She looked, and saw a little boat headed for the beach, with a single occupant.

The keel grated on the shore, the man sprang out, and came directly toward her, pausing with hat in hand—a tall fellow, dark and bewhiskered, with somber, dark eyes.

"Ah, good evening, my pretty maid. Taking a stroll all alone, eh? Won't you have a moonlight row with me?"

"No, thank you, sir; I am in a hurry to get home. Please stand aside," for he had placed himself in her way.

"Not so fast, pretty maid. It is good manners, I trow, to answer a stranger's courteous questions, is it not?" still barring her way. "Well, show me the way to Cliffdene."

The trembling girl pointed mutely back the way she had come.

"Thank you—and again: Do you know Miss Roma Clarke?"

[Pg 32]

"I have just seen her at Cliffdene," she answered.

"So she is not married yet?"

"Oh, no," Liane answered, trying to pass, but he caught her hand, exclaiming mockingly:

"Not married yet? Well, that is very good news to me. I will give you a kiss, pretty one, for that information."

"You shall not! Release me at once, you hound!" cried the girl, struggling to free herself.

But the insolent stranger only clasped her closer and drew her to him, the fumes of his liquor-laden breath floating over her pure brow as he struggled to kiss her shrieking lips.

And, absorbed in the conflict, neither one noticed a third person coming toward them from the town—an exceedingly handsome young man, who hurried his steps in time to comprehend the meaning of the scene before him, and then shot out an athletic arm, and promptly bowled the wretch over upon the wet sands.

"Lie there, you cur, till I give you leave to rise!" he thundered, planting his foot on the fellow's chest while he turned toward the young lady.

[Pg 33]

"Why, good heavens! Is it you, Miss Lester?" he cried, in wonder.

"Yes, Mr. Devereaux. I was hurrying home from an errand to Cliffdene when this man jumped out of his boat, and threatened to kiss me."

"Apologize to the lady on your knees, cur!" cried Jesse Devereaux, helping him with a hand on his coat collar.

The wretch obeyed in craven fear.

"Now tell me where you came from in the boat."

"From the nearest town," sullenly.

"Then get into that boat and go back to it as fast as you can row, and if you are ever caught in Stonecliff again, I promise to thrash you within an inch of your life."

The defeated bully obeyed in craven silence, but the gleam of his somber eyes boded no good to the man who had so coolly mastered him.

Devereaux and Liane stood side by side, watching the little boat shoot away over the dancing billows, leaving ripples of phosphorescent light in the wake of the oars. Then he turned and took her hand.

[Pg 34]

"You had quite an adventure," he said. "Why, you are trembling like a leaf, poor child!"

He felt like drawing her to his breast, and soothing her fears; but that would not be conventional. So he could only regard her with the tenderest pity and admiration, while clasping the trembling little hand as tight as he dared.

Liane was so nervous she could not speak at first, and he continued gently:

"It was rather imprudent for a young girl like you to be walking out alone after nightfall. Did you not know it, Miss Lester?"

She faltered nervously:

"Oh, yes, I knew it! I was frightened almost to death, but I—I could not help it!"

"Why?"

"My employer sent me on an errand to Cliffdene, and I was detained there until after dark."

"They should have sent some one to see you safely home."

"Yes," Liane answered, shivering, but not making any explanation. She hated in her simple, girlish pride to have him know how she had been treated by Roma Clarke.

"I—I must be going now. Thank you ever so much for coming to my rescue," she added, stooping to gather her roses, that lay scattered on the sands. [Pg 35]

Jesse Devereaux helped her, and kept them, saying as he drew her little hand closely within his arm:

"I will carry them and see you safe home."

Arm in arm they paced along under the brilliant moonlight, with the solemn voice of the ocean in their ears. But they were heedless. They heard only the beating of their own excited hearts.

The mere presence of this man, whom she had never met till to-day, filled Liane's innocent heart with ecstasy.

To be near him like this, with her arm linked in his so close that she felt the quick throbbing of his disturbed heart; to meet the glances of his passionate, dark eyes, to hear the murmuring tones of his musical voice as he talked to her so kindly—oh, it was bliss such as she had never enjoyed before, but that she could have wished might go on now forever!

He made her tell him all that the stranger had said to her, and Liane felt him give a quick start when Roma's name was mentioned, although he said lightly: [Pg 36]

"He must be some discarded lover of Miss Clarke."

"Yes," she answered, and, raising her eyes, she saw near at hand the wretched shanty she called her home.

How short their walk had been—barely a minute it seemed to the girl! But now they must part.

She essayed to draw her hand from his clasping arm, murmuring:

"I—I cannot let you go any farther with me, please! Granny does not allow me to walk out with—with gentlemen! She told me to come home alone!"

Jesse Devereaux protested laughingly, but he soon saw that Liane was in terrible earnest, her face pale, her great eyes dilated with fear, her slender form shaking as with a chill.

"Do you mean to say that you cannot have the privilege of receiving me sometimes as a visitor under your own roof?" he asked, more seriously then; but the girl suddenly uttered a low moan of alarm, and shrank from him, turning her eyes wildly upon an approaching grotesque form.

Granny had worked herself into a fury over Liane's long stay, and at last hobbled forth to meet her, armed with a very stout cane, that would serve the double purpose of a walking stick and an instrument of punishment. [Pg 37]

And, in spite of her age, she was strong and agile, and Liane would have cause to rue the hour she was born when next they met.

She strained her malevolent gaze all around for a sight of the truant, and when they lighted on Liane and Devereaux, arm in arm, a growl of fury issued from her lips.

Before Liane could escape, she darted forward with surprising agility, and lifted her stout cane over the girl's shrinking head.

A start, a shriek, and Devereaux saw, as suddenly as if the old hag had arisen from the earth by his side, the peril that menaced Liane.

That descending blow was enough to kill the frail, lovely girl, the object of granny's brutal spite!

Another instant and the stick would descend on the beautiful head!

But Devereaux's upraised arm received the force of the blow, and that arm fell shattered and helpless by his side, but the other hand violently wrenched the old woman away from her victim, as he demanded: [Pg 38]

"You vile beast! What is the meaning of this murderous assault?"

They glared at each other, and the old woman snarled:

"I have a right to beat her! She disobeyed my orders, and she belongs to me. She's my granddaughter."

"Heaven help me, it is true!" moaned Liane, as he looked at her for confirmation.

"Let me get at her! Let me get at her!" shrieked granny, intent on punishing the girl, and writhing in Devereaux's clutch.

But Devereaux, with one arm hanging helpless at his side, held her firmly with the other.

"You shall not touch her!" he said sternly. "You shall go to prison for this outrage."

At that both the old woman and the girl uttered a cry of remonstrance.

Devereaux looked at Liane inquiringly, and she faltered:

"The disgrace would fall on me!"

"Yes, yes, she is my granddaughter," howled granny eagerly, seeing her advantage. Devereaux comprehended, too. He groaned:

"But what can you do? You must not be exposed again to her fury!"

[Pg 39]

Granny glared malevolently, while Liane bent her eyes to the ground, meditating a moment ere she looked up, and said timidly:

"I think you are right. I cannot live with granny any more, for she would surely kill me some day. Let her go home, and I will go and spend the night with Dolly Dorr, who lives not far from here."

"You hear what Miss Lester says? Will you go home peaceably, while she goes to her friend for safety?" demanded Devereaux, eager to close the scene, for he was faint from the pain of his broken arm.

Granny saw that she was cornered, and cunningly began to feign repentance, whimpering that she was sorry, and would never do so any more if Liane would only come home with her now, for she was afraid to spend the night alone.

"She shall not go with you, you treacherous cat," he answered sternly, releasing her and bidding her angrily to return home at once.

Cowed by his authority, she could not but choose to obey, but as she started, she flung back one shaft:

"Better come with me, Liane, than stay with him, my dear. Remember my warnings about rich young men and pretty, poor girls! A beating is safer than his love!"

[Pg 40]

Liane's cheeks flamed at the coarse thrust, but Devereaux said earnestly:

"Do not mind her taunt, Miss Lester. I will always be a true friend to you, believe me!"

"You are a true friend already. From what horrors have you saved me to-night?" Liane cried, bursting into tears. "Your poor arm, how helpless it hangs! Oh, I fear it has been broken in my defense," and suddenly sinking on her knees, in an excess of tenderest gratitude, she pressed her warm, rosy lips to the hand that had so bravely defended her from insult and injury.

"Oh, you are a hero, you have saved my life, and I can never forget you!" she sobbed hysterically.

"Yes, my arm is broken; I must hurry back to town and have it set," he answered faintly. "I must let you go on to Miss Dorr's alone, but it is not far, and you are safe now. Good night," he murmured, leaving her abruptly in his pain.

CHAPTER IV.

[Pg 41]

SECRET LOVE.

Liane gazed after Devereaux's retreating form in bewilderment, her cheeks burning with the thought:

"He was angry because I kissed his hand! Oh, why was I so bold? I did not mean to be, but it made my heart ache to see him suffering so cruelly from his defense of my life! How pale he looked—almost as if he were going to faint. Oh, I love him!" and she wept despairingly, as she hurried to Dolly Dorr's, careless now of the beautiful roses that lay crushed upon the ground where they had fallen.

Dolly was sitting on her little vine-wreathed porch, singing a pretty love song, and she started in surprise as Liane came up the steps.

"Why, Liane, my dear, what is the matter? You are crying; your cheeks are all wet!" she cried, putting her arms about the forlorn girl, who sobbed:

"May I stay with you all night, Dolly? Granny has beaten me again, and I have run away!"

"I don't blame you! You should have done it long ago. Of course you may stay with me as long as you wish!" replied pretty little Dolly, with ready sympathy, that might not have been so warm if she had known all that had transpired between Liane and Devereaux, on whom she had set her vain little heart.

[Pg 42]

But Liane was too shy and nervous to tell her friend the whole story. She simply explained, when pressed, that granny had beaten her for walking with Devereaux that afternoon, and attempted it again because she was late getting home, after altering Miss Clarke's cape.

"So I ran away to you," she added wearily.

"That was right. We will all make you welcome," said Dolly cordially, sure that her father and mother, and her two little brothers, would all make good her promise.

"You should have seen them all peeping out of the window in amazement this afternoon when I came walking up with the grand Devereaux at my side," she continued consciously. "I asked him in, and he sat on the porch nearly half an hour talking to me. When he was leaving, I asked him to call again, and pinned some pansies in his buttonhole, and what do you think he said, Liane?"

"I could never guess," the girl answered, with a secret pang of the keenest jealousy.

[Pg 43]

"He said: 'What exquisite pansies! They remind me of Miss Lester's eyes—such a rare, purplish

blue, with dark shadings."

Liane caught her breath with stifled rapture, that he had remembered her, but Dolly added wistfully:

"He must have read in my face that I was disappointed at not having a compliment, too, for he went on to say that my eyes were just like bluebells. Liane, which are the prettier flowers, pansies or bluebells?"

"I should say that it is all a matter of taste," Liane replied gently.

So presently they went upstairs to bed, but Dolly was so excited she talked half the night.

"Liane, have you heard of the Beauty Show that is to be held in the town hall next week?" she asked, as she rolled her yellow locks in kid curlers to make them fluffy.

Liane shook her head.

"No? Why, that is strange. Every one is talking about it, and they say that you and I are pretty enough to compete for the prize, although Miss Roma Clarke intends to exhibit her handsomest portrait." [Pg 44]

"Is it a portrait show?"

"It is this way, Liane: A Boston artist has a commission to design the outside cover of a magazine for December, and he wants to get a lovely young girl for the central figure—a young girl taken from life. So he has advertised for five hundred pictures of beauties, to be delivered by next week, when they will be exhibited on the walls of the town hall, and judges appointed to decide on the fairest. Of course, the artist himself is to be one of the judges, and they say that Mr. Clarke and Mr. Devereaux will be two of the others, but I don't know the rest. Don't you think it's unfair, Liane, to have Roma Clarke's father and lover for judges? Of course, they will show her some partiality in their votes."

Liane murmured with dry lips in a choking voice:

"Is Mr. Devereaux Miss Clarke's lover?"

"So they say, but I hope it's not true. I'm trying to catch him myself," confessed Dolly quite frankly. "I don't really think it's fair for Miss Clarke to compete for the prize, anyway. She ought to leave the chance to some beautiful, poor girl that needs that hundred dollars so much worse than she does!" [Pg 45]

"A hundred dollars!" exclaimed Liane.

"Yes; just think of it! You must try for the prize, Liane."

"I don't know; I must think over it first. Wouldn't it seem conceited in me? As if I were sure that I was a raging beauty?" doubtfully.

"Why, so you are! Every one says so, and you can see it for yourself in the glass there! Prettier than I am, really!" Dolly owned magnanimously.

"Small good my pretty face has brought me!" sighed Liane.

"Well, it may get you that hundred dollars, if you try for it! And it might have gotten you a nice husband long ago, but for your cantankerous old granny! The idea of her slapping you for walking with that splendid Devereaux! But I'll give him a hint, when I see him again, never to go near you any more!" exclaimed Dolly, quite eager to give the warning, for she thought:

"I didn't like the way he talked about her eyes; for she had certainly made an impression on him, and I'm afraid I shouldn't stand much chance if she went in to win against me. So I'm glad of granny's opposition for once! If I'm lucky enough to marry him, I'll have Liane at my house for a long visit, and introduce her to some good catches." [Pg 46]

Liane little dreamed of these shrewd thoughts in the pretty, little, yellow noddle, while Dolly prattled on:

"You have not seen the artist, either, have you? His name is Malcolm Dean, and he's quite a handsome fellow. I wish one of us could catch him, Liane! Why, I've heard he gets a fortune for everything he designs, and that magazine has promised him a fortune for their December cover."

"We had better go to sleep, Dolly, or we will be too tired to go to work in the morning," suggested Liane, and Dolly obediently shut her eyes and drifted off into dreamland.

CHAPTER V.

[Pg 47]

ROMA'S LOVERS.

Haughty Roma Clarke did not give another thought to the poor sewing girl who had pleased her fastidious taste so entirely in the alteration of her cape.

She threw the dainty wrap over her graceful shoulders, for the September evenings already grew chill, and wandered out into the grounds to watch for Jesse Devereaux, whom she expected to call.

Her restless, impatient nature would not permit her to wait patiently in the drawing room to

receive him. She thought it would be so gloriously romantic to stroll about the grounds, clinging to his arm, the splendid moonlight etherealizing her beauty, the murmur of the sea in their ears, the fragrance of flowers all around them. She would not be bothered here with papa or mamma coming into the room to talk to Jesse, and breaking up their delightful tête-à-tête.

She went into a rose arbor near the gate, thinking that she would go out to meet him as soon as she heard the click of the latch.

She had been there but a few moments when Liane passed by with the maid, but she kept very still, though she thought: [Pg 48]

"That girl is actually beautiful, and would look superb in good clothes instead of that simple, dark-blue print gown. How foolish it seems for poor girls to be pretty, when they can have nothing nice to set off their beauty. I suppose they must always be pining for riches. How that poor serving girl must have envied me while sewing on this cape! Well, I suppose Miss Bray will give her perhaps twenty-five cents for the extra work, and that will buy her a new ribbon. She ought to be glad that I made her alter it, giving her a little extra pay from her employer. Of course, she could not expect me to pay her myself. My allowance from papa is much too small to permit me the luxury of charity!"

She heard Sophie's light tread, as she returned to the house and muttered:

"I hate that maid. I know she tells tales of me to mamma, and that mamma believes everything, instead of scolding her for tattling! Never mind, Miss Sophie; see if I don't pay you off some time for your meddling! And as for giving you those old gowns you've been hinting for so long, I'd stick them into the fire first!" [Pg 49]

She gathered a rose, pulled it to pieces viciously, as if it had been the pert maid she was demolishing, then sighed impatiently:

"Heigh-ho, how slow he is coming!"

The gate latch clicked, and she sprang up with a start, her eyes flashing, her heart throbbing with joy.

She looked out, and saw the figure of a man coming along the graveled walk.

As he came opposite she started forward, crying sweetly:

"Oh, Jesse, dear, is that you?"

The man stopped and faced her. It was her father, and he laughed merrily:

"Not Jesse, dear; but papa, dear!"

Roma recoiled in bitter disappointment, and said petulantly:

"Jesse promised to come. Have you seen him?"

"No, I only walked outside the gates a little way. I saw no one except a very lovely young girl coming from here. Do you know anything about her, Roma?"

"If she was dressed like a kitchen maid in a print gown, she was a girl from the dressmaker's who brought home some work," Roma answered carelessly. [Pg 50]

"I did not notice her dress in the moonlight. I could not keep my eyes from her face, she was so very beautiful," Mr. Clarke replied, somewhat dreamily.

Roma shrugged her shoulders scornfully:

"A poor girl has no business to be pretty," she exclaimed.

Mr. Clarke frowned at the sentiment.

"Roma, I do not like to hear you express yourself so heartlessly. You would like to be pretty even if you were poor."

"I cannot even imagine myself poor like the common herd!" she retorted, tossing her beautiful head with queenly pride.

If she had been looking at the man before her, she must have seen that a strange look came upon his face as his secret thoughts ran sarcastically:

"Ignorance indeed is bliss, in this case."

But he knew he could never tell her the truth, much as he sometimes longed to do it, in a sudden anger at her ignoble nature. He could not love the girl who had been taken from a foundling asylum, and placed in the stead of his own lost darling. Ah, no, it was impossible! It seemed to him that there was nothing lovable about Roma, although his wife clung to her with devotion. [Pg 51]

He looked at her as she faced him in the moonlight, so proud and confident of her position; her jewels gleaming, her silks rustling as she moved, and thought that, but for the chance that had brought her into his home, she, too, might now be dressed like a servant as she had so contemptuously said of poor Liane Lester.

He felt as if he should like to cast it into her face, the willful, insolent beauty, but he clinched his teeth over the bitter words.

"Heaven help me to bear my cross for Elinor's sake!" he thought.

Roma suddenly came closer to him, and placed her hand on his arm, saying coaxingly:

"Please don't be angry, papa, dear! I didn't mean to seem heartless!"

"I'm glad of that, Roma, for your heart should be full of sympathy, instead of contempt, for that poor, pretty, little sewing girl."

"Yes, papa," gently answered Roma, for she intended to ask him for some new jewels to-morrow, and did not wish to vex him.

"Tell me," he continued eagerly, "all that you know about this pretty Miss Lester."

[Pg 52]

"I know nothing, papa. I never saw her before this evening, when she brought home my work, and said she was one of Miss Bray's sewing girls. Why, what an interest you take in her, papa! Did you stop and speak to the poor girl?"

"She was running to get home in a hurry, and tripped and fell down; I assisted her to rise. We introduced ourselves, and then she went on; that was all," he explained. "Well, I will leave you to watch for Jesse, while I go and talk to your mamma."

Beautiful Roma looked after Mr. Clarke with angry eyes, muttering:

"The idea of scolding me, his daughter and heiress, about that insignificant little sewing girl! And he thought her very beautiful. I wonder if mamma would be jealous if she heard of his open admiration! I think I will give her a hint, and see!" and she laughed wickedly, while she again turned her eyes toward the gate, watching for her laggard lover.

"Why doesn't he come?" she murmured impatiently, for Roma was so spoiled by overindulgence of a willful nature that she could not bear to wait for anything. She was imperious as a queen.

[Pg 53]

As the minutes slipped past without bringing the lover, for whom she waited so eagerly, her angry temper began to flame in her great, red-brown eyes like sparks of fire, and she paced back and forth between the arbor and the gate like a caged lioness, her bosom heaving with emotion.

Jesse Devereaux, who had known her only as a bright, vivacious girl, would not have known his sweetheart now, in her fury of rage at his nonappearance.

Angry tears sparkled in her eyes, as she cried:

"If he could not keep his word, he should have sent an excuse. He must know I shall be bitterly disappointed!"

All the beauty of the night mattered nothing to her now. The moonlight, the flowers, the murmur of the sea, were maddening to the girl waiting there alone for her recreant lover. Love and hate struggled for mastery in her capricious breast.

Jesse Devereaux had been hard to win, but she prized him all the more for that, and she could not bear the least apparent slight from him.

"He did not care to come; he has let some trivial excuse keep him away! I will have to teach him that he cannot trifle with my love!" she vowed darkly, flying into the house in a passion.

[Pg 54]

Seating herself angrily at her desk, she wrote:

MR. DEVEREAUX: Your failure to keep your engagement with me this evening, without any apparent excuse, seems to me a sufficient excuse for breaking our engagement.

ROMA.

She tore a sparkling diamond from her finger, wrapped it in a bit of tissue paper, and inclosed it in the letter, hurrying downstairs again and sending it off to Stonecliff by a messenger, with special directions to deliver it personally to Jesse Devereaux at his hotel.

Her feelings somewhat relieved by this explosion of resentment, Roma laughed harshly, murmuring to herself:

"He will be here the first thing in the morning to beg me to take him back, promising never to slight me so cruelly again. Of course, I will forgive him, after pouting a while, and making him very uneasy, but from this day forward he will have learned a lesson that I must be first with him in everything. I will never tolerate neglect, and he must learn that fact at once."

She was so agitated she could not go into the house just yet. She wandered about the grounds, trying to overcome her angry excitement before she went in, for she knew that her mother was sure to come to her room for a little chat before retiring, and she could not bear her questioning.

[Pg 55]

"Dear mamma, I know she idolizes me, but at times I find her very tiresome," she soliloquized. "How tired I get of her lecturing on the beauty of goodness, as if I were the wickedest girl in the world! I know I am not goody-goody, as she is, and I don't want to be! Good people don't have much fun in this world; they let the wicked ones get the advantage and run over them always. However, I shall be as sweet as sugar to her to-night, for I want her to help me tease papa to-morrow for that set of rubies I want!"

She leaned upon the gate, letting the cool wind caress her heated brow, waiting for her cheeks to cool, and her heart to thump less fiercely with anger before she went in to encounter her mother's searching gaze; but it would have been a thousand times better for her if she had gone to sob her grief out on that mother's gentle breast, than waited here for the fate that was swiftly approaching.

The dark, sinister-looking stranger who had insulted Liane Lester on the beach had rowed back to shore as soon as Devereaux was out of sight.

[Pg 56]

He was interested in Roma Clarke, as his questions to Liane had plainly shown.

He came slowly, cautiously, up to the gate, his heart leaping with hope as he saw a beautiful head leaning over it that he hoped and believed must be Roma's herself.

"What luck for me, and what a shock for her!" he muttered grimly, as he advanced.

At the same moment Mrs. Clarke was sending Roma's maid out with a message that it was so chilly she ought to come in, or she might take cold.

She would not listen to her husband's remonstrance that Roma was with her lover, and might not wish to be interrupted.

"Jesse can come in, too; I am sure he would not wish Roma to get sick out in the night air with nothing on her head!" cried the anxious mother.

"How you love that girl!" he cried testily, and she laughed sweetly.

"Are you getting jealous of my love for our daughter, dear? You need not, for the first place in my heart is yours, but remember how devoted I have always been to Roma, ever since she was born." [Pg 57]

"I know, but has she ever seemed to show the right appreciation of your devotion?" he exclaimed abruptly.

A deep and bitter sigh quivered over the wife's lips, but she parried the question with a complaint:

"You are always insinuating some fault against my darling. Your heart is cold to her, Edmund."

He put his arms around her, and kissed the still lovely face with the passion of a lover.

"At least it is not cold to you, my darling!" he cried; and pleased at his love-making, she momentarily forgot Roma, and nestled confidingly against his breast.

He was glad that she could not know his secret thoughts, for they ran stubbornly:

"She is right. My heart is indeed cold to Roma. I shall be glad when Devereaux marries her and takes her away, and I do not believe it will break my wife's heart, either; for she seemed to bear it well enough when her daughter was away at boarding school those three years."

Meanwhile Sophie went away most reluctantly with her message, thinking: [Pg 58]

"I am sure Miss Roma will not thank me for breaking up her tête-à-tête with her lover, for, of course, she is staying out just to keep him all to herself. But I cannot disobey Mrs. Clarke's commands, though I'll saunter along as slowly as I can, so as to give Miss Roma a little more time."

Sophie was an intelligent and good-hearted girl, and might have been invaluable to Roma, if she could have appreciated such a treasure; but by her selfishness and arrogance she had completely antagonized the young woman, who only stayed, as she had frankly told Liane, for Mrs. Clarke's sake.

As she strolled along, picking a flower here and there, and giving Roma all the time she could, she thought of Liane with pity and admiration.

"There's a lovely girl for you! If she had been rich instead of Miss Roma, I fancy she'd make a better mistress," she murmured, and then the sound of subdued voices came to her ears.

"There she is at the gate with Mr. Devereaux, sure!" she thought, as she saw two heads together, the man's outside, while the murmur of excited voices came to her ears.

"I hope they aren't quarreling already! She had trouble enough hooking him, to be sure!" she thought as she went forward noiselessly, perhaps hoping to catch a word. [Pg 59]

She was rewarded by hearing Roma say:

"I will come outside and talk with you. We must not run the risk of being overheard by any one from the house."

The gate latch clicked as she stepped outside and joined her companion, a tall, dark man, whom Sophie did not doubt must be Jesse Devereaux.

She led her companion out toward the high cliff, washed at its base by the surging sea, and Sophie stole after them, thinking curiously:

"Now, what secret have they got, these two, that no one from the house must overhear, I wonder? It is very strange, indeed, and I'll bet they have a mind to elope, just to make a sensation! These rich folks will do any foolish thing to get their names and pictures in the papers! They think it's fame, but any jailbird can get published in the papers. Well, I'll follow you, my lady, and there's one from the house who will hear your secret in spite of your precautions."

She crept along after them, so near that if they had turned their heads they must have seen the skulking figure; but neither Roma nor the man looked back, but kept along the edge of the cliff on the narrow path, talking angrily, it seemed to Sophie, though their words were drowned by the roar of the sea, to the great chagrin of the curious maid. [Pg 60]

"But they are certainly quarreling! Ah, now they are stopping! I don't want to interrupt them yet; so I'll hide!" she thought, darting behind a convenient ledge.

In the clear and brilliant moonlight the two figures faced each other, perilously near to the edge of the cliff, and Sophie, peering at them from her concealment, suddenly saw a terrible thing

happen.

The man had his back to the sea, facing Roma, and both were talking vehemently, it seemed, from their gestures; when all at once the girl thrust out her foot and struck her companion's knee, causing him to lose his balance. The result was inevitable.

The tall figure lurched backward, swayed an instant, trying to recover itself, toppled over with a shriek of rage, and went over the cliff a hundred feet down into the foaming waters.

CHAPTER VI.

[Pg 61]

AFTER THE CRIME.

Sophie Nutter could hardly believe the evidence of her own startled eyes when she saw the terrible crime of her young mistress.

She knew that Roma was selfish and cruel, but she had never realized that such depths of wickedness were concealed beneath her beautiful exterior.

When she saw Roma push the supposed Jesse Devereaux over the face of the cliff to a dreadful death, the hair seemed to rise on her head with horror, and from her lips burst an uncontrollable shriek of dismay and remonstrance, while she tried to spring forward with outstretched arms in a futile impulse to avert the man's awful fate.

Too late! The writhing, struggling body went hurtling down over the high cliff, and struck the water with a loud thud that dashed the spray high in air. Then Sophie's limbs relaxed beneath her, and she fell in a heap like one paralyzed, behind the ledge of stones, while her terrified shriek went wandering forth on the air of night like a wailing banshee.

But Roma had shrieked, wildly, too—perhaps in nature's recoil from her own sin—so Sophie's protesting cry lost itself in dismal echoes. Then all grew still save for the voice of the sea and the dash of water churning itself to fury at the foot of the bluff.

[Pg 62]

The maid, crouching low in her concealment, heard Roma flying with terror-haunted footsteps from the scene of her awful crime, and muttered distractedly:

"She has murdered her handsome lover, the beautiful fiend! God in heaven alone knows why! I thought she loved the very ground he trod on!"

The maid was suffering from severe nervous shock. She sobbed hysterically as she thought of handsome Jesse Devereaux lying drowned at the foot of the cliff, and beaten by the cruel waves that would wash him out to sea when the tide turned, so that Roma's sin would be forever hidden from the sight of men.

"I will go and inform on her at once! She shall suffer the penalty!" she vowed at first; but when she thought of gentle, loving Mrs. Clarke her resolution wavered.

"It will kill her to learn of her child's wickedness, the good, gentle lady who has been so kind and generous to me! I do not know what to do! I would like to punish the daughter, and spare the mother, but I cannot do both," she groaned, in a state of miserable indecision.

[Pg 63]

It was some time before her trembling limbs permitted her to drag herself from the spot; and when she gained the house and her bed she could not rest. She tossed and groaned, and at length was seized with hysterical spasms, obliging the housemaid to call for assistance.

In the meantime Roma, far less excited than Sophie, had also retired to her room and flung herself down by the open window to await impatiently the inevitable good-night chat with her mother.

"I wish she would not come. Her affection grows really tiresome at times," she muttered rebelliously, as she heard the light footsteps outside her door.

Mrs. Clarke entered and sat down close to her daughter, putting her white hand tenderly on the girl's shoulder.

"Good girl, to come in when mamma sent for you," she said caressingly, as to a child.

"You—sent—for—me!" Roma faltered, in surprise.

"Yes, by Sophie. I feared you would take cold, bareheaded out in the night air."

[Pg 64]

"I have not seen Sophie," Roma muttered sullenly, with a downcast face.

"Why did Jesse leave so soon?" continued the mother curiously.

"He did not come. I have been walking in the grounds alone."

"But your papa said, dear—"

"Yes, I know; papa told you I was waiting for Jesse at the gate, but he never came. He disappointed me!"

"Why, that is very strange, dear. And you are grieved over it, I see. Your face is pale, and your whole frame trembles under my touch. Do not take it so hard, darling. Of course Jesse was detained. He will come to-morrow."

"He should have sent me an excuse, mamma!"

"He must have been prevented. I am sure he would not neglect you purposely. He will explain to-morrow."

Roma tossed her proud head, with a bitter laugh.

"I tell you, mamma, I will not brook such negligence. I have broken our engagement."

"Roma!"

The girl gave a reckless laugh of wounded pride.

[Pg 65]

"Yes; I sent him a note, with his ring, just now, setting him free."

"You were precipitate, Roma; you should have waited for an explanation."

"I did not choose to wait!"

"I fear you will regret it."

"I do not think it likely."

Mrs. Clarke gazed at her in sorrowful silence, whose reproach goaded Roma into adding haughtily:

"I wished to teach Jesse, early, a lesson that I am not to be neglected for anything; that I must be foremost always in his thoughts."

"But have you not gone too far in giving him this lesson? His thoughts will not belong to you now."

"He will bring back his ring, and beg me to take it back to-morrow."

"Are you certain, Roma?"

"As sure as I am of my life!" with a confident laugh.

"Well, perhaps you know him better than I do, Roma, but I fancied Jesse Devereaux very high-spirited—too high-spirited to bear dictation."

"He will have to bend to my will!" Roma cried arrogantly, and the gentle lady sighed, for she knew that her daughter made this her own motto in life. Power and dominion were hers by the force of "might makes right."

[Pg 66]

Mrs. Clarke rose with a sigh and touched Roma's cheeks with her lips, saying kindly:

"Well, I hope it will all come right, dear. Good night."

She returned to her own room, thinking: "Poor girl, she is the miserable victim of her own caprice. I could see that she is too terribly agitated to sleep an hour to-night."

CHAPTER VII.

[Pg 67]

GRANNY'S REVENGE.

The half dozen pretty young girls who served for Miss Bray were light-hearted, hopeful young creatures in spite of their poverty, and at their daily work they sociably discussed their personal affairs with the freedom and intimacy of friends. Beaus and dress were the choice topics just as in higher circles of society. Liane Lester was the only quiet one among them, granny's edicts barring her both from lovers and finery.

Dolly Dorr was turning them all green with envy the next morning by boasting of the attentions she had received from the grand Mr. Devereaux, when one of the girls, Lottie Day, interposed:

"He is not likely to call on you again very soon, for I heard Brother Tom saying at breakfast this morning that Mr. Devereaux had broken his arm by a fall last night."

A chorus of compassionate remarks followed this announcement, and Dolly exclaimed vivaciously:

"I wish I might be allowed to nurse the poor fellow!"

[Pg 68]

Nan Brooks replied chaffingly:

"Miss Roma Clarke might have some objection to that scheme. They say she is engaged to him."

"That's why I want a good chance to cut her out. The proud, stuck-up thing!" cried Dolly indignantly, and from the remarks that followed it was plainly to be seen that Miss Clarke was not a favorite among the pretty sewing girls.

Roma had never lost an opportunity to impress them with the difference in their stations and her own, as if she were made of quite a superior sort of clay, and the high-spirited young creatures bitterly resented her false pride.

Not one of them but would have been glad to see Dolly "cut her out," as they phrased it, with the handsome Devereaux, but they frankly believed that there could be no such luck.

In their gay chatter, Liane alone remained silent, her beautiful head bent low over her sewing to hide the tears that had sprung to her eyes while they talked of Jesse Devereaux's accident.

"It was for my sake!" she thought gratefully, with rising blushes, though her heart sank like lead when she heard them saying he was engaged to Miss Clarke. [Pg 69]

"He belongs to that proud, cruel girl! How I pity him!" she thought. "Yet, no doubt, he admires her very much. She does not show him the mean, selfish side of her character, as she does to us poor sewing girls."

She would have given anything if only she had not yielded to her passionate gratitude, and kissed his hand.

"He was disgusted at my boldness. He believed I had given him my love unasked, and he turned away in scorn. Yet how could I help it, he was so kind to me; first saving me from that ruffian, then from granny's blows? Oh, how could I help but love him? And I wish, like Dolly, that I might be permitted to nurse him as some reparation for his goodness," she thought, her cheeks burning and her heart throbbing wildly with the tenderness she could not stifle.

Every way she looked it seemed to her she could see his dark face, with its dazzling black eyes, looking at her with an admiration and tenderness they should not have shown, if he were indeed betrothed to another. Those glances and smiles had lured Liane's heart from her own keeping and doomed her to passionate unrest. [Pg 70]

She listened to everything in silence, nursing her sweet, painful secret in her heart, afraid lest a breath should betray her, until suddenly Ethel Barry, the girl next her, exclaimed:

"How quiet Liane is this morning, not taking the least interest in anything we say!"

"No interest! Oh, Heaven!" thought Liane, but Dolly Dorr interposed:

"You would be quiet, too, if you had been beaten as Liane was by granny last night, and forced to seek refuge with a friend."

Liane crimsoned painfully at having her own troubles discussed, but granny's faults were public property, and she could not deny the truth.

"She is old and cross," she said, generously trying to offer some excuse.

"You need not take up for her, Liane. She doesn't deserve it!" cried one and all, while Mary Lang, the oldest and most staid of the six girls, quickly offered to share her own room with Liane if she would never return to the old woman.

She was an orphan, and rented a room with a widow, living cozily at what she called "room-keeping," and the girls had many jolly visits taking tea with Mary. [Pg 71]

Liane thanked her warmly for her offer.

"But will you come?" asked Mary.

"I cannot."

"But why?"

The girl sighed heavily as she explained:

"Granny came to Mrs. Dorr's this morning, all penitence for her fault, and begged me to come home, promising never to beat me again."

"Do not trust her; do not go!" cried they all; but it was useless.

"She is old and poor. How could she get along without me? She would have to go to the poorhouse, and think how cruelly that would disgrace me!" cried Liane, who had no love for the old wretch, but supported her through mingled pride and pity.

And she actually returned to the shanty that day when her work was done, much to the relief of the old woman, who feared she had driven her meek slave off forever.

"So you are back? That's a good girl!" she said approvingly, and added: "They may tell you, those foolish girls, that I am too strict with you, Liane, but I'm an old woman, and I know what's best for you, girl. It was through letting your mother have her own way that she went to her ruin; that's why I'm so strict on you." [Pg 72]

"My mother went to her—ruin!" faltered Liane, flushing crimson, but very curious, for she had never been able to extract a word from granny about her parents, except that they were both dead and had been no credit to her while living.

"Yes, her ruin," granny replied, with a malicious side glance at the startled girl. "She ran away from me to be an actress when she wasn't but seventeen, and a year later she came back to me with a baby in her arms—you! She had been deceived and deserted, and you, poor thing, had no lawful name but the one she had picked out of a book—Liane Lester."

"Oh, Heaven!" sobbed the girl, burying her white face in her hands, thinking that this blow was more cruel even than one of the old woman's beatings.

At heart Liane had a strange pride, and she was bitterly ashamed of her low origin and her cruel grandmother, whom no one respected because of her vile temper.

To be told now that she had no lawful name, that her mother had been deceived and deserted, was like a sword thrust in the poor girl's heart. [Pg 73]

She sobbed bitterly, as granny added:

"I didn't never mean to tell you the truth, but now that you are getting wild and willful, like your

mother was, it's best for you to know it, and take her fate as a warning."

Liane knew the accusation was not true, but she did not contradict it; she only sobbed:

"Did my mother die of a broken heart?"

"No, indeed, the minx; she got well and ran away again, and left you on my hands."

"Is she living now?"

"She is, for all I know to the contrary. But she takes good care never to come near me, nor to send me a dollar for your support."

"I take care of myself, and you, too, granny."

"Yes, the best you can; but she ought to help—the ungrateful creature!" granny exclaimed so earnestly that she could scarcely doubt the truth of her story.

It was a cruel blow to Liane's pride, and up in her bare little chamber under the eaves that night she lay awake many hours sobbing hopelessly over her fate.

"I would rather be dead than the daughter of a woman who was deceived and deserted! Mr. Devereaux would never give me a second thought if he knew," she sighed, with burning cheeks, as she sank into a restless sleep, troubled with dreams in which her hero's magnetic, dark eyes played the principal part—dreams so sweet that she grieved when the cold gray light of dawn glimmered upon her face and roused her to reality and another day of toil.

[Pg 74]

Very eagerly the girls questioned her when she reached Miss Bray's as to granny's mood, and she answered quietly:

"No, she did not scold me or strike me this time; she was kind in her way."

But she did not tell them granny's way of kindness, for her heart sank with shame as she looked around the group of her light-hearted friends, thinking how different their lot was from hers; all of them having honorable parentage, and dreading lest they would not wish to associate with her if they knew she had no right to her pretty name, Liane Lester, that her wronged mother had simply picked it out of a story book.

Miss Bray had a hurry order this morning—a white gown ruffled to the waist—so she set all the girls to work, and as they worked their tongues flew—they knew pretty nearly everything that had happened in the village since yesterday.

[Pg 75]

The choice bit of gossip was that Miss Clarke's maid, Sophie Nutter, had left her, and gone to Boston.

"They say she had a sick spell night before last, and went out of her head, talking awful things, so that the servants were quite frightened, and called up their mistress herself. Sophie had hysterical spasms, and accused Miss Roma of dreadful crimes right before her mother's face," said Mary Lang.

"Miss Roma must have been very angry—she has such a temper," cried Dolly, as she threaded her needle.

"Oh, Miss Roma wasn't present, and her mother took steps never to let her find it out, you may be sure."

"It must have been something awful," said Lottie Day.

"I should say so! She declared to Mrs. Clarke she had seen Miss Roma push Mr. Devereaux over the bluff and drown him! Just think—when Mr. Devereaux had not been near the place, but was lying at his hotel with a broken arm!"

"It was all a dream," said Miss Bray from her cutting board.

[Pg 76]

"Yes, but she could hardly be convinced yesterday morning that she had not really seen Miss Roma commit a murder. They had to send for the doctor to tell her that Mr. Devereaux was really alive at his hotel, having broken his arm by a fall on the sands. They say she went off into more hysterics when she heard that, and muttered: 'A fall over the cliff was more likely, but how he escaped death and got to shore again puzzles me. And why did she do it, anyway? It must have been a lovers' quarrel. I must get away from here. She will be pushing me over the bluff next.' And she had her trunk packed and went off to Boston, though she looked too ill to leave her bed," added Mary Lang, who had had the whole story straight from the housekeeper at Cliffdene.

CHAPTER VIII.

[Pg 77]

THE BROKEN ENGAGEMENT.

"Oh, how rash and foolish I have been!" thought Roma, the next day, when she heard of Jesse Devereaux's accident.

"His arm broken by a fall on the sands last night—most probably on his way to see me, poor fellow! And in my angry resentment at my disappointment I have broken our engagement! How rash and foolish I am, and how much I regret it! I must make it up with him at once, my darling!" she cried repentantly, and hurried to her mother.

"Mamma, you were right last night. I regret my hasty action in dismissing Jesse without a hearing. How can I make it up with him?"

"You can send another note of explanation, asking his forgiveness," suggested Mrs. Clarke.

"Oh, mamma, if I could only go to him myself!" she cried, impatient for the reconciliation.

"It would not be exactly proper, my dear."

"But we are engaged."

"You have broken the engagement."

Roma uttered a cry of grief and chagrin that touched her mother's heart.

[Pg 78]

"Poor dear, you are suffering, as I foreboded, for last night's folly," she sighed.

"Please don't lecture me, mamma. I'm wretched enough without that!"

"I only meant to sympathize with you, dear."

"Then help me—that is the best sort of sympathy. I suppose it wouldn't be improper for you to call on Jesse, at his hotel, would it?"

"No, I suppose not."

"Then I will write my note to him, and you can take it—will you?"

Mrs. Clarke assented, and was on the point of starting when a messenger arrived with a note for Roma, replying to hers of the night before.

In spite of his broken right arm, Jesse Devereaux had managed a scrawl with his left hand, and Roma tore it open with a burning face and wildly beating heart, quickly mastering its contents, which read:

Mr. Devereaux accepts his dismissal with equanimity, feeling sure from this display of Miss Clarke's hasty temper that he has had a lucky escape.

It was cool, curt, airy, almost to insolence; a fitting match for her own; and Roma gasped and almost fainted. [Pg 79]

Where was all her boasting, now, that she would teach him a lesson; that he would be back in a day begging her to take back his ring?

She had met her match; she realized it now; remembering, all too late, how hard he had been to win; a lukewarm lover, after all, and perhaps glad now of his release.

Oh, if she could but have recalled that silly note, she would have given anything she possessed, for all the heart she had had been lavished on him.

With a genuine sob of choking regret, she flung the humiliating note to her mother, and sank into a chair, her face hidden in her hands.

Mrs. Clarke read, and exclaimed:

"Really, he need not comment on your temper while displaying an equally hasty one so plainly. He must certainly be very angry, but I suppose his suffering adds to his impatience."

"He—he—will forgive me when he reads my second note!" sobbed Roma.

"But you do not intend to send it now, Roma!" exclaimed Mrs. Clarke, with a certain resentment of her own at Jesse's brusqueness.

But Roma could be very inconsistent—overbearing when it was permitted to her; humble when cowed. [Pg 80]

She lifted up a miserable face, replying eagerly:

"Oh, yes, mamma, for I was plainly in the wrong, and deserve that he should be angry with me. But he will be only too glad to forgive me when he reads my note of repentance. Please go at once, dear mamma, and make my peace with Jesse! You will know how to plead with him in my behalf! Oh, don't look so cold and disapproving, mamma, for I love him so it would break my heart to lose him now. And—and—if he made love to any other girl, I should like to—to—see her lying dead at my feet! Oh, go; go quickly, and hasten back to me with my ring again and Jesse's forgiveness!"

She was half mad with anxiety and impatience, and she almost thrust Mrs. Clarke from the room in her eagerness for her return.

It mattered not that she could see plainly how distasteful it was to the gentle lady to go on such a mission; she insisted on obedience, and waited with passionate impatience for her mother's return, saying to herself:

"He is certainly very angry, but she will coax him to make up, and hereafter I will be very careful not to let him slip me again. I can be humble until we are married, and rule afterward. Mamma will not dare leave him without getting his forgiveness for me. She knows my temper, and that I would blame her always if she failed of success." [Pg 81]

But there are some things that even a loving, slavish mother cannot accomplish, even at the risk of a child's anger. Jesse Devereaux's reconciliation to Roma was one of them.

The mother returned after a time, pale and trembling, to Roma, saying nervously:

"Call your pride to your aid, dear Roma, for Jesse was obdurate, and would not consent to renew the engagement. I am indeed sorry that I humbled myself to ask it."

CHAPTER IX.

[Pg 82]

LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT.

Jesse Devereaux had never spent a more unpleasant half hour in his life than during Mrs. Clarke's visit. He admired and esteemed the gentle lady very much, and it pained him to tell her that he no longer loved her daughter, and was glad of his release.

Yet he did so kindly and courteously, though he was well aware that no gentleness could really soften the blow to her love and pride.

"I have been betrothed to your daughter only two weeks, dear madam, but in that short time I have discovered traits in her character that could never harmonize with mine. We have both been spoiled by indulgent parents; both are willful and headstrong. Such natures do best wedded to gentle, yielding ones. It is best for our future happiness that we should separate, although I should have kept faith with Roma, had she not yielded to her hasty temper and broken the engagement," he said.

She looked at his pale, handsome face as he rested on the sofa, and decided that he was only holding out for pride's sake. Surely he must love beautiful Roma still—he could not hate her so soon.

[Pg 83]

"Roma is not headstrong, as you think; only hasty and impulsive," she faltered. "See how she has humbled herself to you in the depths of her love. Why, I left her weeping most bitterly over her fault, and praying for your forgiveness. How can I go back and tell her you refuse it; that you scorn her love?"

She was frightened, indeed, to return from an unsuccessful mission to Roma. There were tears in her imploring eyes as she gazed at him.

"I do not refuse her my forgiveness; I accord it to her freely," he replied. "Neither do I scorn her love, but I do not believe it can be very deep, else she could not have been so angry with me last night. And I am free to confess that my love was not of the strongest, either, for I realize now that I am glad of my freedom, if you will pardon me for my frankness, dear lady."

How could she pardon aught that must wound her daughter vitally? An angry flush rose into her cheek, her blue eyes flashed.

"You are cruelly frank!" she cried; and he answered:

[Pg 84]

"I lament the painful necessity, but circumstances leave me no alternative, Mrs. Clarke. I feel that I entered into an engagement too hastily, and that its sudden rupture is a relief. I tender my friendship to your daughter with profound gratitude for her kindness, but I can never again be her lover."

In the face of such frankness she sat dumb. What was there to say that could move him?

Her heart sank at the thought of Roma's disappointment. She rose unsteadily to her feet, blinded by angry tears.

"I may still retain your friendship?" he pleaded, but her lip curled in scorn.

"No, you are cruel and unjust to Roma. I despise you!" she answered, in wrath, as she stumbled from the room, wondering at his heartlessness.

She would not have wondered so much if she could have known that Roma had never really filled his heart, but that the glamour of her fascinations and her open preference had somehow drawn him into a proposal that had brought him no happiness, save a sort of pride in winning the beautiful belle and heiress from many competitors. All the while he did not really love her; it was just his pride and vanity that were flattered.

[Pg 85]

There had come a sudden, painful awakening that fateful day, when rescuing Liane Lester's veil. He had looked deep into those shy, lovely eyes of hers, and felt his heart leap wildly, quickened by a glance into new life.

Roma's eyes had never thrilled him that way; he had never wondered at her great beauty; he had never longed to take her in his arms and clasp her to his heart at first sight. This was love—real love, such as he had never felt for the proud beauty he had rashly promised to marry.

In that first hour of his meeting with Liane, he cursed himself for his madness in proposing to Roma.

Yet, he was the soul of honor. He did not even contemplate retreating from his position as Roma's affianced husband. He only felt that he must avoid the fatal beauty of Liane, lest he go mad with despair at his cruel fate.

Then had followed the meeting with her again, that night when he had so fortunately saved her from the insults of a stranger and the brutality of her old grandmother. How proud and glad he had been to defend her, even at the pain of a broken arm; how he had loved her in that moment, longed to shelter her on his breast from the assaults of the cruel world.

[Pg 86]

He could never forget that moment when, overcome by gratitude, the girl had bent and kissed his hand, sending mad thrills of love through his trembling frame.

Had he been free, he would have poured out his full heart to her that moment, and the tender stars would have looked down on a scene of the purest love, where two hearts acknowledged each other's sway in ecstasy.

But he was bound in the cruel fetters of another's love, from which he could not in honor get free. His heart must break in silence.

He had to hurry away from her abruptly to hide the love he must not confess.

In his sorrow and suffering that night, judge what happiness came to him with Roma's angry letter, sent by special messenger, restoring his ring and his freedom!

His heart sang pæans of joy as he let his thoughts cling lovingly to Liane, realizing that now he might woo and win the shy, sweet maiden for his own.

Very early in the morning he penned his note to Roma, making it purposely curt and cold, that she might not attempt a reconciliation. [Pg 87]

He felt so grateful to her that he was not at all angry, and thanked her in his heart for her summary rejection.

The unpleasant interview with Mrs. Clarke over, he dismissed the whole matter from his mind, and gave all his thoughts to Liane, chafing at the delay that must ensue from his forced confinement to his room.

"You must let me get out of here as soon as possible, doctor. I have something very important to do!" he cried eagerly.

"Love-making, eh?" bantered the doctor, thinking of Roma. "All right, my dear fellow. I shall have you walking about in a few days, I trust; but I warn you it will be a long while before you can do any but left-handed hugging!"

"Pshaw!" exclaimed his patient; but he colored up to his brows. He was indeed thinking of how impassioned he would make love to Liane when he saw her again.

"I shall ask her to marry me on the spot!" he decided joyfully, "and—I hope I'm not vain—but I don't believe she will say no. We must be married very soon, so I can take her away from her wretched surroundings. That old grandmother can be pensioned off. She shall never see Liane again after she is my wife. Of course, the world will say I've made a mésalliance, but I'm rich enough to please myself, and my darling is beautiful enough to wear a crown." [Pg 88]

The doctor found him the most impatient patient in the world. He never complained of the pain in his arm, though it was excruciating. He only chafed at his confinement.

"I want to get out," he said. "Doctor, you know I'm one of the judges at the Beauty Show tomorrow night."

"I'm going to let you go with your arm in a sling. Hang it all, I wouldn't miss it myself for anything! Say, there's more than one beauty in Stonecliff, but it goes without saying that you judges will award the prize to Miss Clarke, eh?" cried the jocose physician.

CHAPTER X.

[Pg 89]

ROMA SEEKS A NEW MAID.

Roma's rage and grief at her mother's failure to set matters straight between her and Devereaux were beyond all expression.

But, for very pride's sake, she concealed the deepest bitterness of her heart.

She could not accuse her gentle mother of wanton carelessness, for the tears stood in her deep-blue eyes as she told the story of her interview, concluding sadly:

"Do not think, my darling, that I did not do my best to bring him to reason, putting pride away, and telling him how devotedly you loved him, and that it would break your heart to lose him now. He was cold and unresponsive to all my pleadings, and as good as said he was glad to be free of you. I confess I lost my temper at the last, and told him I despised him, before I came away."

Roma did not speak, she only tapped the rich carpet with a restless foot, indicative of a white heat of repressed anger; but Mrs. Clarke did not read her mood aright; she thought she was bearing the blow with fortitude.

In her keen sympathy she exclaimed:

[Pg 90]

"It is a cruel blow to your pride and love, my daughter, and I only wish I knew how to comfort you."

Roma lifted her white face and glittering eyes to Mrs. Clarke's anxious scrutiny, and actually laughed—a strange, mirthless laugh, that chilled her mother's blood. Then she said, with seeming coolness:

"You can comfort me right off, mamma, by begging papa to give me those rubies I've wanted so

long! As for Jesse, he is only holding off from pride! I shall win him back, never fear!"

"You shall have your rubies, dear," her mother answered kindly, though she thought: "What a strange girl? How can she think of rubies at such a moment?"

"Thank you, mamma, you are very good to me!" Roma answered prettily, in her gratitude for the rubies; then, as Mrs. Clarke was going out, she added: "I wonder if Sophie is well enough to get up and wait on me. I am in need of her services."

Mrs. Clarke paused in some embarrassment, and answered:

"I shall have to lend you my own maid till I can get you another. Sophie Nutter left quite abruptly this morning." [Pg 91]

"I'm glad of it. I disliked the girl, and I suspected her of telling tales of me to you!" cried Roma.

Mrs. Clarke neither affirmed nor denied the charge. She simply said:

"We should be kind to our servants, Roma, if we expect them to bear good witness for us."

"Kindness is wasted on the ungrateful things!" Roma answered impatiently. "I must have another maid immediately."

"But where shall we find her? Not in this little town, I fear. So we must send to Boston."

"Wait! I have an idea, mamma!"

"Well?"

"I should like to have that neat little sewing girl that altered my cape that night. She is so clever with her needle, she would be a real treasure to me, and save you many dressmaking bills."

"Would she be willing to come?"

"We can find out by asking the old woman she lives with—you know, mamma, that old tumble-down shanty at the end of town, coming out of Cliffdene? It is a little more than a mile from here. Liane Lester lives there with an old grandmother that beats her every day, I've heard, and I've no doubt she would jump at the chance of a situation here!" [Pg 92]

Mrs. Clarke forbore to remind her daughter that she, too, had been accused of beating her maid; she only said warningly:

"You would have to be kinder to her than you were to Sophie, or she would not be likely to stay, my dear."

"How could you believe Sophie's fibs on me?" cried Roma petulantly; but Mrs. Clarke turned the exclamation aside by saying:

"Perhaps you had better go and see about the new maid at once."

"Oh, mamma, I think you might do it yourself! I—I am too nervous and unhappy to attend to it just now. Won't you just drive down into town again and see about the girl?" answered Roma.

Mrs. Clarke did not relish the task, but she was so used to bearing Roma's burdens that she assented without a murmur, and went out again to see about the new maid, sadly troubled in her mind about what had happened last night, when the delirious maid had told such shocking stories on her daughter.

"It could not be true; of course not, but it is shocking that Sophie should even have imagined such awful things! It all came of Roma being cross and impatient with her, and making a bad impression on her mind. Now, if this young sewing girl should consent to serve Roma, I shall make it a point to see that she is not ill-used," she thought, as her handsome carriage stopped at Liane's humble home, and the footman opened the door and helped her out. [Pg 93]

She swept up the narrow walk to the door, an imposing figure, thinking compassionately:

"What a wretched abode! It will be a pleasing change to Liane Lester if the girl will consent to come to Cliffdene."

She tapped on the open door, but no one replied, though she saw the old woman's figure moving about in the room beyond.

"She is deaf and cannot hear me. I will just step in," she thought, suiting the action to the word.

Granny was sweeping up the floor, but she turned with a start, dropping her broom as a soft hand touched her shoulder, and, confronting the beautiful intruder, asked:

"Who are you? What do you want?"

Mrs. Clarke smiled, as she replied:

"I am Mrs. Clarke, of Cliffdene. I wish to see Liane Lester." [Pg 94]

"Liane's down to her work at Miss Bray's, ma'am, but you can tell me your business with her. I'm her grandmother," snarled granny crossly.

"My daughter Roma has lost her maid; she wishes to offer Liane the vacant place, with your approval. She will have a pleasant home, and much better wages than are paid to her by Miss Bray for sewing."

Mrs. Clarke had never seen Liane Lester, but she felt a deep sympathy for her from what she had heard, and was strangely eager to have her come to Cliffdene.

So she waited impatiently for granny's reply, and as she studied the homely figure before her, a sudden light beamed in her eyes, and she exclaimed:

"How strange! I recognize you all at once as the woman who nursed me when my daughter Roma was born. You have changed, but yet your features are quite familiar. Oh, how you bring back that awful time to me! Do you remember how my child was stolen, and that I would have died of a broken heart, only that she was restored to me almost at the last moment, when my life was so quickly ebbing away?"

[Pg 95]

The quick tears of memory started to the lady's eyes, but granny's fairly glared at her as she muttered:

"You are mistaken!"

"Oh, no, I cannot be! I recall you perfectly," declared Mrs. Clarke, who had an astonishing memory for faces.

"I never saw you before in my whole life! I never was a sick nurse!" declared the old woman, so positively and angrily that Mrs. Clarke thought that, after all, she might be mistaken.

"Really, it does not matter. I was misled by a resemblance, and I thought you would be glad to hear of your nurse child again," she said.

A strange eagerness appeared on the old woman's face as she muttered:

"It's my misfortune that I haven't such a claim on your kindness, ma'am. God knows I'd be glad to meet with rich friends that would pity my poverty-stricken old age!"

Mrs. Clarke's white hand slipped readily into her pocket, taking the hint, and granny was made richer by a dollar, which she acknowledged with profuse gratitude.

"And as for Liane going as maid to your daughter, ma'am, I'd like to see this Miss Roma first, before I give my consent. I want to see if she looks like a kind young lady, that would not scold and slap my granddaughter," she declared cunningly.

[Pg 96]

Mrs. Clarke colored, wondering if Sophie's tales had reached the old woman's ears, but she said quickly:

"I would insure kind treatment to your grandchild if she came to serve my daughter."

"Thank you kindly, ma'am. I believe you, but will you humor an old woman's whim and persuade Miss Roma to come to me herself?" persisted granny, with veiled eagerness.

"I will do so if I can, but I cannot promise certainly," Mrs. Clarke replied, rather coldly, as she rustled through the door.

She was vexed and disappointed. Everything seemed to go against her that day. How angry Roma would be at the old woman's obstinacy, and how insolently she would talk to her, looking down on her from her height of pride and position. It was as well to give up the thought of having Liane come at all.

And how strangely like the old woman was to Mrs. Jenks, the nurse she had had with her when Roma was born. She was mistaken, of course, since the old creature said so; but she had such a good memory for faces, and she had never thought of two such faces alike in the world.

[Pg 97]

But if Mrs. Clarke went away perturbed from this rencontre, she left granny sadly frustrated also.

The old creature sat down in the doorway, her chin in her hands, and gazed with starting eyes at the grand carriage from Cliffdene rolling away.

"Who would have dreamed such a thing?" she muttered. "Here I have lived two years neighbor to the Clarkes, and never suspected their identity, and never heard their girl's name spoken before! Well, well, well! And they want Liane to wait on Roma. Ha, ha, ha!"

She seemed to find the idea amusing, for she kept laughing at intervals in a grim, mocking fashion, while she watched the road to Cliffdene as if she had seen a ghost from the past.

"Will the girl come, as I wish? Will she condescend to cross old granny's humble threshold? I should like to see her in her pride and beauty. Perhaps she, too, might have a dollar to fling to a poor old wretch like me!" she muttered darkly.

CHAPTER XI.

[Pg 98]

THE BEAUTY SHOW.

Roma was indeed surprised and angry at granny's summons. She flatly refused to go, declaring:

"The insolence of the lower classes is indeed insufferable. Why, I offered that girl a situation much more profitable than the one she holds now, and here that crazy old witch, her grandmother, wishes to annoy me with all sorts of conditions! Call on her, indeed, in her old rookery of a house! I shall do nothing of the kind, but I will write a note to the girl, at Miss Bray's, and I have no doubt she will fairly jump at the chance, without saying 'by your leave' to that old hag!"

Delighted at the idea of outwitting the insolent old woman, as she deemed her, Roma quickly

dispatched a patronizing, supercilious note to Liane, and waited impatiently for the reply.

She hardly gave another thought to poor Sophie Nutter, now that she was gone. Least of all did it enter her beautiful head that the maid had quit in fear and horror at the crime she had seen her commit that night.

Mrs. Clarke, in her tenderness over Roma's feelings, had bound all the servants never to betray Sophie's wild ravings to her daughter. [Pg 99]

So, secure in her consciousness that her terrible deed had had no witness, Roma tried to dismiss the whole affair from her mind, believing that her victim lay at the bottom of the sea and could never rise again to menace her with threats of exposure, as he had done that night, bringing down on himself an awful fate.

The man she had remorselessly hurled from the cliff to a watery grave belonged to an episode of Roma's boarding-school days, that she hoped was forever hidden from the knowledge of the world. The thought of exposure and betrayal was intolerable. It was a moment when she dare not hesitate. Desperation made her reckless, branded her soul with crime.

The strongest love of her life had been given to Jesse Devereaux. Woe be to any one who came between her and that selfish love! Woe be to Devereaux himself when he scorned that love! Turbulent passion, that brooked no obstacle, burned fiercely in Roma's breast. Proud, vain, self-indulgent, she would brook no opposition in anything.

Out of all the five hundred girls whose portraits had been accepted for the Beauty Show, there was not one more eager than Roma to win the prize—not for the money, but for the additional prestige it would add to her belleship. [Pg 100]

Her handsomest portrait had been offered, and Roma had scrutinized it most anxiously, hour by hour, searching for the slightest flaw.

She had a wealth of rich coloring in eyes, hair, and complexion, but her features were not quite regular; her nose was a trifle too large, her mouth too wide. Aware of these defects, she would have been a little uneasy, only that she counted on the votes of her father and Devereaux as most certain. Besides, she considered that her brilliant social position must prove a trump card.

"The palm will surely be mine, both by reason of beauty and belleship," she thought triumphantly, sneering, as she added: "The town will surely choose one of its own maidens for the honor, and who would think of awarding the prize to any one here except myself? True, they say that all of Miss Bray's pretty sewing girls have had their pictures accepted, and it's true that some of them are rather pretty, especially that Liane Lester, but who would think of giving a vote to a common sewing girl? I don't fear any of them, I'm sure! But, how I should hate any girl that took the prize from me!" she concluded, with a gleam of deadly jealousy in her great, flashing eyes, that could burn like live coals in their peculiar, reddish-brown shade. [Pg 101]

But an element of uncertainty was added to the situation, now, in the defection of Jesse Devereaux.

"What if, in his passionate resentment against me, he should cast his vote for another?" she thought, in dismay so great that she determined to humble herself to the dust if she could but win him back.

She sent him flowers every day, and, accompanying them, love letters, in which she poured out her grief and repentance; but, alas, all her efforts fell on stony ground.

The recreant knight, busy with his new love dream, scarcely wasted a thought on Roma. He replied to her letters, thanking her for the flowers and her kindly sentiments, assuring her that he bore no malice, and forgave her for her folly; but he added unequivocally that his fancy for her was dead, and could never be resurrected.

"His fancy! He can call it a fancy now!" the girl moaned bitterly, and in that moment she tasted, for the first time, the bitterness of a cruel defeat, where she had been so confident of success. [Pg 102]

She could not realize that he loved her no more, that the fancy she had so carefully cultivated was dead so soon! The pain and humiliation were most bitter. She rued in dust and ashes her hasty severance of her engagement.

Added to the bitterness of losing his love was the pain of having him vote against her at the Beauty Show.

"He will be sure to do so out of pure spite, even if he thought me the most beautiful of all!" she thought bitterly. "Oh, I wonder for whom he will cast his vote! How I should hate her if I knew! I—I could trample her pretty face beneath my feet!"

In desperation she resolved to cultivate the acquaintance of the artist, Malcolm Dean. He was to be one of the judges, she knew. Perhaps she could win him over to her side.

Gradually she took heart of hope again.

It could not be possible Jesse's heart had turned against her so suddenly. No, no! When they met again she would be able to draw him back again.

She had heard that he was going to be present at the Beauty Show. She would wear her new rubies and her most becoming gown for his eyes. [Pg 103]

There were other girls than Roma planning to look their prettiest that night, and one was Liane Lester.

Her girl friends had persuaded her to send in her picture with theirs, and all six had been photographed in a large group by the Stonecliff artist.

No one could gainsay the fact that it was a beautiful group, from the petite, flaxen-haired Dolly, to the tall, stately brunette, Mary Lang. Miss Bray was quite proud of them, and wished she had not been too old and homely to compete for the prize.

"How sweet they look in their plain white gowns—as pretty as any millionaire's daughters!" she said proudly. "Indeed, I don't see why one of them can't take the prize? What if they are just poor sewing girls? Almost any of them is as pretty as Miss Clarke, with her fame as a beauty! But her pa's money helped her to that! Look at Liane Lester, now; that girl's pretty enough for a princess, and if she had fine fixings, like Roma Clarke, she could outshine her as the sun outshines the stars! But, of course, I wouldn't have Liane know I said it, because a poor girl must never cultivate vanity," she concluded to her crouny, Widow Smith, who agreed to everything she said.

[Pg 104]

Liane had been almost frightened at first when the girls insisted on her going to the Beauty Show to see the exhibition of photographs, and hear the prize awarded.

"For if you should be chosen, you must be there to receive the prize," cried Dolly.

"I could never dream of being chosen," the girl cried, with a blush that made her lovelier than ever.

"You must come! Tell granny you have thrown off her yoke now, and intend to have a little fun, like other young girls. If she rebels, tell her you will leave her and live with me!" encouraged Mary Lang.

"You mustn't miss it for all the world!" cried Lottie Day vivaciously. "Did you know that the ladies of the Methodist church intend to have a supper in the town hall, also, that night?"

Little by little they tempted Liane to rebel against granny's arbitrary will and accompany them.

"But I have nothing to wear!" she sighed.

[Pg 105]

"Oh, a cheap, white muslin will do! It will look real sweet by gaslight, with a ribbon round your waist," suggested Miss Bray herself, and then Liane's heart gave a thump of joy. She told them about the five dollars Mrs. Clarke had given her for the work on Roma's cape, and how she had kept all knowledge of it from granny, longing to enjoy the money herself.

"You were quite right, since she takes every penny of your wages!" they all agreed, while Miss Bray added kindly:

"You can get a sweet pattern of white muslin and a ribbon for your waist and neck, with five dollars. I will cut and fit your gown for nothing."

"And we girls will take parts of it home at night and help you make it!" cried her young friends.

"Oh, how good you all are to me! I hope I may be able to return your favors some day," cried the girl, grateful tears crowding into her beautiful eyes.

And just then came the note from Roma Clarke, offering Liane a situation as her maid.

The girl shared the note with her friends, and they were unanimously indignant.

[Pg 106]

"The idea of thinking that any of us would stoop to be a maid!" they cried, while Liane, with flushing cheeks, quickly indited a brief, courteous, but very decided refusal of the young lady's offer.

CHAPTER XII.

[Pg 107]

"THE QUEEN ROSE."

"What impudence! She thanks me for my offer, but finds it quite impossible to accept. And her note is worded as if written to an equal!" cried Roma angrily, as she tossed Liane's answer to her mother.

Mrs. Clarke examined it somewhat curiously, commenting on the neatness and correctness of the writing.

"She has made good use of her limited opportunities for education," she said.

"But, mamma, the idea of her refusing my offer, to remain with Miss Bray at three dollars a week."

"Perhaps there is a little pride mixed up with her position. She may consider her present place more genteel, my dear."

"I really do not see any difference to speak of. Poor people are all alike to me," Roma cried scornfully. "As for Liane Lester, I should like to shake her! I suppose her pretty face has quite turned her head with vanity! Why, mamma, she and those other sewing girls at Miss Bray's have even sent their pictures to the Beauty Show."

[Pg 108]

"The competition was free to all, my dear, and poverty is no bar to beauty. I have seen some of the prettiest faces in the world among working girls. But still, I do not suppose any of Miss Bray's employees can compete with you in looks," returned Mrs. Clarke, with a complacent glance at

her handsome daughter.

"Thank you, mamma, but you haven't seen this Lester girl, have you? She is really quite out of the ordinary, with the most classic features, while I—well, I confess my features are the weak point in my beauty. I don't see why I didn't inherit your regular features!" complained Roma.

"You do not resemble me, but you are not lacking in beauty, dear. I suppose you must be more like your father's family, though I never saw any of them. But don't begin to worry, darling, lest you should lose the prize. I feel sure of your success," soothed the gentle lady.

"But, mamma, there is Jesse, who will be sure to vote against me for spite, and I'm afraid that papa is the only one of the judges I can count upon."

"You cannot count upon him, Roma, because he has declined to serve, fearing to be accused of partiality if he votes for you." [Pg 109]

"Then I shall have to go entirely on my own merits," Roma returned, with pretended carelessness, but at heart she was furious at her father's defection, only she knew it was useless to protest against his decision. She had learned long ago that she could not "wind him around her little finger," as she could her adoring mother.

Again her hopes recurred to Jesse Devereaux. She must make every effort to lure him back.

Her mother's patient maid grew very tired dressing Miss Roma for the show when the night came.

"She was as fussy and particular as some old maid! I did up her hair three times in succession before it suited! My! But she was cross as a wet hen! I believe she would have slapped me in the face if she had dared! I hope to goodness she may fail to get the prize, though I wouldn't have dear Mrs. Clarke hear me say so for anything in the world! But I'm just hoping and praying that some poor girl that needs the money may get that hundred dollars!" exclaimed the maid to her confidante, the housekeeper.

There was not one among the servants but disliked the arrogant heiress, who treated them as if they were no more than the dust beneath her dainty feet. They whispered among themselves that it was strange that such a sweet, kind lady as Mrs. Clarke should have such a proud, hateful daughter. [Pg 110]

While Roma was arraying herself in the finest of silk and lace, set off by the coveted new rubies, Liane Lester was making her simple toilet at the home of Mary Lang, with whom she had promised to attend the show.

Granny had most grudgingly given her consent to Liane's spending the night with Mary, since she dared not offer any violent opposition. Since Liane had threatened open rebellion to her tyranny, the old woman was somewhat cowed.

Liane put up her beautiful, curling tresses into the simplest of knots, but she did not need an elaborate coiffure for the chestnut glory of rippling, sun-flecked locks. It was a crown of beauty in itself.

She put on the crisp, white gown she had bought with Mrs. Clarke's gift, and Mary helped to tie the soft ribbons at her waist and neck.

"Oh, you lovely thing! You look sweet enough to eat!" she cried. "Now, then, put on the roses your mysterious admirer sent you to wear, and we will be off." [Pg 111]

Liane blushed divinely as she fastened at her waist a great bunch of heavy-headed pink roses, that had been sent to Miss Bray's late that afternoon, with an anonymous card that simply read:

FAIR QUEEN ROSE: Please wear these sister flowers at the Beauty Show to-night.

No name was signed, but the merry girls all declared that Liane had caught a beau at last, and that he would be sure to declare himself to-night. They persuaded her to wear the roses, though she was frightened at the very idea.

"Suppose some great, ugly ogre comes up to claim me!" she exclaimed apprehensively, as she pinned them on and set off, all in a flutter of excitement, for the town hall, clinging to Mary's arm, for she was quite nervous over the prospect of the evening's pleasure.

Now, as she passed along the lighted streets to the festive scene, and saw others, also gayly bedecked, hurrying to the same destination, she felt a thrill of pleasant participation quite new and exhilarating.

"Just see what I have missed all my life, through granny's hardness!" she murmured plaintively to Mary, who squeezed her arm lovingly, and answered: [Pg 112]

"Poor dear!"

The hall was already crowded with people, and the supper of the Methodist ladies was busily in progress when they entered the place that was gayly decorated with flowers and bunting, framing the pictures that lined the walls.

"Let us walk around and look at the beauties," Mary said, and, following the example of the other visitors, they mingled with the crowd and feasted their eyes on the five hundred pretty faces that were deemed worthy to compete for the prize.

They soon found out that Miss Clarke's portrait and the group of six sewing girls claimed more

attention than any others.

But there were many eyes that turned from the pictured to the living beauty, and whispers went round that drew many eyes to Liane, wondering at her marvelous grace.

Liane had never appeared at a public function in the town before, and many of the people thought she was a stranger. Curious whispers ran from lip to lip:

"Who is the lovely girl with the pink roses?"

Roma, in her rich gown and sparkling rubies, heard the question, and bit her lips till the blood almost started. [Pg 113]

"It is only one of the dressmaker's sewing girls!" she said haughtily, and started across the room to her mother, who had paused to speak to Jesse Devereaux.

He had just entered, looking pale and superbly handsome; but with his right arm in a sling, and the lady, for Roma's sake, resolved to forget her resentment and try to propitiate him.

"I am afraid I was too hasty that morning," she said gently. "Will you forgive me and be friends again, Jesse?"

"Gladly," he replied, for he valued her good opinion, little as he cared for her proud, overbearing daughter.

The next moment Roma, coming up to them, heard her mother exclaim, to her infinite chagrin:

"Tell me, Jesse, who is that perfectly lovely girl in the white gown with the pink roses at her waist?"

Jesse looked quickly, and saw Liane again for the first time since that eventful evening on the beach, when he had saved her from insult and injury. His heart gave a strangling throb of joy and love, mingled with pride in her peerless loveliness. [Pg 114]

"You are right. She is peerless," he answered, in a deep voice, freighted with emotion. "Her name is Liane Lester."

"Impossible!" almost shrieked the lady in her surprise; but at that moment Roma confronted them, her proud face pale, her eyes gleaming, murmuring:

"Oh, Jesse, how glad I am to see you out again! No wonder you were cross with me, suffering as you were with your poor arm. But I forgive you all."

"I thank you," he replied courteously, and Roma took her station at his side quite as if she had the old right.

He was vexed, for he was anxious to cross over to Liane and ask her to have an ice with him. Then he would keep at her side all the rest of the evening. He would see her home, too, and before they parted he would tell her all his love, and ask for her hand.

With these ecstatic anticipations in his mind, it was cruel torture to be kept away from her against his will by the two ladies, and, worst of all, with an air as if they had a right to monopolize him all the evening. [Pg 115]

In desperation he asked them to take an ice with him, vowing to himself he would escape directly afterward.

But Roma was thirsty that evening, it seemed. She took two ices, and trifled over them, her mother waiting patiently, while Jesse, outwardly cool and courteous, inwardly cursed his untoward fate, for he saw other men seeking introductions to Liane, and loading her with attentions, carried away by the charm of her beauty.

Still he could not shake off Roma without absolute rudeness, for she clung to his arm persistently, though it was near the hour for the announcement of the award of the evening, and yet he had not spoken one word to fair Liane, the queen of his heart.

Suddenly Malcolm Dean ascended the rostrum, and the gay, laughing groups about the hall became intensely still, waiting for his verdict.

"I am no orator," he smiled. "So I will briefly announce, as a member of the committee of the beauty contest, that we examined the pictures in detail to-day, and unanimously award the prize for most perfect beauty to Miss Liane Lester!"

A breathless hush had fallen on the crowd as Malcolm Dean's voice was heard speaking, and every ear was strained, not to lose a word—for many a fair young girl was listening in feverish excitement, hoping to hear her own name. [Pg 116]

Roma's heart gave a wild leap, her eyes flashed, her cheeks paled, and she half rose from her seat in uncontrollable excitement.

But the suspense of the aspirants for the prize lasted but a moment, for Malcolm Dean purposely made his announcement audible to every one in the hall:

"Miss Liane Lester!"

The name ran from lip to lip in excited tones, while many a young heart sank with disappointment, so many had hoped to be chosen queen of beauty, caring more for the honor even than the money.

Then the voices swelled into plaudits, and Liane, shrinking with bashful joy, heard her name shouted from eager lips:

"Miss Lester! Miss Lester!"

Roma had uttered a stifling gasp of disappointment, and sank heavily back into her seat.

"She is the most beautiful girl I ever saw!" cried Jesse impulsively. It was cruel to tell Roma this, and he realized it, but his heart was on his lips. He could not check it, though he saw the deadly fire of hate leap into her flashing eyes.

[Pg 117]

Mrs. Clarke touched her daughter's arm caressingly, saying:

"Do not feel so badly over it, Roma, darling. No doubt the committee were governed somewhat by partiality, thinking that the prize ought to be given some poor girl who needed the money."

Jesse felt the delicate thrust, and answered quickly:

"You were struck with her beauty yourself, Mrs. Clarke!"

"Yes, she is a very pretty girl," she replied, rather carelessly, then paused, as Malcolm Dean lifted his hand for silence, and said in the hush that followed:

"Will Miss Lester please come forward and receive the prize?"

A wild impulse came to Devereaux to escort Liane forward. How proud he would be to take that little fluttering hand and lead her to the rostrum to receive the award! He knew that every eye would be on them, that it would be a virtual declaration of his sentiments toward her, but he gloried in the thought. He rose quickly, exclaiming:

[Pg 118]

"Excuse me, please!"

But Mrs. Clarke's voice, cold and grating, fell on his ear:

"Please escort Roma to the open air—to the carriage! Do you not see that she is almost fainting?"

Roma was indeed drooping heavily against her mother, in pretended weakness. Her ruse had its effect. Jesse had to offer his arm and lead her from the room, followed by her mother. After some little delay their carriage was found, and, while placing them in it, Mrs. Clarke said coolly:

"Now if you will find my husband and send him to us, you will add greatly to the obligation you have placed us under."

He bowed silently and hurried away, meeting Mr. Clarke, fortunately, coming out. A hasty explanation, and they parted, Devereaux returning to the room, wild to speak to Liane after all this baffling delay.

But the prize had been presented, and Liane was surrounded by an obsequious crowd, offering eager congratulations.

By her side stood the handsome young artist, Malcolm Dean, gazing with rapt admiration on her shy, blushing face, and then Devereaux remembered that the artist had said, while they were deciding on the pictures that afternoon, that this was surely the fairest face in the whole world, and he should not rest until he knew the original.

[Pg 119]

"If the counterfeit presentiment can be so charming, how much more lovely, the original!" he exclaimed.

And now by his looks Devereaux saw that his anticipations were more than realized. The ethereal charm of Liane's beauty held him as by a spell.

It seemed to Liane as if she had fallen asleep and waked in a brighter world.

But an hour ago she had been poor little Liane Lester, the humble sewing girl, who had spent her little fortune, five dollars, the largest sum she had ever possessed at once in her life, on this simple white gown for the festal occasion. Now she stood there, the centre of admiring congratulations, receiving introductions and alternately bowing and smiling like some great beauty and heiress.

She felt like an heiress, indeed, with that crisp new hundred-dollar bill tucked into her belt, and her cheeks glowed with shy pride and joy, for she had dared to indulge some trembling daydreams over gaining the prize, and now she hoped they might be realized.

[Pg 120]

There were sad hearts there, too, for many a vain little maiden was disappointed, among them Dolly Dorr, who stifled her chagrin, however, and kissed Liane very sweetly, saying:

"Don't forget that I persuaded you to compete for the prize, although I was afraid all the time you would carry it off from us all."

Every one laughed at Dolly's naïve speech. She was such a frank, pretty little thing, and, next to Liane, the prettiest girl in Miss Bray's employ.

But among all the disappointed ones, no one had been so vexed as to leave the scene like Roma, and it was soon whispered through the room that she had scolded her lover for giving his vote to Liane instead of herself.

"I heard them quarreling; I was just behind Mrs. Clarke," said the lady who had started the report, and she added that Roma had been taken almost fainting to her carriage, unwilling to remain and witness her rival's triumph.

There were many who rejoiced over Roma's defeat, and others who wondered at Devereaux's disloyalty.

[Pg 121]

He should have paid her the compliment of his vote, since it could have made no difference in the

result, they said.

But Devereaux, returning to the hall, eager to speak to Liane, and indifferent to comments on his actions, was forced to stand on the verge of the crowd waiting his turn, till Dolly Dorr, espying him, hastened to his side.

She said to herself that here was one prize, at least, that Liane had not won yet, and she would lose no time trying to make good a claim.

"If he has quarreled with Miss Clarke, so much the better. Hearts are often caught in the rebound," she thought eagerly, as she engaged his attention with some bantering words.

Devereaux smiled kindly on the sunny-haired little maiden, but she found it impossible to engross his attention.

She soon saw that his whole mind was fixed on Liane, and he could not keep from watching her face, until Dolly said quite crossly:

"You are like all the rest! You cannot keep your eyes from off Liane Lester, now that she has taken the beauty prize!" [Pg 122]

Devereaux answered dreamily:

"I could look at her forever!"

His brilliant, dark eyes glowed and softened with tenderness, and a passionate flush reddened his smooth olive cheek.

Dolly stared, and said sharply:

"Perhaps Miss Clarke wouldn't like that so well!"

"What has she to do with my looking at Miss Lester?" he cried impatiently.

"But aren't you engaged to Miss Clarke?"

"No, I am not!"

"But everybody says so!"

"Everybody is mistaken."

Dolly's eyes beamed with joy as she cried gayly:

"Then you are free, Mr. Devereaux?"

He answered with a happy laugh:

"Free as the wind—free to look at Miss Lester as much as I choose—or as long as she will allow me."

This did not please Dolly at all, so she said spitefully:

"I dare say she doesn't care whether you look at her or not! She has no eager eyes for any one but that handsome Mr. Dean, and he has been standing beside her ever since he gave her the prize, and walked back to her seat with her, just as if they were lovers." [Pg 123]

"You are trying to make me jealous, Miss Dolly!" he laughed, unwilling for her to perceive the pain she gave him.

And he added, as some of the crowd around Liane moved aside:

"Please excuse me while I speak to Miss Lester."

Dolly made an angry little pout at him as he moved away. She had forgiven Liane for winning the prize of beauty, but if she carried off Devereaux's heart, too, why, that would be quite different. Liane knew how Dolly had set her heart on him. It would be mean if she came between them, she thought.

She managed to get near them when they met, and marked Liane's blush and smile of pleasure.

"And she always pretended not to care for flirting! But I suppose she will turn over a new leaf from to-night," she muttered jealously, as she edged nearer, trying to overhear everything that passed between the pair.

She had one triumph, at least, when she heard Devereaux prefer a low request to walk home with Liane that evening. [Pg 124]

"I am very sorry, but—I have already promised Mr. Dean," the girl murmured back, in regretful tones.

CHAPTER XIII.

[Pg 125]

EDMUND CLARKE'S SUSPICION.

Roma Clarke gave her parents a very uncomfortable quarter of an hour riding home that evening.

She threw pride to the winds, and raved in grief and anger at her defeat in the contest for the beauty prize, charging it most bitterly at the door of Jesse Devereaux.

Mr. Clarke learned for the first time now of the broken engagement, and, on finding that it was Roma's fault, he could not help censuring her severely for the folly by which she had lost her lover.

He thought bitterly in his heart: "Ah, how different my own sweet daughter must have been from this ill-tempered, coarse-grained girl who betrays her low origin in spite of the good bringing up and fine education she has received! My poor wife! How disappointed she must feel at heart, in spite of her brave show of affection and sympathy! And, as for Jesse Devereaux, he is a splendid young fellow, and has had a lucky escape from Roma's toils. I cannot feel that she will make any man a lovable wife, though I shall be glad enough to have her married off my hands!"

[Pg 126]

When Roma had gone, sobbing, to her room, he talked very earnestly to her mother, somewhat blaming her for encouraging the girl's willful temper.

"She is spoiled and selfish," he declared. "I for one am willing to own that the prize was well given to Miss Lester. She is very lovely—far lovelier than Roma!"

"How can you say so of our dear girl?" Mrs. Clarke cried reproachfully.

"Because, my dear wife, my eyes are not blinded, like yours, by love and partiality, and thus I can do justice to others," he answered firmly.

"You have never loved our daughter as you should. Therefore, I have felt it my duty to love and cherish her the more!" she sobbed.

He took her tenderly in his arms, and kissed the beautiful, quivering lips, exclaiming:

"Oh, my love, if our daughter were more like you, I could love her a hundredfold better! But, alas, she is so different, both in beauty and disposition, from my angel wife!"

"I have fancied she must be like your own relations, Edmund."

[Pg 127]

"Perhaps so," he replied evasively, continuing:

"This girl who took the prize this evening won my admiration, darling, because she has a wonderful likeness to you in your young days, Elinor; when we were first married."

"Oh, Edmund, I was never so exquisitely beautiful!" she cried, blushing like a girl.

"Oh, yes, indeed; quite as beautiful as Liane Lester—and very lovely still," he answered, gazing into her eyes with the admiration of a lover, giving her all the tenderness he withheld from Roma, his unloved daughter.

She nestled close to his breast, delighted at his praises, and presently she said:

"It is rather a coincidence, your fancying that Miss Lester looks like me, while I imagine that her grandmother—a dreadful old creature, by the way—resembles Mrs. Jenks, the old woman who nursed me when Roma was born."

Some startled questioning from her husband brought out the whole story of her visit to granny.

"Of course I was mistaken in taking her for Mrs. Jenks, but the old crone needn't have been so vexed over it," she said.

[Pg 128]

Edmund Clarke was startled, agitated, by what she had told him, but he did not permit her to perceive it.

He thought:

"What if I have stumbled on the solution of a terrible mystery? The likeness of Liane Lester to my wife is most startling, and, coupled with other circumstances surrounding her, might almost point to her being my lost daughter!"

He trembled like a leaf with sudden excitement.

"I must see this old woman—and to-night! I cannot bear the suspense until to-morrow!" he thought, and said to his wife artfully:

"Perhaps I am selfish, keeping you from poor Roma in her distress."

"I will go to her at once, poor child," she said, lifting her fair head from his breast.

"And I will take a walk while I smoke," he replied, leaving her with a tender kiss.

He lighted a cigar, and started eagerly for the cottage of granny, hoping to find her alone ere Liane returned from the hall.

His whole soul was shaken with eager emotion from what his wife had told him about the old woman's identity.

[Pg 129]

In the cool, clean September moonlight he strode along the beach, eager-hearted as a boy, in the trembling hope of finding his lost child again.

What joy it would be to find her in the person of lovely Liane, who had already touched his heart with a subtle tenderness by the wonderful likeness that brought back so vividly his wife's lost youth in the days when they had first loved with that holy love that crowned their lives with lasting joy. Not one cloud had marred their happiness save the loss of their infant daughter.

He had restored what happiness he could to Elinor by the substitution of a spurious child, but for himself there must ever be an aching void in his heart till the lost was found again.

He stepped along briskly in the moonlight, and to his surprise and joy he found the old woman

leaning over the front gate in a dejected attitude, as if loneliness had driven her outdoors to seek companionship with nature.

"Ah, Mrs. Jenks, good evening!" he exclaimed abruptly, pausing in front of her and lifting his hat.

Granny started wildly, and snapped:

"I don't know you!"

"You have a poor memory," laughed Mr. Clarke. "Now, I knew you at once as Mrs. Jenks, who nursed my wife when our daughter Roma was born. My name is Edmund Clarke. We used to live in Brookline. I sold my property there and moved away when Roma was an infant."

"I never heard of Brookline before, nor you, either!" snapped granny.

"Your memory is bad, as I said before, but you won't deny that your name is Jenks?" Mr. Clarke returned.

As the whole town knew her by that name, she felt that denial was useless, but she preserved a stubborn silence, and he continued:

"I came to ask you, granny, how you came by such a beautiful granddaughter."

"Humph! The same way as other people come by grandchildren, I s'pose. My daughter ran away to be an actress, and came back in a year without a wedding ring, and left her baby on my hands, while she disappeared again forever," returned granny, with an air of such apparent truthfulness that he was staggered.

He was silent a moment, then returned to the charge.

"How old is Liane?"

"Only seventeen her next birthday."

"I should have taken her for quite eighteen."

"Then you would have made a mistake."

"Is her mother dead?"

"I don't know. I never heard of her after she ran away and left her baby on my hands."

"Eighteen years ago?"

"No; not quite seventeen, I told you, sir."

"And you do not really remember Mrs. Clarke, whom you nursed at Brookline eighteen years ago? Come, it ought to be fresh in your memory. Do you not recall the distressing facts in the case? The infant was stolen from my wife's breast, and she was dying of the shock when a spurious daughter was imposed on her, and she recovered. You, Mrs. Jenks, were sent to the founding asylum for the child, and laid it on Mrs. Clarke's breast, restoring her to hope again. You cannot have forgotten!"

Granny Jenks looked at him angrily in the moonlight.

"You must be crazy! I don't know you, and I don't care anything about your family history! Go away!" she exclaimed fiercely.

Mr. Clarke was baffled, but not convinced. He stood his ground, saying firmly:

"You may bluster all you please, Granny Jenks, but you cannot shake my conviction that you are the wretch that stole my daughter, and placed a foundling in her place to deceive and make wretched my poor wife. This girl, Liane Lester, is the image of my wife, and I am almost persuaded she is my own daughter. If I have guessed the truth it will be wiser for you to confess the fraud at once, for denial now will be useless. I believe I am on the right track at last, and I will never stop till I uncover the truth. And—the more trouble you give me, the greater will be your punishment."

His dark eyes flashed menacingly, and the hardened old woman actually shivered with fear for an instant. Then she shook off the feeling, and turned from him angrily, reëntering her house, and snarling from the doorway:

"I know nothing about your child, you crazy fool! Go away!"

CHAPTER XIV.

ROMA FINDS AN ALLY.

Dolly Dorr was right. Handsome Malcolm Dean had never quitted Liane's side since the moment he had clasped her hand in congratulating her on her triumph as queen of beauty.

He remained by her side, enraptured with her beauty and her bashful grace, and he lost no time in preferring a request to walk home with her that night, thinking to himself how sweet it would be to walk with her beneath the brilliant moonlight, the little hand resting on his arm, while the low, musical voice answered his remarks with the timidity that showed how unconscious she was of her own enchanting beauty.

He could scarcely credit what they had told him this afternoon when examining the portraits: that Liane Lester was only a poor sewing girl, with a cruel grandmother, who beat her upon the slightest pretext, and never permitted her to have a lover.

"She looks like a young princess. It is a wonder that some brave young man has not eloped with her before now," he declared.

"Every one is afraid of Granny Jenks," they replied; but Jesse Devereaux only remained gravely silent. He had decided to win sweet Liane for his own, in spite of a hundred vixenish grannies. [Pg 134]

He had sent her the fragrant roses to wear, determining to disclose his identity that night, and to win her sweet promise to be his bride.

Now his plans were all spoiled by the artist's sudden infatuation, and he could have cursed Roma for the spiteful manœuvring that had kept him an unwilling captive, while Liane was drifting beyond his reach.

All his pleasure was over for to-night, yet he did not give up hope for the future. His dark eyes had not failed to detect the joy in her glance, and the blush on her cheek at their meeting, and his ears had caught the little regretful ring in her voice, as she whispered that she had already promised Mr. Dean.

Presently the people all began to go away, and with keen pain he saw Liane leaving with her new admirer, her little hand resting like a snowflake on his black coat sleeve.

"But it shall be my turn to-morrow," he vowed to himself, turning away with a jealous pang, and pretending not to see Dolly Dorr, who had lingered purposely in his way, hoping he would see her home. [Pg 135]

Disappointed in her little scheme, she rather crossly accepted the offer of a dapper dry-goods clerk, and went off on his arm, laughing with forced gayety as she passed Devereaux, to let him see that she did not care.

Devereaux did not even hear the laughter of the piqued little flirt. He could think of nothing but his keen disappointment over Liane. He returned to his hotel in the sulks.

After all his pleasant anticipations, his disappointment was keen and bitter.

"How can I wait until to-morrow?" he muttered, throwing himself down disconsolately into a chair.

Suddenly a messenger entered with a telegram, and, tearing it hastily open, he read:

Come at once. Father has had a stroke of apoplexy.

LYDE.

Lyde was his only sister, married a year before, and a leader in society. He could fancy how helpless she would be at this juncture—the pretty, petted girl.

Filial grief and affection drove even the thought of Liane temporarily from his mind. [Pg 136]

Calling in a man to pack his effects, he left on the earliest train for his home in Boston.

But as the train rushed on through the night and darkness, Liane blended with his troubled thoughts, and he resolved that he would write to her at the earliest opportunity. He would not leave the field clear for his enamored rival.

He realized, too, that the clever and handsome artist would be a dangerous rival; still, he felt sure that Liane had some preference for himself. On this he based his hopes for Malcolm Dean's failure.

"She will not forget that night upon the beach, and the opportune service I did her. Her grateful little heart will not turn from me," he thought hopefully.

Malcolm Dean was the only one he could think of as likely to come between him and Liane. He had not an apprehension as to Roma Clarke's baleful jealousy. And yet he should have remembered the hate that had flashed from her eyes and hissed in her voice when she taxed him with voting for Liane.

Again, she had nearly fainted when he was excusing himself to speak to her successful rival. [Pg 137]

And even now, while the fast-flying train bore him swiftly from Stonecliff, Roma paced her chamber floor like one distraught, wringing her hands and alternately bewailing her fate and vowing vengeance.

Before Roma's angry eyes seemed to move constantly the vision of her rival in her exquisite beauty. Liane, in her girlish white gown, with the fragrant pink roses at her slender waist—Liane, the humble sewing girl she had despised, but who had now become her hated rival.

Jesse Devereaux admired her; thought her the loveliest girl in the world. Perhaps, even, he was in love with her. That was why he had taken so gladly the dismissal she had so rashly given.

A fever of unavailing regret burned in Roma's veins, the fires of jealous hate gleamed in her flashing eyes.

"I would gladly see her dead at my feet," she cried furiously.

Before she sought her pillow, she had resolved on a plan to forestall Devereaux's courtship.

She would go to-morrow morning to see the wicked old grandmother of Liane; she would have a good excuse, because the old woman had desired the visit, and she would tell her that Devereaux was engaged to herself, and warn her not to permit her granddaughter to accept attentions that could mean nothing but evil. She would even bribe the old woman, if necessary. She was ready to make any sacrifice to punish Jesse for what she called to herself his perfidy, ignoring the fact that she had set him free to woo whom he would.

[Pg 138]

Granny was tidying up her floor next morning, when a footstep on the threshold made her start and look around at a vision of elegance and beauty framed in sunshine that made the coppery waves of her hair shine lurid red as the girl bowed courteously, saying:

"I am Miss Clarke. Mamma said you wished to see me."

Granny dropped her broom and sank into a chair, staring with dazed eyes at the radiant beauty in her silken gown.

As no invitation to enter was forthcoming, Roma stepped in and seated herself, with a supercilious glance at the shabby surroundings. She thought to herself disdainfully:

"To think of being rivaled in both beauty and love by a low-born girl raised in a hovel!"

Yet she saw that everything was scrupulously clean and neat, as though Liane made the best of what she had.

[Pg 139]

The old woman, without speaking a word, stared at Roma with eager eyes, as if feasting on her beauty, a tribute to her vanity that pleased Roma well, so she smiled graciously and waited with unwonted patience until granny heaved a long sigh, and exclaimed:

"It is a pleasure to behold you at last, Miss Roma, as a beauty and an heiress! Ah, you must be very happy!"

The young girl sighed mournfully:

"Wealth and beauty cannot give happiness when one's lover is fickle, flirting with poor girls at the expense of their reputations."

"What do you mean?" gasped the old woman, and somehow Roma felt that she was making a favorable impression, and did not hesitate to add:

"I am speaking of your granddaughter, Liane Lester. The girl is rather pretty, and I suppose that her vanity makes her ambitious to marry rich. She flirts with every young man she sees, and lately she has been making eyes at my betrothed husband, Jesse Devereaux, a handsome young millionaire. He loves me as he does his life, but he is a born flirt, and he is amusing himself with Liane in spite of my objections. So I thought I would come and ask you to scold the girl for her boldness."

[Pg 140]

"Scold her! That I will, and whip her, too, if you say so! I will do anything to please you, beautiful lady," whimpered granny, moving closer to Roma, and furtively stroking her rich dress with a skinny, clawlike hand, while she looked at the girl with eager eyes.

Roma frowned a little at this demonstration of tenderness, but she was glad the old woman took it so calmly about Liane, and answered coolly:

"So that you keep them apart, I do not care how much you whip her, for her boldness deserves a check, and I suppose that you cannot restrain her, except by beating."

She was surprised and almost shocked as granny whispered hoarsely:

"I would beat her—yes; I would kill her before she should steal your grand lover, darling!"

CHAPTER XV.

[Pg 141]

"A DYING MOTHER."

Even Roma's cruel heart was somewhat shocked at granny's malevolence toward her beautiful young granddaughter, but she did not rebuke the old hag; she only resolved to make capital of it. So she said:

"I don't want you to kill her, but I wish you could take her away from here, where Jesse Devereaux can never find her again. She is in my way, and I want her removed!"

"It would be worth money to you to get her out of your way," leered granny cunningly:

Roma hesitated a moment, then answered frankly:

"Yes, but I could not promise to pay you much. Papa makes me a very small allowance."

The old woman crept nearer to the beautiful, cruel creature, and gazed up into her face with an expression of humble adoration, while she murmured wheedlingly:

"I would take her away from here—far away—where she could never trouble you again, pretty lady, for a reward that even you could afford to bestow."

[Pg 142]

"What is that?" cried Roma eagerly, and she was startled when granny answered nervously:

"A kiss!"

"A kiss!" the girl echoed wonderingly.

Granny was actually trembling with excitement, and she added pleadingly:

"You are so pretty, Miss Roma, that I have fallen in love with you, and for my love's sake I would like to kiss you once. If you grant my wish, I will be your slave for only one kind look and kiss!"

She was softened and agitated in a strange fashion, but she could not help seeing that Roma recoiled in surprise and disgust.

"Really, this is very strange! I—I am not fond of kissing old women. I scarcely ever kiss even my own mother. I would much rather pay you a little money!" she exclaimed.

Granny's face saddened with disappointment, and she muttered:

"So proud; so very proud! She could not bear a downfall!"

Roma flushed with annoyance, and added:

"You seem so very poor that even a small sum of money ought to be acceptable to you!"

[Pg 143]

"I am miserably poor, but I love you—I would rather have the kiss."

If Roma had known the old woman's miserly character she would have been even more surprised at her fancy. As it was, she hardly knew what to say. She gazed in disgust at the ugly, yellow-skinned and wrinkled old hag, and wondered if she could bring herself to touch that face with her own fresh, rosy lips.

"I—I would rather give you a hundred dollars than to kiss you!" she blurted out, in passionate disgust.

Instantly she saw she had made a grave mistake. Granny drew back angrily from the haughty girl, muttering:

"Hoity-toity, what pride! But pride always goes before a fall!"

"What do you mean?" flashed Roma.

A moment's silence, and granny answered cringingly:

"I only meant that you would be humiliated if that pretty Liane stole Devereaux's heart from you and married him. The other night I beat Liane for walking with him on the beach by moonlight!"

[Pg 144]

"Heavens! It is worse even than I thought!" cried Roma, springing to her feet, pale with passion.

She advanced toward granny, adding:

"Will you take her away by to-morrow, and never let him see her face again if I grant your wish?"

"I swear it, honey!"

"There, then!" and Roma held up her fresh, rosy lips, shuddering with disgust as the old crone gave her an affectionate kiss that smacked very strongly of an old pipe.

"Be sure that you keep your promise!" she cried, hastening from the house.

Granny watched her until she was out of sight, clasping her skinny arms across her breast, after the fashion of one fondling a beloved child.

"How proud, how beautiful!" she kept saying over to herself in delight. Then she went in and closed the door, while she sat down to make her plans for gratifying Roma's wish.

Not a breath of last night's happenings had reached her, for she seldom held communication with any one, being feared and hated by the whole community, as much as Liane was loved and pitied. She knew nothing of the popular beauty contest, and that Liane had won the prize of a hundred dollars. If she had known, she would have managed to get possession of the money ere now. Liane, having spent the night with Mary Lang, had gone to her work from there, and was having an ovation from her girl friends, who put self aside and rejoiced with her over her triumph.

[Pg 145]

The proud and happy girl answered gratefully:

"But for your persuasions I should never have ventured to send in my picture for the contest. I want to testify my gratitude by giving each of you five dollars to buy a pretty keepsake."

They protested they would not take a penny of her little fortune, but the generous girl would not be denied.

"I have seventy-five dollars left! I am rich yet!" she cried gayly, for Liane was the happiest girl in the world to-day.

But it was neither her signal triumph nor the money that made her happy, it was because she had seen Jesse Devereaux again, and his radiant, dark eyes had told her the story of his love as plain as words.

Though she was grateful to the handsome artist for his attentions, she was disappointed because he had kept Jesse from walking home with her last night.

[Pg 146]

But she looked eagerly for some demonstration from him to-day. Perhaps he would send her some more flowers, for he had whispered gladly as they parted:

"Thank you for wearing the roses I sent you!"

Liane's heart leaped with joy at hearing the flowers had come from Jesse, and she placed them carefully away that night, determined to keep them always, for his dear sake.

How her heart sank when Dolly Dorr, who had been rather quiet and sulky that morning, suddenly remarked:

"Mr. Devereaux went off, bag and baggage, they say, to Boston last night, so I suppose that is the last we shall see of him!"

Liane could not keep from exclaiming regretfully:

"Oh, dear!"

"You seem to be sorry!" Dolly cried significantly.

All eyes turned on Liane, and she blushed rosy red as she bent lower over the work she was sewing.

Dolly added curtly:

[Pg 147]

"I did not think you would be so ready to take away another girl's chance, Liane."

"But he has broken with Miss Clarke. They quarreled last night," said Lottie Day.

"I did not mean Miss Clarke. I meant myself. Liane knows he has paid me some attention, and that I have set my cap at him! I thought she was my true friend, but I caught her making eyes at him last night!" Dolly exclaimed ruefully.

The gay girls all laughed at Dolly's jealousy, but Liane could not say a word for embarrassment, knowing in her heart how baseless were Dolly's hopes.

The angry little maiden continued:

"He told me last night that he was free from Miss Clarke; and I believe I could win him if no one tried to spoil the sport. I would never have introduced him to Liane if I had thought she would try to cut me out."

"Oh, Dolly, you know I have not tried. Could I help his coming to speak to me last night?" cried Liane.

"No, but you needn't have encouraged him by flirting when he spoke to you, blushing and rolling up your eyes."

A derisive groan went around among the merry band at Dolly's charge, and Mary Lang spoke up spiritedly:

[Pg 148]

"Dolly Dorr, you are simply making yourself ridiculous, putting in a claim to Mr. Devereaux because he happened to speak to you once or twice! Any one with half an eye can see he's in love with Liane, and I'll state for your benefit that he told her last night he sent her that bouquet of roses, and he wanted to walk home with her, only Mr. Dean was ahead of him!"

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" ran the chorus of voices, Liane drooping her head in blushing confusion, and Dolly pouting with disappointment, while she cried spitefully:

"He's nothing but a wretched flirt! He flirted with Miss Clarke, and then with me, and next with Liane! I'm glad he got ashamed of himself, and sneaked off; and I hope he will never come back!"

Her little fit of temper spoiled the rest of the day for the girls, and Liane Lester was glad to get away at six o'clock, where, after a while, she could be alone with her own thoughts.

But granny was sniveling, with her apron to her eyes, when she entered the poverty-stricken room.

[Pg 149]

"What is it, granny? Are you ill?" she asked.

"No, I have bad news!"

"Bad news?"

"Yes; I've heard from my daughter, your mother, at last. She's dying down to Boston, and wants you and me to come," with an artful sob.

"But, of course, we cannot go!" Liane said, with strange reluctance.

"But, of course, we can. I've got a little money; enough for the trip. I've just been waiting for you to come and help me to pack our clothes."

"That will not take long. Our wardrobes are not extensive. But, I—I don't want to go!" declared Liane.

"You unnatural child, not to want to see your poor dying mother!" snapped the old woman.

"She has been an unnatural mother!" answered the girl warmly.

"No matter about that! She is my child, and I want to see her before she dies, and you've got to go, willy-nilly! So go along with you and get the tea ready; then we will get packed to go on the first train!" declared granny, with grim resolution.

CHAPTER XVI.

A LOVE LETTER.

[Pg 150]

Liane's little sewing chair was vacant the next day, and there was grief and surprise among the five girls present when Miss Bray explained the reason.

Liane had sent her a little note the night before, she said, telling her that her grandmother was taking her to Boston to see a dying relative, and she did not know when she should be back, but hoped Miss Bray would have work for her on her return. She left her dear love for all the girls, and hoped she should see them soon again.

Every one expressed sorrow but Dolly Dorr, who from spite and envy had suddenly changed from a friend to an enemy of Liane.

Dolly tossed her pretty, flaxen head scornfully and insinuated ugly things about Liane following Jesse Devereaux to Boston. A dying relative was a good excuse, but it could not fool Dolly Dorr, she said significantly.

The other girls took the part of the absent one, and even Miss Bray gently reproved Dolly for her slanderous words. The upshot of the matter was that she grew red and angry, and developed the rage of a little termagant. Taking offense at Miss Bray's rebuke, she angrily resigned her position, tossed her jaunty cap on her fluffy, yellow head, and flew home.

[Pg 151]

The ambition to captivate Jesse Devereaux had quite turned the silly little noddle, and she was passionately angry at Liane for what she denominated "her unfair rivalry."

But on reaching home and finding that her father had just been thrown out of work, Dolly was a little frustrated at her own precipitancy in leaving her place, especially as Mrs. Dorr, a weak, hard-worked woman, bewailed their misfortunes in copious tears.

"Don't cry like that, mamma, I know of a better place than Miss Bray's, where I can find work. Miss Clarke wants a maid," cried Dolly eagerly.

Mrs. Dorr's pride rebelled at first from her pretty daughter going into service like that, but the notion had quite taken hold of Dolly, and in the end the worried mother yielded to her persuasions, especially as the wages were liberal, and would help them so much in their present strait.

Dolly hurried off to Cliffdene, and asked for Miss Clarke, offering her services for the vacant place, as Liane Lester had gone away.

[Pg 152]

Roma's red-brown eyes flashed with joyful fire as she cried:

"Where has she gone?"

"Her grandmother took her to Boston to see a dying relative, miss."

"Ah!" exclaimed Roma, and her heart leaped with joy as she realized that granny had kept her promise to take Liane far away.

"Now I may have some chance of winning Jesse back again," she thought.

But Dolly's next words threw a damper on her springing hopes.

"Liane can't fool me with a tale of a dying relative! I believe she had an understanding with Jesse Devereaux to follow him down to Boston," she exclaimed spitefully.

Roma started violently, her rich color paling to ashen gray.

"Jesse Devereaux gone!" she cried, in uncontrollable agitation that betrayed her jealous heart to Dolly's keen eyes.

The girl thought shrewdly:

"She loves him even if he did tell me he was not engaged. Whew! won't she hate Liane when she knows all!"

[Pg 153]

And, taking advantage of Roma's mood, she added:

"Liane has been flirting for some time with Mr. Devereaux, and the night she got the beauty prize he sent her roses to wear, and voted for her, and offered to walk home with her that night, only he was disappointed, because Mr. Malcolm Dean had asked her first."

Roma, inwardly furious with jealous rage, tossed her proud head carelessly, and answered:

"Mr. Devereaux cares nothing for the girl! He is engaged to me, but we had a little tiff, and he was just flirting with her to pique me because I would not make up with him just yet!"

Although she regarded Dolly as greatly her inferior, she was placing herself on a level with her by these confidences, encouraging Dolly to reply:

"Of course, I know he wouldn't marry Liane, but she was foolish enough to think so, and I feel certain she's down to Boston with him now."

Roma knew better, but she only smiled significantly, giving Dolly the impression that she agreed with her entirely, and then she said:

"I will agree to give you a week's trial, and mamma's maid can instruct you as to your duties. When can you come?"

[Pg 154]

"To-morrow, if you wish."

"Very well. I shall expect you," returned Roma, abruptly ending the interview.

When Dolly was going back the next day, she stopped in at the post office for her mail, and the

smiling little clerk in the window, as he handed it out, exclaimed:

"Don't Miss Liane Lester work with you at Miss Bray's, Miss Dolly? There's a letter for her this morning, the first letter, I believe, that ever came for her, and now that I come to think about it, she never calls here for mail, anyhow!"

Dolly's cheeks flushed guiltily, and her heart gave a strangling thump of surprise, but she said, quite coolly:

"Yes, Liane works at Miss Bray's with me, and I'm going down there now, so I'll take her letter, if you please, and save her the trouble of calling for it."

The unsuspecting clerk readily handed it out, and Dolly clutched it with a trembling hand, hurrying out so as to read the superscription and gratify her curiosity.

"What a beautiful handwriting! A man's, too, and postmarked Boston. Now, it must be Devereaux or Dean writing to her!" she muttered, longing to open it, yet not quite daring to commit the crime. [Pg 155]

She placed it at last in her pocket, thinking curiously:

"As I don't know where Liane is, of course I cannot forward this letter to her, and—I would give anything in the world to know what is in it, and who wrote it! Perhaps Miss Clarke would know the writing."

That evening, when she was brushing out the long tresses of Roma's hair, she ventured on the subject:

"To-day the postmaster gave me a letter from Boston to Liane Lester, but I don't know where to send it, and I am wondering who wrote it!"

She felt Roma give a quick start as she cried:

"Let me see it!"

Dolly giggled, and brought it out of her pocket.

"Oh! It is Mr. Devereaux's writing," cried Roma excitedly.

"So I thought, miss. Now I wonder what he wrote to her about? I must be mistaken thinking he knew she had gone to Boston," cried Dolly.

Roma turned the letter over and over in her hand, her eyes blazing, her cheeks crimson, her heart throbbing with jealous rage. [Pg 156]

How dared he write to Liane? How dared he forget her, Roma, so insolently, and so soon? She would have liked to see them both stretched dead at her feet!

They looked guiltily at each other, the mistress and maid, one thought in either mind. Dare they open the letter?

Dolly twittered:

"I shouldn't think you would allow him to write to her! He belongs to you!"

She felt like making common cause with Roma against Liane, in her bitter envy forgetting how often she had inveighed against Roma's pride and cruelty. She continued artfully:

"The letter can never do her any good, because we don't know where to send it. And—and would it be any harm for us to take a peep at it?"

"I think I have a right," Roma answered, her bosom heaving stormily, then she clutched Dolly's arm:

"Girl, girl, if we do this thing—you and I—will you swear never to betray me?" she breathed hoarsely.

"I swear!" Dolly muttered fiercely, in her anger at Liane, and then Roma's impatience burst all bounds. She quickly broke the seal of the letter, her angry eyes running over the scented sheets, while Dolly coolly read it over her shoulder. [Pg 157]

And if ever two cruel hearts were punished for their curiosity, they were Roma's, the mistress, and Dolly's, the maid.

It was an impassioned love letter that Devereaux had written to Liane, and it ended with the offer of his hand, as she already possessed his heart.

The young lover had chosen the sweetest words and phrases to declare his passion, and he explained everything that she might have misunderstood.

He had fallen in love with her at first sight, but he was bound by a promise to one he no longer even admired. In honor he could not speak to Liane, but his betrothed had herself broken the fetters that bound him, and he was free now to woo his darling. He had intended to tell her so that night of the beauty contest, but Malcolm Dean had rivaled him. Then had come the summons to his sick father, tearing him away from Stonecliff. He must remain some time in Boston with his sinking father, and his impatience prompted this letter. Would Liane correspond with him? Would she be his beloved wife, the treasure of his heart and home? He should wait with burning impatience for her reply. [Pg 158]

Roma threw the letter on the floor and stamped on it with her angry foot.

Not in such tender, passionate phrases had he wooed her when she promised him her hand, but

in light, airy words, born of the flirtation through which she had successfully steered him to a proposal so quickly regretted, so gladly taken back. Oh, how she loved and hated him in a breath!

As for the girl, thank Heaven, granny had promised to keep her out of the way. Ay, even to kill her, if she commanded it. It was strange how the old woman had fallen so slavishly under her sway, but she was thankful for it, though she shuddered still with disgust at remembrance of granny's fond caress.

She said to herself that it were better for Liane Lester that she never had been born than to cross her path again, and to take from her the love of the man she had worked so hard to win, and then so rashly lost.

CHAPTER XVII.

[Pg 159]

A CRUEL FORGERY.

At the elegant family mansion on Boston's most aristocratic avenue, Jesse Devereaux, watching by the bedside of his sick father, waited with burning impatience for the answer to the letter in which he had poured out the overwhelming tenderness of his soul.

No shadow of doubt clouded his love, he felt so sure of Liane's love in return. Had it not trembled in her voice, gleamed in her eyes, and blushed on her cheeks?

Oh, they would be so happy together, he and his young bride, Liane! He would make up to her for all the poverty and sorrow of her past life. Life should be flower-strewn and love-sweet for her now.

Of course he expected some opposition from Lyde, his proud, fashionable sister, when she learned that he was off with his engagement to the heiress, Miss Clarke, and meant to wed a poor girl, who worked for her living. But he meant to stand firm, and when she saw how sweet and beautiful Liane was, she would be ready to excuse him and accept his darling for a sister.

[Pg 160]

In these rosy daydreams the hours flew, and on the second day after posting his letter he received a reply.

It gave him something of an unpleasant shock when he held the square blue envelope in his hand and read the ill-written address:

MISTER JESS DEVEROW,
No. — Comonwelt Avnoo,
Bostin,
Mass.

His cheek flushed, and he sighed.

"Poor girl, of course she has had no opportunities of education, but she can have private teachers, and soon remedy all that."

And he opened the letter with the eagerness of a lover, despite the slight damper on his spirits, caused by his love's bad chirography, united to even worse orthography.

His eager eyes traveled quickly over the small sheet with the awkward sentences of one little used to epistolary work.

STONECLIFF, the 17 Sept.

DEER MISTER DEVROW: Deer me, what a s'hpise your letter wuz! I thought you wuz jest flirtin' with me! I had heerd what a flirt you wuz, so I jest tryed my hand on you! They told me you wuz ingage to the beautiful Miss Clarke, and I thought what fun to cut her out!

[Pg 161]

But I didn't think I could do it. I didn' know as I was so pretty till I tuk the beauty prize that nite. Deer me, how glad I wuz of that money! I'm a grate heiress now, like Miss Clarke, ain't I?

I'm much obleedge fur your offer to marry, but I can't see my way clear to accept, being as I don't love you well enuff. I never did admire these dark men with sassy, black eyes and dark hair. I've heern tell they are as jealous as a turk. I make bold to say, I think Mr. Deen is the style I most admire—deep blue eyes and brown curls. He seems to have took a fancy to me, too, and if he should ast me the question you did, I know I could say yes. Forgive if this pains, but it's best to be frank, so you won't go on loving me in vane.

I'm grateful to you for your vote that helped to git me that hundred dollars! I'm goin' down to Bostin to see the sites, and buy me a red silk gown, I always wuz crazy for one!

Truly yours,
LIANE LESTER.

Devereaux sat like one dazed, going over and over the letter of rejection. He could hardly realize that Liane's little hand had penned those words.

No more cruel blow at a strong man's love and pride had ever been dealt than that letter, showing the writer to be possessed of so shallow a nature as to be incapable of appreciating the

treasure of a true heart's love, so ungratefully thrown away.

Jesse Devereaux thrust it away from him at last, and sat staring blankly before him with heavy eyes, like one contemplating the ruins of his dearest hope. [Pg 162]

It seemed to him as if he had just laid some dearly loved one in the grave. Hours and days of sorrow seemed to pass over him as he sat there brooding darkly over his fate.

Was it indeed but an hour ago he had felt so hopeful and glad, telling himself he had just found the sweetest joy of life in the dawn of love?

What foolish thoughts, what a misplaced love, what rash confidence in an innocent face and demure, pansy-blue eyes!

She had just been flirting with him because she heard he was a great flirt, and was engaged to Miss Clarke, and she wanted to see if she could "cut her out." It was all heartless vanity that he had taken for shy, bashful love. The ignorant little working girl had proved herself an adept in the art of flirtation.

It was a crushing blow, and his heart was very sore. He had loved her so, ever since the night they had first met, loved her with the passion of his life! Even now the memory of her sweetness would not down. He would be haunted forever by her voice, her glance, her smile, so alluring in their beauty, so false in true womanly worth and grace, will-o'-the-wisp lights, shining but to betray. [Pg 163]

And Malcolm Dean was his rival in the heart of the lovely, coquettish working girl! She admired his "deep-blue eyes and brown curls" as much as she disliked "sassy black eyes and dark hair." She would marry him if he asked her, she said. Jesse wondered cynically if Dean had been merely flirting, too, or would his love prompt him to elevate pretty Liane to the proud position of his bride.

Meanwhile, Liane, innocent as an angel, of course, of the letter that Roma had sent in her name, had duly arrived in the city.

Her grandmother had taken her to cheap lodgings that night, and, after they had been shown to a room, the old woman said abruptly:

"Now I'll go and inquire about my daughter."

Liane went to the window and looked out in awe at the lights of the great city, wondering how far away from this spot Jesse Devereaux could be to-night. Her young heart throbbed with joy at the thought of his nearness, for she had no realization of the extent of Boston.

While she was musing and wondering granny returned, saying crossly: [Pg 164]

"It seems I made a mistake in the address. She ain't here at all, but I'm tired, and not a step shall I stir from this to-night, so we'll go to bed, Liane, and I'll hunt her in the morning."

"But if she should die before morning, granny?"

"Let her die, then; I can't help it! Go to bed!" snarled the old woman, creeping into bed; so Liane, seeing the uselessness of remonstrance, followed her example.

The next morning, after breakfast, granny announced that she would leave Liane in care of the landlady, while she went out in search of the dying daughter.

"Let me go with you," pleaded the girl, with a vague hope of meeting Devereaux somewhere on the street, all her thought clinging to him with tender persistence.

"No, I won't have you along with me, but I'll come back for you as soon as I find her," snapped granny, so sharply that Liane gave in and watched her depart with keen regret.

"I should have liked to go with her to see some of the sights of the great city," she sighed, so forlornly that the landlady said cheerily: [Pg 165]

"Well, come in here and sit a while with my sick sister, and I'll hurry up my morning's work and go out with you myself this afternoon."

Lizzie White was a pretty shop girl, just recovering from a spell of fever, and she took an instant interest in the pretty new boarder.

"Sister Annie can show you all over the city," she said. "But," hesitatingly, "haven't you any other clothes to wear?" her glance falling deprecatingly on Liane's simple dark-blue print gown and summer straw hat. "It's time for fall things, you know," she added.

Liane blushed at the poverty of her attire, but answered gently:

"These are the best clothes I have, but I have a little money of my own, and if I knew where to go, I would buy a blue serge suit."

"Sister Annie can take you to a place this afternoon—the very store where I work when I am well," replied Lizzie encouragingly.

Afternoon came, but no granny yet, and Mrs. Brinkley offered to take Liane out, saying it was such a pity to stay indoors all day when the sun shone so bright and warm.

Liane accepted eagerly, and then her new friend, Lizzie, shyly proffered her a new fall suit of her own to wear. [Pg 166]

"Do wear it to please me, and because people will make remarks on your print gown," she said eagerly, and the girl, fearful that Mrs. Brinkley might be ashamed of her shabby attire, accepted

gratefully.

Her appearance was indeed quite different when clothed in Lizzie's brown cloth skirt, scarlet silk waist, and jaunty brown jacket, with a brown walking skirt to match.

CHAPTER XVIII.

[Pg 167]

LIANE'S FLEETING LOVE DREAM.

Liane was enchanted with the beautiful city, and Mrs. Brinkley, who felt a proud proprietorship in it, was delighted with her praises.

They went from one grand building to another, but the good woman soon noticed that Liane seemed best pleased walking along the crowded streets, and that instead of observing all that she pointed out, the girl's eyes wandered wistfully from one face to another, as if in search of some one.

"Are you looking for your grandmother?" she asked.

"Oh, no, ma'am," and Liane blushed like a rose.

"Then it must be your beau, you look so bashful. Have you got a beau in Boston?"

Liane shook her pretty head, but she looked so conscious that the woman plied her with curious questions, until the young girl owned that she knew one person in Boston, a young man, who had spent several weeks at Stonecliff. Then the curious matron did not rest until she had learned his name.

"Jesse Devereaux! Was he handsome as a picture, with big, rolling, black eyes? Yes? Why, my pretty dear, you must not set your heart on him. He is one of the young millionaires up on Commonwealth Avenue, the swellest young man in Boston. He would never stoop to a poor working girl."

[Pg 168]

She saw the beautiful color fade from the girl's rosy cheek, and her bosom heaved with emotion as she faltered:

"He was very kind to me at Stonecliff!"

Mrs. Brinkley knew the world so well that she took instant alarm, exclaiming warningly:

"Don't you set any store by his kindness, child. No good comes of rich young men showing attentions to pretty working girls. If you have followed him here through a fancy for his handsome face, then you had better go home to-night."

Eagerly, blushing, Liane disclaimed such a purpose, saying granny had brought her to see a relative.

"I—I only thought I might see his face in some of the crowded streets," she faltered.

"It is better for you never to see his face again, for it's plain to be seen he has stolen your heart," chided the widow. "Come, I'll show you his grand home, and then you may understand better how much he is above you, and how useless it is to hope to catch him."

[Pg 169]

Liane's cheeks burned at the chidings of the good woman, and tears leaped to her eyes, but she did not refuse the proffer of seeing Devereaux's home. She thought eagerly:

"I might see him at the window, or perhaps coming down the steps into the street. Then, if he should come and speak to me joyfully, as he did that night at the beauty contest, I believe even this good, anxious woman could see that he loves me."

She walked along happily by Mrs. Brinkley's side, carrying the jaunty brown jacket on her arm, as Lizzie had advised, for the sun's rays were warm, and she was weary from her sightseeing. The scarlet silk waist looked very gay, but if she had dreamed of the dreadful letter that had told Devereaux she was coming to Boston to buy a red silk gown, she would have torn it off and trampled it beneath her feet.

Her beautiful eyes sparkled with pleasure at sight of the splendid homes of Boston's wealthy class, and she could not help exclaiming:

"I am not envious, but I would like to be rich and live in one of these palaces."

[Pg 170]

"That you can never do, child, so don't think about it any more, as I tell Lizzie, when she gets to sighing for riches," rejoined the prudent matron. "Look, now, at that grand house we're coming to; Mr. Devereaux lives there with his old father and his young married sister, the proudest beauty in Boston. You see, I read all about them in the society columns, and—oh!"

She paused with a stifled shriek, for the great front door of the grand mansion had indeed opened, as Liane secretly prayed it would, and a man came down the steps—Jesse Devereaux himself!

Leaving Lyde beside his father's bed, he was going out for a walk to try to shake off the benumbing influences of the letter that had shattered his air castles into hopeless ruins.

It seemed to him as if his thoughts had taken bodily shape, as he beheld Liane there in reach of his hand, her timid, eager glance lifted almost appealingly to his face.

He hesitated, he almost stopped to speak to her, so thrilled was he by the sight of her lovely face again, but his eyes fell on the gay red silk waist, and the words of her letter recurred to his mind: [Pg 171]

"I'm coming down to Bostin to see the sites, and buy a red silk gown. I've always been crazy for one."

She was here, she had the red silk gown she craved, and idle curiosity had led her to pass his house, perhaps boasting to her companion, meanwhile, that she had flirted with the owner and refused his hand.

A deep crimson rose to his brow, and his heart almost stopped its beating with wounded love and pride. Just glancing at Liane with cold, indifferent eyes, he lifted his hat, bowed stiffly, and passed her by in scorn.

The girl, who had almost stopped to speak to him, gave a sigh that was almost a sob, and dropped her eyes, moving on by Mrs. Brinkley's side with a sinking heart.

"That was he, Jesse Devereaux himself," whispered the latter excitedly. "My, what a cold, haughty stare and bow; enough to freeze you. You see how 'tis, my dear? When city folks visit the country they're mighty gracious, but when country folks come to the city, they don't hardly recognize 'em."

Liane's pale smile at Mrs. Brinkley's observation was sadder than the wildest outburst of tears. [Pg 172]

"I see that you are right," she answered, with gentle humility that touched her new friend's heart, and made her exclaim:

"Don't never give him another thought, honey. He ain't worth it. You're sweet enough and pretty enough to marry the proudest in the land, but nothing don't count now but money."

They hurried home to the poor lodgings, so different from the splendid locality they had just left, and found granny just returned from her search and in rather a good humor from the day's outing.

She did not scold Liane for going out, as the girl expected, but said calmly:

"I was too late. I found Cora dead and the funeral just starting, so I went with it, and saw her laid away in her last home. Then I thought I had just as well finish the day looking over the things she left, but I wasn't any better off by it, for the people where she boarded took it all for debt."

She was lying straight along, but, of course, Liane did not know it, and she tried to feel a little sorrow for the unknown mother laid in her lonely grave to-day, but the emotion was very faint. She could not grieve much for one she had never seen, and of whom granny had given such a frankly bad report. [Pg 173]

Her first thought was that now she could go back to Stonecliff, away from the city that had held Jesse Devereaux, whose proud glance and chilling bow had stabbed her heart with such cruel pain.

But on making this request, the old woman scowled in disapproval.

"Back to Stonecliff? No, indeed!" she cried. "I hate the place, and I left it for good when we came away. You can get a place to work in Boston, and we will stay here."

"Yes, it will be easy to get in as a salesgirl at the store where I work. I'll recommend you," said the sick girl kindly.

Liane knew there was no appeal from granny's decision, and, after thanking Lizzie for the loan of her gown and hat, she returned to the shabby little room, longing to seek solitude in her grief.

But granny soon entered, carrying a bundle, and exclaiming:

"Mrs. Brinkley says you bought this dress to-day, and paid for it, too! Now, where'd the money come from, I'd like to know?" [Pg 174]

Liane had to confess the truth about the beauty contest, and, as soon as the old woman took it in, she cried furiously:

"And you dared to spend that money for finery, you vain hussy?"

"It was my own, granny," Liane answered.

"Where is the rest of it? Give me every penny that is left, before I beat you black and blue!" raged the old termagant.

"Granny, you promised never to beat me again if I would stay and work for you in your old age," reminded Liane.

"I don't care what I promised! Give me the rest of the money before I kill you!" hissed the savage creature, clutching Liane's arm so tight that she sobbed with pain.

"Let go, or I'll call for help!"

"Dare to do it, and I'll choke you before any one comes!" winding her skinny claws about the fair white throat.

Liane felt as if her last hour had come, and she was so unhappy she did not greatly care, but she struggled with the old harpy, and succeeded in throwing her off, while she said rebelliously:

"I will never give you the money while I live, and if you kill me to get it, it will do you no good. You will be hanged for my murder." [Pg 175]

Perhaps granny saw the force of this reasoning, for she desisted from her brutality, whining:

"I'm so poor, so miserably poor, that you ought to give me every penny you get."

"And dress in rags!" cried the girl indignantly. "No, granny, I will never do it again, and if you illtreat me any more, I will run away from you, and then you will starve."

She knew she would never have the heart to carry out her threat, but she had found out that she could intimidate the old woman by the threat of leaving, so she put on a bold air, and continued:

"Here is five dollars for a present, and it is all you will get of that money. I gave away twenty-five dollars in keepsakes to my girl friends before I left Stonecliff, and I have spent thirty dollars for some decent clothes to wear. Now, I have given you five dollars, and I have but forty left, and I shall keep that for myself, in case I have to run away from you and hide myself from your brutality."

Granny snatched eagerly at the money, muttering maledictions on the girl for her extravagance, but Liane, sitting with downcast eyes, pretended not to take any notice of her, until the old woman, glaring at her in wonder at the beauty that could win such a prize, demanded harshly:

"Was Miss Clarke's picture in that contest?"

When Liane answered in the affirmative, she was startled at the woman's anger.

"You dared to take that prize over beautiful Roma's head—you?" she cried furiously.

"I did not take it. The judges gave it to me. The contest was open to any pretty girl, rich or poor," Liane answered gently.

Granny looked as if she could spring upon the girl and rend her limb from limb, so bitter was her rage. She moved about the room, clinching her hands in fury, whispering maledictions to herself, but again Liane forgot to notice her, she was so absorbed in her own troubles.

She had dreamed a fleeting dream of love and bliss, and the awakening was cruel!

"I have been vain, foolish, to dream he loved me because he sent me a few roses and offered to walk home with me that night. He was only amusing himself," she thought, shrinking in pain from the cruel truth.

[Pg 176]

CHAPTER XIX.

[Pg 177]

WHAT DOLLY TOLD.

Seven weeks slipped uneventfully away.

The bright, cool days of October gave place to dreary, drizzly, bleak November.

Liane had become absorbed into Boston's great army of busy working girls. Lizzie White had secured her a position at a glove counter in the same store with herself, and granny had rented two cheap rooms in Mrs. Brinkley's house, and gone to housekeeping.

Her resentment against Liane continued unabated, and she never gave the girl a kind word, but she refrained from acts of violence, lest her meek slave should rebel and leave her alone, in her old age and poverty, to fight the battle of a useless existence.

Meanwhile Judge Devereaux had died and been buried with the pomp and ceremony befitting his wealth and position, and his son and daughter had inherited his millions.

Roma Clarke did not fail to send a letter of the sweetest sympathy to her former lover—a letter that in writing and expression was so far different from Liane's letter that he could not fail to note the difference.

"Poor Liane! What a pity her mind is not as cultured as her lovely face!" he thought, with a bitter pang.

Since the day of their meeting on the avenue, he had not seen Liane, and he supposed she had seen the sights of the city, bought some garish finery, and returned to the wretched hovel she called her home.

He despised her for her shallow coquetry, but he could not help pitying her poverty, and the wretched life with the old hag, from whose brutal violence he had once rescued her at the cost of a broken arm.

"How gladly I would have taken her from her wretched lot to a life of love and luxury, but she preferred Dean. I wonder if he has justified her hopes?" he thought bitterly.

He grew more and more curious on the subject after his father's burial, in the quiet that comes to a house of mourning, and he suddenly resolved to return to Stonecliff and find out for himself.

The little seaside town looked very gloomy in the downpour of a cold November rain, and the boom of the sea, lashed to fury in a storm, was disquieting to his nerves, but he sallied forth to the post office, and stood on the steps, watching to see Liane passing by on her way from work, as on the first day he had seen her lovely face.

How freshly it all came back to him, that day but two months ago, when he had followed her to restore her truant veil, and first looked into the luring blue eyes that had thrilled his heart with

[Pg 178]

[Pg 179]

passion.

What a mighty passion for the shallow coquette had been born in his heart at that meeting—passion followed by pain! Ah, how he wished now that he had never met her, that he had let the blue veil blow away on the heedless wind! The little acts of kindness had brought him a harvest of pain.

Even now, despite all, he was waiting and watching with painful yearning for another sight of her face.

But the moments waned, and she came not.

He saw the other work people of the town going home through the falling dusk. Four of Miss Bray's girls dropped in at the post office, flashing surprised glances at his handsome, familiar face, wondering at his return; then they went out again, and he thought that presently Liane and Dolly would be passing also.

[Pg 180]

But he was disappointed, and presently he realized that it was useless waiting longer.

"Dean must have married her and taken her off already, but it must have been a very quiet affair. I have seen nothing of his marriage in the papers," he thought with strange disquiet, as he came down the steps.

A handsome carriage, with prancing gray horses, in a silver-mounted harness, with liveried footman, suddenly drew up at the curbstone, and a brilliant face flushed on him from the window.

"Oh, Jesse, what a surprise! How do you do? Won't you look in our box and bring me out my mail?" cried Roma Clarke gushingly.

There was nothing for it but obedience. Jesse came out to her with two letters and a paper, and as she took them, she threw open the carriage door, urging sweetly:

"Come home with me, do, and see papa and mamma. They will be so glad to see you. Poor papa has been ill of a fever, and is just convalescing."

He was in a reckless mood. He accepted the invitation and went home with her, but she did not find him a very congenial companion. He ignored her coquettish attempts to return to their old footing.

[Pg 181]

"You hate me yet," she pouted.

"Not at all. I am glad to be your friend, if you will permit me," he replied courteously.

"Friend!" Roma cried, in an indescribable tone.

He ignored the reproach, and said calmly:

"Tell me all that has happened since I went back to Boston. Who are married and who are dead?"

"No one that you know," replied Roma, and she never guessed what a thrill of joy the words sent to his heart.

He was glad. He could not help it, that Malcolm Dean had not married Liane yet. He was yearning for news of her, yet he knew better than to ask Roma for it. He knew it would only make her angry and jealous.

While he was alone in the drawing room, Roma having gone to apprise her parents of his arrival, he was startled to see Dolly Dorr sidle in, dressed in a dark-gray gown, with a maid's white cap and apron.

He arose in surprise.

"Miss Dorr! Is it possible?"

Dolly colored and hung her head, muttering:

"You're surprised to see me here as Miss Clarke's maid."

[Pg 182]

"Yes," he replied frankly; then a sudden thought came to him, and he added: "And your pretty friend, Miss Lester? Is she at Cliffdene also?"

Dolly tossed her head scornfully.

"No, indeed, she is not here!"

"Where, then?" he asked eagerly, with a painful curiosity.

"Don't you know?" cried Dolly pertly, with her flaxen head on one side, like a bird, and he answered quickly:

"Of course not!"

Dolly smoothed down her white apron with her little hands, and, glancing at him sidewise with her bright blue eyes, returned indignantly:

"Then, if you don't know, I can tell you. I used to like Liane, but I despise her now. That beauty prize made a fool of the girl, and turned her so silly no one liked her any more. She spent all that money for gaudy clothes and cheap jewelry, trying to entrap that artist, Mr. Dean. She was crazy about him, and didn't mind everybody knowing it, either. So at last she went chasing off to some city after him, and I don't know what became of her then, and I don't care, for every one says she must have gone straight to the bad."

[Pg 183]

She studied his paling cheek with keen eyes for a moment, then added:

"But I almost forgot. Mr. Clarke sent me to show you up to his room."

Devereaux rose silently, and followed the pert maid upstairs.

It never occurred to Devereaux to doubt Dolly's story in the least. He believed her a simple, truthful, shallow little maiden devoid of guile.

The little actress had played her part well, and Roma, listening behind a curtain, was delighted with the skill of her pupil, so hastily schooled a moment before in her artful story.

With a heavy heart Devereaux followed the scheming maid upstairs to Mr. Clarke's apartment, where he met a joyful welcome.

"Ah, my boy, I have been ill for many weeks. It seems an age since we parted that night at the Beauty Show," he exclaimed, as he wrung Devereaux's hand, adding sadly: "The strangest thing of all is the disappearance of the successful contestant for the prize. She went away a day or two afterward, and no one has the least knowledge of her whereabouts."

This was confirmation of Dolly's artful story, and Devereaux felt a strange choking in his throat that kept him silent, while Mr. Clarke continued eagerly: [Pg 184]

"To tell the truth, I was deeply interested in the beautiful Miss Lester, and felt a hearty sympathy for her troubles. She led a sad existence with that wicked old grandmother, and I was on the point of asking her to come and stay at Cliffdene as my typewriter, just to give her a better home, you know, poor girl, when she disappeared so strangely, going away, some people insinuate, to lead a gayer life," sighing.

Devereaux knew quite well, from the letter he had received from her, that Liane could scarcely have filled the position of Mr. Clarke's typewriter, but he was too generous to say so. He swallowed the lump in his throat as best he could, and answered:

"I hope the insinuations are not true, but I cannot tell. I saw Miss Lester once in Boston. It was a few days after the contest, and she was walking past my home with a respectable-looking, middle-aged woman. I have never seen her since."

"So it was to Boston she went? I wish I could find the poor girl! I would try to interest my wife in her fate," exclaimed Mr. Clarke, but that lady, entering at the moment, overheard the words, and frowned angrily. [Pg 185]

"I will have nothing to do with the girl, and the interest you take in her is very displeasing to me," she said curtly.

Roma had worked busily, fostering jealousy in her mind until she almost hated the name of Liane Lester.

She shook hands with Devereaux, welcomed him cordially, and returned to the subject.

"Speaking of that girl," she said, "I feel that sympathy is wasted on such as Liane Lester. At one time Roma and I were both so moved with pity for her poverty that we offered her the position of Roma's maid, with a good salary and a comfortable home, but the old woman and the girl both refused, as if they had actually been insulted, though Dolly Dorr, who worked with Liane, was glad enough to apply for the position Liane refused, and fills it very acceptably to Roma. After that we took no further interest in the girl, and rumor says that her head was quite turned by vanity after getting the beauty prize, so that she and the old granny moved away from Stonecliff."

Mrs. Clarke had pitied and admired Liane until her rivalry with Roma, and the latter's specious tales had turned the scales against her, and made her jealous of her husband's interest in the lovely girl, so she said again, with flashing eyes and heightened color: [Pg 186]

"I do not approve of Mr. Clarke's strong interest in the girl, and would certainly never consent to receive her beneath the roof of Cliffdene."

She did not understand the strange glance of blended reproach and pity her husband bent upon her as he thought:

"My poor, deceived love, I cannot be angry with her, for she does not understand the painful interest I take in this Liane Lester, foreboding that she may possibly be our own child, doomed to poverty and woe, while her place in our homes and hearts is usurped by an upstart and an ingrate, without one lovable trait, but whom my poor wife feels compelled to blindly worship, believing her her own child! Ah, how unfortunate this illness that has prevented my tracing Nurse Jenks' history!"

CHAPTER XX.

[Pg 187]

"AS ONE ADMIRES A STATUE."

Happily unconscious of her father's unfavorable opinion, Roma entered and seated herself close to his chair, displaying an unwonted tenderness for him that deceived no one but Devereaux, for whose benefit it was designed. Both her parents knew that Roma was never affectionate, except to gain some end of her own.

On this occasion she was unwontedly sweet and gentle, with a new pensiveness in her manner more attractive to Devereaux than her usual brilliancy. She made no bids for his attention; she

seemed sadly resigned to her fate, as her downcast eyes and stifled sighs attested. It touched him, but he felt too sad at heart to console others, and he soon tore himself away, returning that night to Boston, wondering if it could be possible, that the same city had held Liane all this time that he had supposed her safe at Stonecliff.

He knew that Malcolm Dean was in Philadelphia, and had been there for some time, and he wondered if the artist's love for Liane had failed to realize her confident hopes.

"Poor little thing! I pity her, with her sweet love dream blighted!" he thought generously, as he awakened early the next morning, pursuing the same sad train of thought. [Pg 188]

A startling surprise awaited him after breakfast, where Lyde was sitting going over the new magazines.

Her dark eyes brightened suddenly, as she exclaimed:

"Upon my word, Jesse, the beautiful face on the outside cover of this magazine resembles perfectly the pretty girl from whom I buy my gloves!"

"Really!" he exclaimed, taking the magazine, and flushing and paling alternately, as he saw before him the cover that Dean had designed, with Liane's face for the central figure.

How beautiful it was? How beautiful! His heart leaped madly, then sank again in his breast.

"Do you think it can be accidental, or is it really her portrait? She is lovely, Jesse, with a natural, high-bred air, the darkest eyes, like purple pansies rimmed in jet, and the most beautiful chestnut hair, all touched with gleams of gold. I have woven quite a romance round her, fancying her some rich girl reduced to poverty."

His heart was beating with muffled throbs, his eyes flashed with eagerness, but he asked with seeming carelessness: [Pg 189]

"What is her name?"

He was not in the least surprised when she answered:

"Miss Lester, and the other girls call her Liane. It is a pretty name, and, oddly enough, I read it once in a novel. She must have been named from it; don't you think, Jesse?"

"Perhaps so."

He could hardly speak, he was so excited, and Lyde rambled on:

"We have fallen in love with each other, pretty Liane and I. She always hurries to meet me and show me her gloves. Her eyes smile at me so tenderly, as if she were really fond of me, and I almost believe she is, for when I allow her to try on my gloves for me, she has such a caressing way, I almost long to kiss her. But then, perhaps, she has the same manner with all, just to get trade," disappointedly.

Devereaux recalled the caressing touch of her lips on his hand that night by the sea; her pretty, bashful gratitude, and groaned within himself.

"Oh, my lost love, my false love!"

Aloud he said cynically:

[Pg 190]

"I thought you were too proud, Lyde, to notice a pretty salesgirl."

"Oh, Jesse, I like to be kind to them all, poor things! And they appreciate a kind word and smile more than you might think. And many of these girls are so very pretty, too, that really, if I were looking for beauty, I believe I should seek it among the working girls in our stores. This Liane Lester, too, is lovelier than all the rest, and her voice so soft and sweet that, really, I am sure she must be a reduced aristocrat."

He wondered if he dare tell her the truth about Liane, the story of his love. Smilingly he said:

"You will have me falling in love with your pretty glove girl."

"Oh, not for the world!" she cried, in dismay. "My dear Jesse, never think of loving and marrying out of your own set. One can admire beauty in a poor girl as one admires beauty in a statue, but, lifted above her station, my pretty Liane would not be half so admirable."

"Of course not," he replied cynically, and decided not to make her his confidante.

All the same, he determined to see for himself again the lovely face that had won Lyde's admiration. He knew where she bought her gloves, and that afternoon he was close by when the little army of salesgirls came pouring out into the street. [Pg 191]

By and by came two arm in arm, Lizzie White and Liane, and his eyes feasted again on the lovely face beneath the little blue hat, noting with gladness its purity of expression.

"They lied. She is pure and innocent still, in spite of pardonable vanity and girlish coquetry," he thought, with a subtle thrill of joy.

Then he saw Granny Jenks dart forward with a skinny, outstretched claw, whining:

"I came for your wages, Liane. I was afraid you might fool away the money before you got home."

"The old harpy!" he muttered, with irrepressible indignation, as he saw her clutch the money Liane had earned by her week's toil.

Then he drew back quickly, lest she should see him, a sudden resolve forming in his mind.

He would follow them, and find out where her home was, and if she deserved the cruel things they said of her at Stonecliff. He felt sure that she had been slandered, poor, pretty Liane, leading her simple, blameless life of toil and poverty.

He thought with pleasure of Mr. Clarke's interest in Liane, and promised himself to write to that gentleman all he could find out about her, little dreaming of the cruel consequences that would follow on the writing of the letter.

[Pg 192]

"Poor little girl, it is a shame that evil hearts should malign and traduce her, living her humble life of toil, poverty, and innocence!" Jesse Devereaux said to himself pityingly, on returning from following Liane to her humble abode.

He satisfied himself that her surroundings, though poor, were strictly respectable, and that she earned a meager living for herself and granny by patient, daily toil, and he had turned back to his own life of ease and luxury with a sore heart.

Keen sympathy and pity drove resentment from his mind, effacing all but divine tenderness.

He longed for an intensity that was almost pain to brighten her daily life, so weary, toilsome, and devoid of pleasure.

"Had she but loved me, beautiful, hapless Liane, how different her lot in life would have been!" he thought, picturing her as the queen of his splendid home, her graceful form clothed in rich attire, her white throat and her tiny little hands glittering with costly gems, while she leaned on his breast, happy as a queen, his loving bride.

[Pg 193]

He wondered what had become of Malcolm Dean, and why his ardent admiration of Liane had waned so soon.

Almost simultaneously with the thought the doorbell rang, and Malcolm Dean's card was presented to him.

"Show the gentleman in."

They stood facing each other, the handsome blond artist and the dark-haired millionaire, and the latter recalled with a silent pang that Liane preferred men with fair hair and blue eyes.

They shook hands cordially; then, as Dean sank into a chair, he noted that he had grown pale and thin.

"You have been ill?"

"Yes, for weeks, of a low fever that kept me in bed in Philadelphia, while my heart was far away. Can you guess where, Devereaux?"

"Perhaps at Stonecliff?"

"Then you have guessed at my passion for the beautiful prize winner."

"It was patent to all observers that night," Devereaux answered, in a strangled voice, with a fierce thumping of the heart. Oh, God, how cruel it was to discuss her with his fortunate rival, who had only to ask and have.

[Pg 194]

Dean noticed nothing unusual. He continued earnestly:

"I don't mind owning to the truth, Devereaux. Yes, I lost my heart irretrievably that night to lovely Liane Lester, and I made up my mind to overlook the difference in our position and woo her for my own. But I had to go to Philadelphia the next day, and I was detained there some time getting my design ready for the magazine, and this was followed by a spell of illness. At length, all impatience, I returned to Stonecliff two days ago to seek the fair girl who had charmed me so. Fancy my dismay when I found her gone, and no clue to her whereabouts!"

Again Devereaux's heart thumped furiously.

"You loved her very much?" he asked hoarsely.

"I adored her. She was to me the incarnation of simple beauty and purity."

"And had you any token of her preference in return?"

"None. She was too shy and bashful to give me the sign the coquette might have deemed befitting. She hid her heart beneath the drooping fringe of her dark, curling lashes. Yet I dared to hope, and there was one thing in my favor: I did not have a rival."

[Pg 195]

"You are mistaken!"

"How?"

"I was your rival!"

"You, Devereaux!"

They almost glared at each other, and Devereaux said hoarsely:

"I was in love with Miss Lester before you ever saw her face!"

"After all, that is not strange. Who could see her and not love her? But was your suit successful?"

"No."

"Rejected?"

Devereaux flushed, then answered frankly:

"Yes."

Malcolm Dean could not conceal his joyful surprise.

"I cannot comprehend her rejection of your suit. I should have thought you irresistible."

Devereaux struggled a moment with natural pride and selfishness, then answered:

"She preferred you."

"Me? How should you know?"

"By her own confession to me."

Malcolm Dean was frankly staggered by his friend's statement. His blue eyes gleamed with joy and his bosom heaved with pride. [Pg 196]

"You have made me very happy, but how very, very strange that she should have made such a confession to you," he cried, in wonder.

Again Devereaux had a short, sharp struggle with his better self and his natural jealousy of the more fortunate lover of Liane, then his pity for the girl triumphed over every selfish instinct, and he said:

"She was very frank with me—the frankness of innocence that saw no harm in the confidence. On the same principle I see no harm in confiding in you, Dean;" and he impulsively drew from his breast Liane's letter.

Had he dreamed of the fatal consequences, he would have withheld his eager hand.

There is love and love—love that has shallow roots and love that cannot be dragged up from its firm foundations.

"Read!" said Devereaux, generously placing in his rival's hand Liane's letter.

For himself he could have forgiven all her faults of innocence and ignorance could she but have returned his love.

It did not occur to his mind that the artist could be in any way different; that the ill spelling and the puerile mind evinced by the letter would inspire him with keen disgust. [Pg 197]

It only seemed to him that all these faults could be remedied by Liane by the influence of a true love. The glamour of a strong passion was upon him, blinding him to the truth that instantly became patent to Dean's mind.

The artist, reading the shallow effusion, flung it down in keen disgust.

"Heavens, what a disappointment! Such beauty and apparent sweetness united to shallowness and vanity!" he exclaimed.

"It calls forth your pity?" Devereaux said.

"It excites my scorn!" the artist replied hotly.

"Remember her misfortunes—her bringing up by that wretched old relative in want and ignorance. Surely the influence of love will work every desirable change in the fair girl who loves you so fondly," argued Devereaux.

Malcolm Dean was pacing the floor excitedly.

"You could not change the shallow nature indicated by that letter, if you loved her to distraction," he exclaimed. "Mark how she confesses to deliberate coquetry to win you from your betrothed; how cold-bloodedly she gloats over her triumph. Why, my love is dead in an instant, Devereaux, slain by this glimpse at Liane Lester's real nature. Thank fortune, I did not find her at Stonecliff yesterday. I shall never seek her now, for my eyes are opened by that heartless letter. Why are you staring at me so reproachfully, Devereaux? You have even more cause to despise than I have." [Pg 198]

"And yet I cannot do it; Heaven help me, I love her still!" groaned the other, bowing his pale face upon his hands.

"But, Devereaux; this is madness! She is not worth your love. Fling the poison from your heart as I do. Forget the light coquette. Return to your first love."

"Never!" he cried; but in all his pain he could not help an unconscious joy that Liane could yet be won.

He had not meant to turn Dean's heart against her, but the mischief was done now. Poor little girl! Would she hate him if she knew?

The old pitying tenderness surged over him again, and he longed to take her in his arms and shield her from all the assaults of the cruel world. Vain and shallow she might be; coquette she might be, yet she had stormed the citadel of his heart and held it still against all intruders. [Pg 199]

"I am going now," the artist cried; turning on him restlessly. "This is good-by for months, Devereaux. I think I shall join some friends of mine who are going to winter in Italy, to study art, you know. Wish you would come with us."

"I should like to, but my father is lately dead, you know, and Lieutenant Carrington, my sister's husband, is ordered to sea with his ship. I cannot leave Lyde alone, poor girl."

"Then good-by, and thank you for showing me that letter. What if I had married her in

ignorance?" with a shudder. "For Heaven's sake, Devereaux, be careful of getting into her toils again. Better go back to Miss Clarke, and make up your quarrel. Adieu," and with a hearty handclasp, he was gone, leaving his friend almost paralyzed with the remorseful thought:

"Would she ever forgive me if she guessed the harm I have done?"

CHAPTER XXI.

[Pg 200]

A HARVEST OF WOE.

Devereaux's thoughts clung persistently to Liane. He could not shut away from his mind her haunting image.

Pity blended with tenderness, as putting himself and his own disappointment aside, he gave himself up to thoughts of bettering her poverty-stricken life, so toilsome and lonely.

He took up his pen and wrote feelingly to Edmund Clarke, telling him how and where he had found Liane again, and of his full belief in her purity and innocence, despite the cruel slanders circulating in Stonecliff, the work, no doubt, he said, of some jealous, unscrupulous enemy.

He assured Mr. Clarke that he was ready to assist in any way he might suggest in bettering the fair young girl's hard lot in life.

The letter was immediately posted, and went on its fateful way to fall into jealous Roma's hands and work a harvest of woe.

Affairs at Cliffdene were already in a critical stage, and it wanted but this letter to fan the smoldering flames into devastating fury.

Mr. Clarke, impatient of his lingering convalescence, had taken a decisive step toward recovering his lost daughter.

[Pg 201]

He had written a letter summoning old Doctor Jay, of Brookline, on a visit, and he had explained it to his wife by pretending he wished to avail himself of the old man's medical skill.

Doctor Jay was the physician who had attended Mrs. Clarke when her daughter was born, and he received a warm welcome at Cliffdene, a guest whom all delighted to honor; all, at least, but Roma, who immediately conceived an unaccountable aversion to the old man, perhaps because his little hazel-gray eyes peered at her so curiously through his glasses beneath his bushy gray eyebrows.

There was something strange in his intent scrutiny, so coldly curious, instead of kindly, as she had a right to expect, and she said pettishly to her mother:

"I detest Doctor Jay. I hope he is not going to stay long."

"Oh, no, I suppose not, but I am very fond of Doctor Jay. He was very kind and sympathetic to me at a time of great suffering and trouble," Mrs. Clarke replied so warmly that she aroused Roma's curiosity.

[Pg 202]

"Tell me all about it," she exclaimed.

Mrs. Clarke had never been able to recall that time without suffering, but she impulsively told Roma the whole story, never dreamed of until now, of the loss of her infant and its mysterious restoration at the last moment, when her life was sinking away hopelessly into eternity.

Roma listened with startled attention, and she began to ask questions that her mother found impossible to answer.

"Who had stolen away the babe, and by what agency had it been restored?" demanded Roma.

Mrs. Clarke could not satisfy her curiosity. The subject was so painful her husband would never discuss it with her, she declared, adding that Roma must not think of it any more, either.

But, being in a reminiscent mood, she presently told Roma how she had been deceived in old Granny Jenks' identity, and how indignantly the old woman had denied the imputation of having been her nurse.

"I was so sure of her identity that her anger was quite embarrassing," she said.

Roma's thoughts returned to granny's affection for herself, and she felt sure the old woman had lied to her mother, though from what object she could not conceive. Her abject affection for herself seemed fully explained by the fact of her having been her nurse child.

[Pg 203]

But she was, somehow, ill at ease after hearing her mother's story, and longed eagerly to know more than she had already heard.

"I wonder if I dare question papa or the old doctor?" she thought when her mother had left her alone, resting easily in her furred dressing gown and slippers before a bright coal fire, while in the room beyond Dolly Dorr was getting her bath ready.

Roma was devoured by curiosity. She sat racking her brain for a pretext to intrude on her father and the old doctor, who were still in the library together, chatting over old times when the Clarkes had lived in Brookline.

A lucky thought came to her, and she murmured:

"I will pretend to have a headache, and ask Doctor Jay for something to ease it. Then I will stay a while chatting with them and making myself very agreeable until I can bring the subject around, and get the interesting fact of my abduction out of them."

[Pg 204]

Stealing noiselessly from the room, she glided downstairs like a shadow, pausing abruptly at the hall table, for there lay the evening's mail, just brought in by a servant from the village post office.

Roma turned over the letters and papers, finding none for any one but her father, but the superscription on one made her start with a stifled cry.

She recognized the elegant chirography of Jesse Devereaux on the back of one letter.

"Now, why is he writing to papa?" she wondered, eagerly turning the letter over and over in her burning hand, wild with curiosity that tempted her at last to slip the letter into her bosom.

Then, taking the rest of the mail in her hand, Roma went to the library, thinking that the delivery of the mail would furnish another plausible pretext for her intrusion.

There was a little anteroom just adjoining the library, and this she entered first to wait a moment till the fierce beating of her heart over Devereaux's letter should quiet down.

Her slippered feet made no sound on the thick velvet carpet, and, as she rested for a moment in a large armchair, she could hear the murmur of animated voices through the heavy portières that hung between her and the library.

[Pg 205]

Believing that the whole family had retired, and that they were safe from interruption, Doctor Jay and his host had returned to the tragedy of eighteen years before—the loss of the infant that had nearly cost the mother's life.

Roma caught her breath with a stifled gasp of self-congratulation, hoping now to hear the whole interesting story without moving from her chair.

In her hope she was not disappointed.

"I have never ceased to regret the substitution of that spurious infant in place of my own lovely child," sighed Mr. Clarke.

Roma gave a start of consternation, and almost betrayed herself by screaming out aloud, but she bit her lips in time, while her wildly throbbing heart seemed to sink like a stone in her breast.

Doctor Jay said questioningly:

"You have never been able to love your adopted daughter as your own?"

"Never, never!" groaned Edmund Clarke despairingly.

"And her mother?"

[Pg 206]

"She knows nothing, suspects nothing; for the one object of my life has been to keep her in ignorance of the truth that Roma is not her own child. She has an almost slavish devotion to the girl, but I think in her inmost heart she realizes Roma's lack of lovable qualities, though she is too loyal to her child to admit the truth even to me."

"It is strange, most strange, that no clue has ever been found that would lead to the discovery of your lost little one," mused the old doctor, and after a moment's silence the other answered:

"One thing I would like to know, and that is the family from which Roma sprang. It must have been low, judging frankly from the girl herself."

The listener clinched her hands till the blood oozed from the tender palms on hearing these words, and she would have liked to clutch the speaker's throat instead.

But she sat still, like one paralyzed, a deadly hatred tugging at her heartstrings, listening as one listens to the sentence of death, while Doctor Jay cleared his throat, and answered:

"I am sorry, most sorry, that your surmises are correct, but naturally one would not expect to find good blood in a foundling asylum, though when I sent Nurse Jenks for the child, I told her to get an infant of honest parentage, if she could."

[Pg 207]

"Then you know Roma's antecedents?" Mr. Clarke questioned anxiously.

"My dear friend, I wish that you would not press the subject."

"Answer me; I must know! The bitterest truth could not exceed my suspicions!" almost raved Mr. Clarke in his eagerness, and again the clinched hands of the listener tightened as if they were about his throat.

Hate, swift, terrible, murderous, had sprung to life, full grown in the angry girl's heart.

She heard the old doctor cough and sigh again, and a futile wish rose in her that he had dropped down dead before he ever came to Cliffdene.

Doctor Jay, all unconscious of her proximity and her charitable wishes, proceeded hesitatingly:

"Since you insist, I must own the truth. Nurse Jenks deceived me."

"How?" hoarsely.

"She never went near the foundling asylum. She had at her own home an infant, the child of a worthless daughter, who had run away previously to go on the stage. Leaving this child on her mother's hands, the actress again ran away, and the old grandmother palmed it off on you as a

[Pg 208]

foundling."

"My God! I see it all," groaned Edmund Clarke. "The old fiend exchanged infants, putting her grandchild in the place of my daughter, and raising her in poverty and wretchedness. I have seen my child with her, my beautiful daughter. Listen to my story," he cried, pouring out to the astonished old physician the whole moving story of Liane Lester.

CHAPTER XXII.

[Pg 209]

AT A FIEND'S MERCY.

Doctor Jay listened with breathless attention, and so did Roma.

Pale as a breathing statue, her great eyes dilated with dismay and horror, her heart beating heavily and slow, Roma crouched in her chair and listened to the awful words that told her who and what she was, the base-born child of Cora Jenks, and granddaughter of old granny, whose very name was a synonym for contempt in Stonecliff.

She, Roma, who despised poor people, who treated them no better than the dust beneath her well-shod feet, belonged to the common herd, and was usurping the place of beautiful Liane, whom she had despised for her lowly estate and hated for her beauty, but who had become first her rival in love and now in fortune.

To the day of her death beautiful, wicked Roma never forgot that bleak November night, that blasted all her pride and flung her down into the dust of humiliation and despair, her towering pride crushed, all the worst passions of her evil nature aroused into pernicious activity.

[Pg 210]

Still than chiseled marble, the stricken girl crouched there, listening, fearing to lose even a single word, though each one quivered like a dagger in her heart.

Her greatest enemy could not have wished her a keener punishment than this knowledge of her position in the Clarke household—an adopted daughter, secretly despised and only tolerated for the mother's sake, holding her place only until the real heiress should be discovered.

No words could paint her rage, her humiliation, her terrors of the future, that held a sword that might at any moment fall.

Oh, how she hated the world, and every one in it, and most of all Liane Lester, her guiltless rival.

While she listened, she wished the girl dead a hundred times, and all at once a throbbing memory came to her of the fierce words Granny Jenks had spoken in her rage against Liane.

"I would beat her; yes, I would kill her, before she should steal your grand lover from you darling!"

Roma could understand now the old hag's devotion to herself. It was the tie of their kinship asserting itself. She shuddered with disgust as she recalled the old woman's fulsome admiration and adoration, and how she had been willing to sell her very soul for one kiss from those fresh, rosy lips.

[Pg 211]

How eagerly she had said:

"I will scold Liane, and whip her, too. I will do anything to please you, beautiful lady!"

No wonder!

Roma was bitterly sorry now that she had not let granny kill Liane when she had been so anxious to do it. She felt that she had made a great mistake, for her position at Cliffdene would never be assured until Liane was dead.

Edmund Clarke was certain now that Liane was his own child, and he swore to Doctor Jay that he would find her soon, if it took the last dollar of his fortune.

The old doctor replied:

"I do not blame you, my friend, for it does, indeed, appear plausible that this Liane Lester must be your own lost child, and I can conceive how galling it must be to your pride to call Nurse Jenks' grandchild your daughter, while, as for your noble wife, it is cruel to think of the imposition practiced on her motherly love all these years. But it is certain that she must have died but for the terrible deception we had to practice."

[Pg 212]

Edmund Clarke knew that it was true. He remembered how she had been drifting from him out on the waves of the shoreless sea, and how the piping cry of the little infant had called her back to life and hope.

"Yes, it was a terrible necessity," he groaned, adding:

"And only think, dear doctor, how sad it is that Roma, with a devilish cunning, that must be a keen instinct, has always hated sweet Liane, and has succeeded in poisoning my wife's mind against her, arousing a mean jealousy in my uncomprehended interest in the girl! Think of such a sweet mother being set against her own sweet daughter!"

"It is horrible," assented Doctor Jay, and he continued:

"But this excitement is telling on your nerves, dear friend, weakened by your recent severe

illness. Let me persuade you to retire to bed, with a sedative now, and to-morrow we will further discuss your plan of employing a detective to trace Liane and the fiendish Nurse Jenks."

"I believe I will take your advice," Roma heard Edmund Clarke respond wearily, and Doctor Jay insisted on preparing a sedative, which he said should be mixed in a glass of water, half the dose to be taken on retiring, and the remainder in two hours, if the patient proved wakeful.

[Pg 213]

"I wish it was a dose of poison," Roma thought vindictively, as she hurried from the room and gained her own unperceived, where she found her maid waiting most impatiently to assist her in her bath.

"Never mind, Dolly, you can go to bed now. I went to mamma's room for a little chat, and we talked longer than I expected, so I will wait on myself this once," she said, with unwonted kindness in her eagerness to be alone; so Dolly curtsied and retired, though she said to herself:

"She is lying. She was not in her mother's room at all, for I went there to see, and Mrs. Clarke had retired. She must have been up to some mischief and don't want to be found out. She had a guilty look."

Meanwhile Roma flung herself into the easy-chair before the glowing fire, stretched out her slippered feet on the thick fur rug, and gave herself up to the bitterest reflections.

"There are four people who are terribly in my way, and whom I would like to see dead! They are Liane Lester, Granny Jenks, old Doctor Jay, and Edmund Clarke, the man I have heretofore regarded as my father," she muttered vindictively.

[Pg 214]

She knew that the two last named would know neither rest nor peace till they found Liane and reinstated her in her place at Cliffdene as daughter and heiress, ousting without remorse the usurper.

"Ah, if I only knew where to find her, granny would soon put her out of my way forever!" she thought, regretting bitterly now that she had not made the old hag keep her informed of her whereabouts.

The spirit of murder was rife in Roma's heart, and she longed to end the lives of all those who stood in her way.

"I wish that Edmund Clarke would die to-night! How easy it would be if some arsenic were dropped into his sedative—some of that solution I was taking a while ago to improve my complexion," she thought darkly, resolving to wait until all was quiet and herself attempt the hellish deed.

One death already lay on her conscience, and the form of the man she had remorselessly thrust over the bluff stalked grimly through her dreams. To her soul, already black with crime, what did the commission of other deeds of darkness matter?

[Pg 215]

The death of Edmund Clarke so quickly decreed, she began to plan that of the old doctor.

This was not so easy. He did not have a convenient glass of sedative ready by his bedside. But she had noticed at supper that he was fond of a glass of wine.

"I must poison a draught for him before he leaves Cliffdene," she thought, regretting that she could not accomplish it to-night.

But Edmund Clarke's speedy death would delay the search for Liane a while, even if it did not postpone it forever.

For the old physician was not likely to prosecute it after the death of his patron. He could have no interest in doing so, though she would make sure he did not by putting him out of the way if she could.

Her mind a chaos of evil thoughts, Roma rested in her chair, waiting till she thought every one must be asleep before she stole from the room to poison the draught for the man she had regarded until this hour as her own father, and to whose wealth she owed her luxurious life of eighteen years.

[Pg 216]

Neither pity nor gratitude warmed her cold heart. She had never loved him in her life, and she hated him now.

In her rage and despair she had forgotten Jesse Devereaux's letter to her father until, in a restless movement, she heard the rustle of paper in her corsage.

An evil gleam lightened in her eyes, and she drew the letter forth, muttering:

"Ah, this will beguile my weary waiting!"

In five minutes she was mistress of the contents.

It was the letter Devereaux had written to acquaint Edmund Clarke with Liane's address—the fateful letter that was to betray the girl into the hands of her bitterest foe.

Ah, the hellish gleam of wicked joy in the cruel red-brown eyes; the stormy heaving of Roma's breast as she realized her great good fortune; all her enemies in her power, at her mercy! The mercy the ravenous wolf shows to the helpless lamb!

She laughed low and long in her glee, and that laughter was an awful thing to hear.

[Pg 217]

"Oh, how can I wait till to-morrow?" she muttered. "Yet I cannot go to Boston to-night, nor to-morrow, if Edmund Clarke dies to-night. Shall I spare his life till I go to Boston, and have his

CHAPTER XXIII.

[Pg 218]

A MURDEROUS FURY.

Hours slipped away while the beautiful fiend, so young in years, so old in the conception of crime, crouched in her seat, waiting, musing, pondering on the best schemes for ridding herself of those who stood in her way.

She was eager as a wild beast to strike quickly and finish the awful work she had set herself to do.

It seemed to her that she might never have another such opportunity for ending Edmund Clarke's life as was offered to her by the conditions of the present moment.

It was most important to get rid of him, she knew, and the sooner the better for the safety of her position as heiress of the Clarke millions. Let him die first, and she could attend to the others afterward.

At the dark, gloomy hour of midnight, while the icy winds wailed around the house like a banshee, Roma went groping through the pitch-black corridors toward the room where Mr. Clarke lay sleeping with his gentle, loving wife by his side.

[Pg 219]

Like a sleek, beautiful panther the girl crept into the unlocked door, knowing the room so well that she could find her way to the bedside in the darkness, and put out her stealthy, murderous hand, with the bottle of poison in it, seeking for the glass that held the sleeping potion Doctor Jay had prescribed.

Her heart beat with evil exultation, for it seemed to her that her errand could scarcely fail of success. Edmund Clarke was sound asleep, she knew by his deep breathing, and she decided that, after pouring the poison into the glass, she would make enough noise in escaping from the room to arouse him fully, so that he would be sure to swallow the second dose ere sleeping again.

It was a clever plan, cleverly conceived, and in another moment it would be executed, and no earthly power could save the victim from untimely death.

But in her haste Roma made one fatal mistake.

In groping for the glass, she held the vial with the arsenic clasped in her hand.

And she was very nervous, her white hands trembling as they fluttered over the little medicine stand by the head of the bed.

[Pg 220]

That was why, the next moment, there came the sharp clink of glass against glass as her hands came in contact with what she sought, overturning and breaking both, with such a sharp, keen, crystalline tinkle that both the sleepers were aroused suddenly and quickly, and Mr. Clarke flung out his arms, clutching Roma ere she could escape, and demanding bewilderedly:

"What is the matter? Who is this?"

"Edmund! Edmund!" cried his equally startled wife, hastily lighting a night lamp close to her arm, in time to see Roma writhing and struggling in her father's arms.

"Roma!" he panted.

"Roma!" echoed his wife.

It was a situation to strike terror to the girl's guilty heart.

But in her scheming she had not failed to take into account any possible contretemps.

Failing in her efforts to escape before her identity was detected, Roma laughed aloud, hysterically:

"Dear papa, do not squeeze me so hard, please; you take away my breath! Why, you must take me for a burglar!"

[Pg 221]

Edmund Clarke, releasing her and not yet fully awake, stammered drowsily:

"Yes—I—took—you—for—a—burglar. What do you want, Roma?"

"Yes, what is the matter, my dear?" added Mrs. Clarke wonderingly, while Roma, mistress of the situation still, pressed her hand to her cheek, groaning hysterically:

"Oh, papa, mamma, forgive me for arousing you, but I am suffering so much with a wretched toothache, and I came to ask you for some medicine to ease it!"

"Poor dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Clarke, with immediate maternal sympathy, as she rose quickly from her bed and motioned Roma into her dressing room, searching for remedies within a little medicine case while she plied her with questions.

"When did it begin to ache, dear? Why didn't you send Dolly for the medicine? It will make you worse, coming along the cold corridors!"

"For goodness' sake, don't tease! Give me the medicine quick as you can!" Roma answered crossly, dropping into a chair and hiding her face in her hands, her whole form shaking with fury

[Pg 222]

at the failure of her scheme to kill Edmund Clarke.

A blind, terrible rage possessed her, and she would have liked to spring upon him and clutch his throat with murderous hands.

But she dare not give way to her murderous impulse; she must wait and try her luck again, for die he must, and that very soon.

She could only wreak her pent-up rage by cross answers to the gentle lady she called mother, and Mrs. Clarke, with a patient sigh of wounded feeling, turned to her, replying:

"I did not mean to tease you, Roma, but here is some medicine. Put five drops of it upon this bit of cotton and press it into the cavity of your tooth, and it will give you speedy relief. In the morning you must visit a dentist."

Roma lifted her pale face, and answered:

"Yes, I will visit a dentist, but not one at Stonecliff. I will go to Boston by the early train."

"I will go with you and do some shopping," said her mother, who had a very feminine love of finery.

"Very well," the girl answered, scowling behind her hand, for she preferred to go alone on her mission to Granny Jenks.

But she realized that it would not do to offend the only person who seemed to have any real fondness for her, so, making a wry face behind her hand, she went up to Mrs. Clarke, saying gently:

[Pg 223]

"I did not mean to be cross to you, dear mamma, but I am in such agony with this pain that I could not help my impatience. I want you to forgive me and try not to love me any less for my faults, please."

Mrs. Clarke could not help wondering what favor Roma was planning to ask for now, but she answered sweetly:

"I forgive you, dear, and, of course, I shall always love my daughter."

"But papa does not love me much. I often meet his glance fixed on me in cold disapproval, and at times he is very stern to me!" complained Roma.

"That must be your fancy, dear. He could not help loving you, his own daughter, dearly and fondly," soothed the lady, though she knew that she had herself noticed and complained of the same thing in her husband.

"You do not love Roma as I do," she had said to him, reproachfully, many times, getting always an evasive, unsatisfactory reply.

So she could not offer her much comfort on this score; she could only put her arm about the form of the arch traitress, murmuring kind, tender words, actually getting in return a loving caress that surprised her very much, it was so unusual.

[Pg 224]

But Roma for the first time in her life comprehended the necessity of fortifying her position by a staunch ally like her mother.

"I will go back to my room now. I must not keep you up any longer in the cold, dear, patient mamma," she cried gushingly, as she kissed her and left the room.

Mrs. Clarke was grateful for the caress, but she retired to bed with the firm conviction that it would take a very large check indeed to gratify Roma's desires in Boston to-morrow. Her affectionate spells were always very costly to her parents.

"Do you think I had better take the second dose of that sedative? I am very nervous from my sudden awakening, and wish we had locked the door on retiring," her husband said petulantly.

"It would be very unkind to lock the door on our own daughter. Roma was just now lamenting your sternness and lack of love and sympathy," returned the lady.

Edmund Clarke stifled an imprecation between his teeth, then demanded earnestly:

[Pg 225]

"Have I ever failed in love and sympathy to you, dear Elinor?"

"Never, my darling husband," she answered, fondly clasping his hand.

"And never will my love fail you, dearest; but I cannot say as much for Roma, whose nature is so unlike yours that I confess she repels instead of attracts me," he exclaimed, reaching out for the medicine and exclaiming impatiently on finding the glass broken and the draught lost.

Ah, how nearly it had been a fatal draught, had not Heaven interposed to save his life!

As he set it back on the table, he added:

"Why, here is a broken vial on the table beside the glass. I wonder how it came there!"

"I do not know; but it really does not matter, dear. There, now, shut your eyes, and try to sleep," advised his wife, knowing the importance of sound, healthful sleep to the convalescent.

But to her dismay he arose and turned the key in the lock, saying as he lay down again:

"I'll try to sleep now; but I'll make sure first of not being disturbed again."

A STRAND OF RUDDY HAIR.

At early daylight the next morning a servant tapped at Edmund Clarke's door with a message from Doctor Jay.

He found himself quite ill this morning, and must go home at once. Would Mr. Clarke grant him a few parting words?

Mr. Clarke was up and dressed. He had just said good-by to his wife and Roma, who had taken an early train to Boston.

He went at once to Doctor Jay's room, finding him seated by the window, looking ill and aged from a bad night.

"Good morning, my dear old friend. You look ill, and I fear you have not rested well."

"No; my night was troubled by ghastly dreams. I could scarcely wait till morning to bid you good-by."

"I am very sorry for this, for I had counted on a pleasant day with you. My wife and Roma are gone to Boston for the day, leaving their regrets for you, and kindly wishes to find you here on their return."

The doctor started with surprise, exclaiming:

[Pg 227]

"It must have been an unexpected trip."

Edmund Clarke then explained about Roma's midnight sufferings from toothache, necessitating a visit to her dentist.

"My wife would not have left me, but she felt sure I should not be lonely, having you for company," he added regretfully.

"My dear friend, I should like to remain with you, and, rather than disappoint you, I will wait until the late afternoon train; but—all my friendship for you could not tempt me to spend another night at Cliffdene!"

"You amaze me, doctor! This is very strange! Why do you look so pale and strange? Why did you spend so uncomfortable a night, when I tried to surround you with every comfort?"

"You did, my dear friend, and every luxury besides—even a key to my door, which I forgot to use," returned Doctor Jay, so significantly that Edmund Clarke reddened, exclaiming:

"It is not possible you have been robbed! I believe that all my servants are honest!"

He thought that the old physician must be losing his senses when he answered, with terrible gravity:

"Nevertheless, I was nearly robbed of my life last night!"

[Pg 228]

"Great heavens!"

Doctor Jay's brow was beaded with damp as he loosened his cravat and collar, and pointed to his bared neck.

Edmund Clarke leaned forward, and saw on the old man's throat some dark purple discolorations, like finger prints.

"Have you in your household any persons subject to vicious aberrations of mind?" demanded Doctor Jay.

"No one!" answered his startled host, and he was astounded when his guest replied:

"Nevertheless, a fiend in human form entered this room last night under cover of the darkness and attempted to murder me by vicious strangling!"

"Heavens! Is this so?"

"You have the evidence!" exclaimed the physician, pointing to his bared throat with the print of the strangler's fingers.

"This is most mysterious!" ejaculated Edmund Clarke, in wonder and distress, while the physician continued:

"Last night I retired and slept soundly until after midnight, when I was aroused by the horrible sensation of steely fingers gripping my throat with deadly force. Vainly gasping for my failing breath, I struggled with the intruder, who held on with a maniacal strength, panting with fury as I clutched in my arms a form that I immediately knew to be that of a woman, soft, warm, palpitating, though her strength was certainly equal to that of a man. We grappled in a terrible struggle, and I clutched my fingers in her long hair, causing her such pain that, with a stifled moan, she released my throat, struck me in the face, and fled before I could regain my senses, that deserted me at the critical moment."

[Pg 229]

"This is most mysterious, most shocking! No wonder you are anxious to leave Cliffdene, where you so nearly met your death. But this must be sifted to the bottom at once, and the lunatic identified, for it could be no other than a lunatic. I will have the whole household summoned. We will question every servant closely!" cried Clarke eagerly, turning to ring the bell.

But Doctor Jay stopped him, saying:

"Wait till I question you on the subject. Have you in your employ a woman with red hair?"

"What a question! But, no. My women servants are all gray-haired or black-haired, with one exception. That is Roma's maid, a pretty little blonde, with the palest flaxen curls." [Pg 230]

He looked inquiringly at the doctor, who replied:

"After my struggle was over and I was able to light a lamp, I found entangled in my fingers some threads of hair—beautiful long strands of ruddy hair, copperish red in the full light."

He took an envelope from his breast, and drew from it a ruddy strand of long hair, holding it up to the light of the window, where it shone with a rich copper tint.

"My God!" groaned Edmund Clarke.

"You recognize the hair?" cried Doctor Jay.

"It is Roma's hair!" was the anguished answer.

"I thought so!"

"You thought so! Is the girl, then, a lunatic, or a fiend? And what motive could she have to take your life—an old man, who has never harmed her in his blameless life?" cried the host, in consternation.

Edmund Clarke had never been confronted with such a terrible problem of crime in his life. His face paled to an ashen hue, and his eyes almost glared as he stared helplessly at his friend. [Pg 231]

"I have a theory!" cried Doctor Jay.

"What is it?"

"The girl must have overheard our conversation last night."

"Impossible!"

"Why?"

Mr. Clarke revolved the matter silently in his mind for a moment, then answered:

"Well, of course, not impossible, but quite improbable."

"Is there not a curtained alcove or anteroom next the library?"

"Yes; but why should the girl have suspected us—why concealed herself there to listen?"

"Heaven only knows, but it is possible that some accident brought her there—perhaps an errand of some kind—maybe to get medicine from me for her aching tooth. She caught a few words that aroused her curiosity, kept silence, and listened, overhearing the truth about herself."

"It must indeed have happened that way!"

"And the shock drove her mad," continued Doctor Jay. "Her resentment flamed against me for knowing so much of her low origin. In her first senseless fury she sought my life." [Pg 232]

"It is a terrible situation!" cried his friend, and both were silent for a moment, gazing at the lock of hair as if it had been a writhing serpent; then Clarke continued:

"It is a wonder the fiend incarnate did not seek my life also, thus removing from her path the two who were plotting to oust her from her position and reinstate the real heiress!"

But even as he spoke he remembered last night's accident when he had been aroused by the clink of breaking glass and found Roma in hysterics by his bedside.

He told Doctor Jay the whole story, adding:

"I could not imagine how the bottle came there. It was certainly not on the stand when I retired to bed, and when I read the label this morning, it ran: 'Poison—arsenic.'"

"I should like to see the bottle."

"Come with me," returned Mr. Clarke, leading the way to his room.

Fortunately the chambermaid had not disturbed anything yet, so the fragments of the bottle and glass were found upon the table.

"It is a fearfully strong solution of arsenic, and I fancy she intended to pour it into your sedative, so that in case you drank it you would be silenced forever," affirmed the doctor. [Pg 233]

They could only stare aghast at each other, feeling that Providence had surely preserved their lives last night.

"She was nervous in the dark, jostling the bottle against the glass, breaking both, and thus defeating her murderous game! The toothache was probably a clever feint to explain her presence in your room," continued the old doctor, who had a wonderful insight into men and motives, and seemed to read Roma like an open book.

A sudden terror seized on Mr. Clarke.

"She has taken my darling wife away with her! What if she means to murder her, too? I must follow them on the next train and separate them forever!" he cried frantically.

"I believe you are right, my friend."

After further thought and consultation, they decided that, although Roma and Mrs. Clarke must be immediately separated, it would not be prudent to reveal the truth to her yet, for the shock

would be sufficient to dethrone her reason. Therefore it would not be prudent to arrest Roma yet for her attempted crimes.

"We have just time enough for a hasty breakfast before catching the next train. Come!" cried Edmund Clarke, leading the way from the room. [Pg 234]

In the corridor they encountered Dolly Dorr mincing along, with her yellow head on one side like a pert canary; and her master, stopping her, exclaimed:

"Your mistress had a bad time with the toothache, I fear, last night, Dolly!"

Dolly, dropping a curtsy, answered slyly:

"Indeed she did, sir, and the medicine she got when she went after Doctor Jay didn't help her one bit, for she walked the floor groaning and sobbing all night."

They glared at her in amazement, while she continued, with pretended sympathy:

"She would not let me sit up with her, poor thing, but I was stealing back to her room to see if I could help her any when I met her flying out of Doctor Jay's room, and she said she had gone for a remedy for the toothache, and he burned her gums with iodine and almost set her crazy with the pain. Then she scolded me for being up so late, and sent me back to my room to stay."

She gave Doctor Jay a quizzical glance from her saucy blue eyes, but his face was entirely noncommittal as he replied: [Pg 235]

"I am very sorry I burned her so badly with the iodine, but I thought it would give the quickest relief."

"Well, she has gone to a dentist in Boston now, and he may soon help the pain," said Edmund Clarke, passing on, while Dolly Dorr muttered suspiciously:

"There were mysterious carryings on in this house last night, for sure!"

CHAPTER XXV.

[Pg 236]

A TRUE FRIEND.

Liane Lester, late that afternoon, when coming home from her work with her friend, Lizzie White, saw again the handsome face and dark, flashing eyes of Jesse Devereaux. He had believed himself unseen, but he was mistaken.

Some subtle instinct had turned Liane's timid glance straight to the spot where he was watching, unseen, as he believed.

The quick, passionate throb of her heart sent the blood bounding to her cheeks and made her hands tremble as they clasped the envelope with her slender weekly earnings.

But at the same instant Liane dropped the thick, curling fringe of her lashes quickly over her eyes, for in his alert glance she met no sign of recognition, and her heart sank heavily again as she remembered his cold, careless greeting the day she had passed his house with Mrs. Brinkley.

The good woman was right. He might have amused himself with her in the country, but he was indifferent to her in town. He would not even take the trouble to bow when they met by chance, as now. [Pg 237]

But Liane had the most loyal heart in the world, and she could never forget that night by the sea when Devereaux had saved her from the insulting caresses of the dark-browed stranger, and afterward from granny's blow, breaking his arm in her defense.

"How brave and noble he was that night! He was so handsome and adorable that my heart went out to him, never to be recalled, in spite of all that has happened since," she thought sadly.

With lowered lashes and a heart sinking heavily with its hopeless love and pain, Liane passed on with her friend, little dreaming that she was followed to her home by Devereaux, nor what dire consequences would follow on his learning her address.

She was restless that night, and he haunted her dreams persistently, and on the morrow she rose tired, and pale, and sad, almost wishing she had not met him again, to have all the old pain and regret revived within her breast.

The long day dragged away, and when she went home that evening she found awaiting her the Philadelphia magazine that had her beautiful face on the outside cover. Accompanying this was a batch of novels, together with a basket of fruit and a bunch of roses. [Pg 238]

"Hothouse roses and tropical fruit—you must have caught a rich beau, Liane!" cried Mrs. Brinkley, as she delivered the gifts.

"Oh, no; there must be some mistake," she answered quickly, but her heart throbbed as she remembered the meeting with Devereaux yesterday, and she wondered if he could possibly be the donor.

"Impossible!" she sighed to herself, as the woman continued:

"There cannot be any mistake, for there is the card, tied to the basket, with 'Miss Liane Lester, with kind wishes of a true friend,' written on it. They came by a neat messenger boy, who would

not answer a single question I asked him."

"A charming mystery! Oh, what magnificent roses for the last of November!" cried Lizzie, inhaling their fragrance with delight, while Liane handed around the basket, generously sharing the luscious fruit with her friends.

She was thinking all the while of the words Jesse Devereaux had said to her on the beach that never-to-be-forgotten night:

"I will be a true friend to you."

[Pg 239]

The card on the basket read the same: "A True Friend."

It was enough to send the tremulous color flying to Liane's cheek, while a new, faint hope throbbed at her heart.

Granny was out somewhere, or she would have got a scolding on suspicion of knowing the donor of the presents. She wisely kept the truth to herself, dividing the fruit with her friends, placing the books in her trunk, and the roses in a vase in Lizzie's room, though she longed very much to have them in her own.

That night her dreams were sweet and rose-colored.

She went to work with a blithe heart next morning, and, although it was the first day of December, and a light covering of snow lay on the roofs and pavements, she did not feel the biting wind pierce through her thin jacket; her pulse was bounding and her being in a glow because of the great scarlet rose pinned on her breast, seeming to shed a summer warmth and sweetness on the icy air—the warmth of hope and love.

All day her visions were rose-colored, and her thoughts hovered about Devereaux until she almost forgot where she was, and was recalled unpleasantly to reality by a proud, impatient voice exclaiming:

[Pg 240]

"I have spoken to you twice, and you have not heard me! Your thoughts must be very far away. Show me your best kid gloves—five and a half size!"

At the same moment a small hand had gently pressed her arm, sending an odd thrill through her whole frame, causing her to start and look up at a handsome, richly dressed woman, whose dark-blue eyes were fixed on her in surprise and dislike.

She knew the proud, cold face instantly. It belonged to a woman she had seen on Edmund Clarke's arm the night of the beauty contest. It was his wife, the mother of haughty Roma, and Liane comprehended instantly her glance of anger—it was because she had taken the prize over Roma's head.

Wounded and abashed by the lady's scorn, Liane attended to her wants in timid silence, only speaking when necessary, her cheeks flushed, her soft eyes downcast, her white hands fluttering nervously over the gloves.

Mrs. Clarke selected a box of gloves, paid for them, and said in a supercilious tone, quite different from her usual gentle manner:

[Pg 241]

"I will take the gloves with me. You may bring them out to my carriage on the opposite side of the street."

She was purposely humbling Liane, and the girl felt it intuitively. Her bosom heaved, and her blue eyes brimmed with dew, but she did not resent the proud command, only took up the box of gloves and followed her customer out of the store to the thickly crowded pavement and over the crossing, where a carriage waited in a throng of vehicles on the other side.

All at once something terrible happened.

Mrs. Clarke, keeping proudly in front of Liane, and not noticing closely enough her environment of vehicles and street cars, suddenly found herself right in the path of an electric car that in another moment would have crushed out her life had not two small hands reached out and hurled her swiftly aside.

Hundreds of eyes had seen the lady's imminent peril, and marked with kindling admiration the girl's heroic deed.

Without a selfish thought, though she was exposing herself to deadly danger, Liane bounded wildly upon the track and seized the dazed and immovable woman with frantic hands, dragging her by main force off the track of the car that, in the succeeding moment, whizzed by at its highest speed, just as the two, Liane and the rescued woman, fell to the ground outside the wheels.

[Pg 242]

Eager, sympathetic men bore them to the pavement, where it was found that Mrs. Clarke was in a swoon, so deathlike that it frightened Liane, who sobbed and wrung her hands.

"Oh, she is dead! The terrible shock has killed her! Can no one do anything to bring back her life? She must not die! She has a loving husband and a beautiful daughter, who would break their hearts over their terrible loss!"

"Who is she?" they asked the sobbing girl, and she answered:

"She is Mrs. Clarke, a wealthy lady of Stonecliff, and must be visiting in the city."

At that moment the lady's eyes fluttered open, she gazed with a dazed air on the curious faces that surrounded her, and murmured:

"Where am I? What has happened?"

There were not lacking a dozen voices to tell her everything, loud in praise of the lovely girl who had saved her life at the imminent risk of her own. [Pg 243]

"I—I did no more than my duty!" she sobbed, blushing crimson while they all gazed on her with the warmest admiration. There are so few who do their duty even in this cold, hard world, and one man exclaimed:

"It was not your duty to risk your life so nearly. Why, the car fender brushed your skirt as you fell. It was an act of the purest heroism!"

Mrs. Clarke pressed her hand to her brow bewilderingly, murmuring:

"I remember it all now! I stepped thoughtlessly on the track, and when I saw the car rushing down on me, I was so dazed with fear and horror I could not move or speak! No, though my very life depended on it, I could not move or speak! I could only stand like a statue, a breathing statue of horror, facing death! My feet were glued to the rail, my eyes stared before me in mute despair! Horrible anticipations thronged my mind! Suddenly I was caught by frantic hands and dragged aside! I realized I was saved, and consciousness fled."

At that moment the carriage driver, who had got down from his box and was waiting on the curb, advanced, and said anxiously: [Pg 244]

"Shall I take you back to the hotel, madam?"

"Yes, yes." She glanced around at Liane, and put out a yearning hand. "Come with me, dear girl. I—I am too ill to go alone. Let me lean on your strength."

Somehow Liane could not refuse the request. She felt a strange, sweet tenderness flooding her heart for the proud lady who, up to the present time, had used her so cruelly in unfair resentment.

She sent a message explaining her absence across to the store, and led Mrs. Clarke's faltering steps to the carriage.

"Oh, I dropped the box of gloves in my rush to drag you from the track! I must go back for them!" she cried, in dismay.

"No, miss, here they are. An honest man picked them up and handed them up on the box this instant," said the driver, producing the gloves.

"Oh, my dear girl, no need to think of gloves at a moment like this! How can I ever thank you and bless you enough for your noble heroism that saved my life!" cried Mrs. Clarke fervently.

She gazed in gratitude and admiration at the exquisite face that owed none of its charm to extraneous adornment. The wealth of sun-flecked, chestnut locks rippled back in rich waves from the pure white brow, the great purplish-blue eyes, the exquisite features, the dainty coloring of the skin; above all, the expression of innocence and sweetness pervading all, thrilled Mrs. Clarke's heart with such keen pleasure that she quite forgot it was this radiant beauty that had rivaled Roma in the contest for the prize. She said to herself that here was the loveliest and the bravest girl in the whole world. [Pg 245]

The carriage rattled along the busy streets, and Liane timidly disclaimed any need of praise; she had but tried to do her duty.

"Duty!" cried Mrs. Clarke, and somehow her cold, nervous hand stole into Liane's, and nestled there like a trembling bird, while she continued with keen self-reproach:

"You have returned good for evil in the most generous fashion. I was treating you in the most haughty and resentful manner, trying to sting your girlish pride and make you conscious of your inferiority. Did you understand my motive?"

"You were naturally a little vexed with me because I had carried off the prize for which your lovely daughter competed," Liane murmured bashfully. [Pg 246]

"Yes, and I was wickedly unjust. You deserved the prize. Roma, with all her gifts of birth and fortune, is not one-half so beautiful as you, Liane Lester, the poor girl," cried Mrs. Clarke warmly. "Do you know I am quite proud that my husband says you resemble me in my girlhood; but, to be frank, I am sure I was never half so pretty."

Liane blushed with delight at her kindness, and bashfully told her of her meeting on the beach with Mr. Clarke, when he had impulsively called her Elinor.

"He told me then that I greatly resembled his wife!" she added, gazing admiringly at the still handsome woman, and feeling proud in her heart to look like her, so strangely was her heart interested.

Mrs. Clarke could not help saying, so greatly were her feelings changed toward Liane:

"My husband admires you greatly; did you know it? He wishes to befriend you, making you an honored member of our household. I believe he would permit me to adopt you as a daughter, so strong will be his gratitude for your act of to-day." [Pg 247]

"Oh, madam!" faltered Liane, in grateful bewilderment, feeling that she could be very happy with these kind people, only for proud, willful Roma, and she added:

"Your handsome daughter would not want me as a sister!"

Mrs. Clarke hesitated, then answered reassuringly:

"Oh, yes, yes, when she learns how you saved my life to-day, Roma cannot help but love you dearly!"

The carriage stopped in front of a grand hotel, and she added:

"I want you to come in and stay all day with me, Liane, dear. I am too nervous to be left alone, and Roma has gone to a dentist and will not be back until late afternoon."

Liane went with her new friend into the grand hotel, and they spent a happy day together, the tie of blood, undreamed of by either, strongly asserting itself.

Mrs. Clarke found Liane a charming and congenial companion, as different from selfish, hateful Roma as daylight from darkness. [Pg 248]

In spite of her loyalty, she could not help contrasting them in her mind, so greatly to Roma's disadvantage that she murmured to herself:

"I would give half my fortune if Roma were like this charming girl!"

She lay on the sofa and talked, while Liane stroked her aching temples with cool, magnetic fingers, so enchanting Mrs. Clarke that she caught them once and pressed them to her lips.

"I love you, dear, you are so sweet and noble. Bend down your head, let me kiss you for saving my life!" and Liane's dewy lips gave the longed-for caress so fervently that it thrilled the lady's heart with keen pleasure. How cold and reluctant Roma's lips were, even in her warmest, most deceitful moods.

But ere the day was far advanced Edmund Clarke suddenly burst in upon them, pale with anxiety lest wicked Roma had already harmed his gentle wife.

He was astonished when he found her in company with Liane Lester.

Explanations followed, and surprise was succeeded by delight.

He was so sure that Liane was his own daughter that he longed to clasp her in his arms, kiss her sweet, rosy lips, and claim her for his own. [Pg 249]

But he did not dare risk the shock to his delicate, nervous wife.

"I must wait a little, till I can get proof to back up my assertion," he decided, so his greeting to Liane, though grateful and friendly, was repressed in its ardor, while he thought gladly:

"Thank Heaven! She has won her way, unaided, to her mother's heart, and that makes everything easier. I shall not have to encounter her opposition in ousting Roma from the place so long wrongfully occupied."

"Do you know what I am thinking of, Edmund, dear?" said his wife. "I wish to adopt Liane for a daughter."

He started with surprise and pleasure, his fine eyes beaming:

"A happy idea!" he exclaimed; "but do you think Roma would care for a sister?"

She hesitated a moment, then answered:

"Frankly, I do not, but I have fallen so deeply in love with this dear girl, and she seems already so necessary to my happiness, that Roma must yield to my will in the matter."

At this moment Liane arose, saying sweetly: [Pg 250]

"I am your debtor for a charming day, Mrs. Clarke, but it is time for me to go now, or my grandmother will be uneasy about me."

"Then you must promise me to come here again to-morrow morning; for I shall never let you work for a living again. Edmund, you must send her home in the carriage," cried Mrs. Clarke, kissing her charming guest farewell.

CHAPTER XXVI.

[Pg 251]

TREMBLING HOPES.

Mrs. Brinkley was amazed to see Liane coming home in an elegant carriage, and when she entered she could not help exclaiming:

"Really, my dear, I shall believe presently that you and Mistress Jenks must be rich folks in disguise! Here was your granny receiving a visit from a grand young lady in a carriage this morning, and now you coming home in another one, just when I was expecting you and Lizzie to come trudging home, afoot, from work. It's rather strange, I think, and, coupled with your gifts yesterday, it looks like you were fooling with some rich young man that means nothing but trifling, though I hope for your own sake it ain't so!"

There was a sharp note of suspicion in her voice, but Liane, inured to harshness, dared not resent it, only shrank sensitively, as from a blow, and meekly explained the happenings of the day, giving the bare facts only, but withholding the promises Mrs. Clarke had made, too incredulous of good fortune coming to her to make any boast.

Mrs. Brinkley flushed, and exclaimed:

[Pg 252]

"That was a brave thing you did, my dear, and I want you to excuse me if I hurt your feelings just now. I spoke for your own good, wishing to be as careful over your welfare as I am over my own sister Lizzie's!"

"I understand, and I thank you!" the young girl answered sweetly, emboldening Mrs. Brinkley to ask curiously:

"Did the rich lady whose life you saved give you any reward?"

"She asked me very particularly to return to the hotel to-morrow, and intimated that I should not have to work for my living any more!"

"Then your fortune's made, my dear girl. Let me congratulate you," cried Mrs. Brinkley. "I've news for you, too. I was lucky enough to secure two new boarders for my two empty rooms this morning."

Liane feigned a polite interest, and she added:

"One was a man, a language teacher in a boarding school. I didn't like his looks much. He is dark and Spanish looking, but he paid my price in advance, so that reconciled me to his scowling brow and black whiskers. The other is a seamstress, very neat and ladylike, and I believe I shall find her real pleasant. Her name is Sophie Nutter, and his is Carlos Cisneros."

[Pg 253]

Liane's eyes brightened as she exclaimed:

"There used to be a lady's maid at Cliffdene named Sophie Nutter. I wonder if it can be the same?"

"You might make a little call on her and see. Her room is next yours, and your granny has gone out to buy some baked beans for her supper."

Liane was glad that granny had not seen her come home in the carriage, she hated having to explain everything to the ill-natured old crone, and she started to go upstairs, but looked back to ask:

"Who was granny's caller?"

"I don't know. She was in such a bad temper when she went away, I didn't dare ask. The young lady was all in silk and fur, with a thick veil over her face, but some locks of hair peeped out at the back of her neck, and they were thick and red as copper. She stayed upstairs with granny as much as an hour, and when she left the old woman seemed to be perfectly devilish in her temper. Seems to me I'd be afraid to live with her if I was you, Liane!"

"So I am, Mrs. Brinkley, but she is old and poor, and it would be wicked for me to desert her, you know!"

[Pg 254]

"I wonder what God leaves such as her in the world for to torment good people, while He takes away good, useful ones, that can ill be spared!" soliloquized the landlady; but Liane sighed without replying, and, running upstairs, tapped lightly on the new boarder's door.

It opened quickly, and there were mutual exclamations of surprise and pleasure. It was, indeed, the Sophie Nutter of Cliffdene.

"Do come in my room and sit down, Miss Lester. I'm so proud to see you again!" cried the former maid.

Liane accepted the invitation, and they spent half an hour exchanging confidences.

"I saw in a Stonecliff paper that you got the prize for beauty, and no wonder! You are fairer than a flower, my dear young lady! But, my goodness, how mad Miss Roma must have been! By the way, I saw her getting out of a carriage here to-day, and she was closeted with your granny an hour in close conversation. Does she visit you often?"

"She has never been here before. I cannot imagine why she came, but I dare not ask granny unless she volunteers some information," confessed Liane, as she started up, exclaiming: "I hear her coming in now, so I will go and help her make the tea!"

[Pg 255]

"Bless you, my sweet young lady, you deserve a better fate than living with that cross old hag!" exclaimed Sophie Nutter impulsively.

She was surprised when Liane turned back to her and said with a sudden ripple of girlish laughter:

"Sophie, suppose my lot should change? Suppose Mrs. Clarke should do something grand for me in return for saving her life to-day? Suppose I were rich and grand, which it isn't likely I shall ever be! Could I employ you for my maid?"

"Yes, indeed, my dear Miss Lester, and I should be proud, and grateful for the chance to serve such a sweet, kind mistress!" cried Sophie earnestly.

"Thank you, and please consider yourself engaged, if the improbable happens!" laughed Liane, in girlish mockery, as she hurried out, meeting in the hall a dark-browed stranger, from whom she started back in dismay as he passed scowlingly to his room.

It was no wonder Liane recoiled in fear and dislike from Carlos Cisneros, the new boarder.

[Pg 256]

The sight of his somber, scowling face, with its dark beard, recalled to her that night upon the beach when Devereaux had saved her from a ruffian's insults.

For it was the selfsame face that had scowled upon her in the moonlight that night. It had terrified her too much ever to be forgotten.

He had evidently recognized her, too, from his start of surprise, and the angry bow with which he passed her by.

Trembling with the surprise of the unpleasant encounter, Liane hastened to seclude herself within her own rooms.

Granny Jenks had just entered, and she was still in the vilest of humors, glaring murderously at Liane, without uttering a word, and giving vent to her temper by banging and slamming everything within her reach.

Liane, gentle, sorrowful, patient, her young heart full of the happenings of the day, and tremulous hopes for the morrow, moved softly about, laying the cloth for tea on the small table, and helping as much as the snapping, snarling old woman would permit.

The sight of her humility and patience ought to have melted the hardest heart, but Granny Jenks was implacable. She only saw in the lovely creature a rival to Roma, and an impediment that must be swept from her path. [Pg 257]

Most exciting had been the interview that day between granny and her real granddaughter, and they had mutually agreed that Liane's continued life was a menace not to be borne longer. The beautiful, injured girl must die to insure Roma's continuance in her position.

When Roma left the house a devilish plot had been laid, whose barest details almost had been worked out, and the beautiful schemer's heart throbbed with triumph as she swept out to her carriage.

She had not noticed, on entering the house, a dark, scowling face at the parlor window, neither did she guess that, while she was with granny, the new boarder went out and slipped into the carriage, unobserved by the driver, calmly remaining there and awaiting her return.

When she entered the carriage and seated herself, looking up the next moment to find herself opposite Carlos Cisneros, she opened her lips to shriek aloud, but his hand closed firmly over her lips, and his hoarse voice muttered in her ear: [Pg 258]

"Scream, and your wicked life shall end with a bullet in your heart, adventuress, false wife, murderess!"

The driver, unaware of his double fare, whipped up his horses and drove on, while the strange pair glared fiercely at each other, the man hissing savagely:

"I don't know how I keep my hands from your fair white throat, murderess, unless I am lenient because I remember burning kisses you once gave me before your false nature turned from me, and you fled from the school, where you had wedded the poor language teacher secretly while I lay ill of a fever. Cruel heart, to desert me while I was supposed to be dying!"

"A pity you had not died!" she muttered viciously between her red lips, and he snarled:

"It is not your fault that I am living! When I found you, after long, weary search, at Cliffdene, that night, and you toppled me so madly over the cliff, I am sure you meant to kill me!"

"Yes, I cannot see how I failed!" she muttered.

"If you wish to know, the explanation is easy. I was picked up more dead than alive by a passing yacht, and carried to the nearest town, where I spent weary months in a hospital from the blow I had received on my head in falling over the bluff. I have but lately recovered, and came here and found a position to teach in a school." [Pg 259]

"You had wisely concluded to give up your pursuit of me?" she sneered.

"Yes, discouraged by the warm reception I got from you at Cliffdene; but, fate having thrown you across my path again, I believe I ought to make capital of it. You are my wife secretly, and you tried to murder me. Both are dangerous secrets. Perhaps you would pay me well to keep them?"

"I suppose that I must do so?" Roma answered, after a moment's hesitancy, with bitter chagrin.

"Very well. I will take what money you have about you now, and I must know what terms you will make for my silence. A liberal allowance monthly would suit me best."

Roma emptied her purse into his hands, saying:

"If we agree upon terms of silence, will you promise never to molest me again? Not even if I marry another man!"

"I promise! And I pity the fellow who gets you, if you treat him as you did me!" [Pg 260]

"The less you say on that subject the better! Do not forget that you persuaded an innocent schoolgirl into a secret marriage, that she was bound to repent when she came to her sober senses," she cried bitterly. "But there, it is too late now for recriminations. I hoped you were dead, but, since you are not, I wish only to be rid of you!"

"You can buy my silence!" replied Carlos Cisneros, so calmly that she congratulated herself, thinking:

"He is not going to be dangerous, after all."

Aloud, she said:

"I will arrange to send you a monthly allowance of fifty dollars, the best I can do for you! Will that

satisfy your greed?"

"It is very little, but I will accept it," he replied sullenly.

"Very well; now leave me, if you can do so without attracting the driver's attention. I shall be leaving the carriage at the next corner," she said, and he obeyed her, springing lightly to the ground, and disappearing.

"He was not very violent, thank goodness!" sighed Roma, believing that as long as she paid him he would not betray her dangerous secrets; but bitterly chagrined that he was not dead, as she had believed so long. [Pg 261]

"Perhaps I can compass that later!" she thought darkly, as she gave the order to the driver for Commonwealth Avenue.

She had determined to call on Lyde Carrington, with whom she had a society acquaintance, in the hope of seeing Jesse Devereaux again.

Mrs. Carrington received her with graceful cordiality, and Roma proceeded to make herself irresistible, in the hope of getting an invitation to remain a few days.

"I shall have to remain in Boston several days to have my teeth treated by a dentist, but mamma is compelled to return to Cliffdene to-night. I think of sending for my maid to cheer my loneliness," she said.

"Come and stay with me," cried Lyde, falling into the trap.

She knew that Jesse had been engaged to the dashing heiress, and amiably thought that their near proximity to each other might effect a reconciliation.

She had a shrewd suspicion of Roma's object in coming; but she did not disapprove of it; she was so anxious to see him married to the proper person, a rich girl in their own set. She knew he was romantic at heart, and secretly feared he might make a mésalliance. [Pg 262]

But even while she was thinking these thoughts she remembered Liane, and said to herself:

"If my pretty glove girl were rich and well-born, I should choose her above all others as a bride for my handsome brother!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

[Pg 263]

WHEN HAPPINESS SEEMED NEAR!

Granny Jenks, after great bustling about and clattering of dishes, sat down at last to copious draughts of strong tea, flavored with whisky.

"Oh, granny, aren't you taking a drop too much?" ventured Liane apprehensively.

"Mind your own business, girl. I'll take as much as I choose! Ay, and pour some down your throat, too, if you don't look out!"

Liane drank her tea in silence, while the old woman went on angrily:

"I want that forty dollars you kept back from me, girl, and I mean to have it, too, or give you a beating!"

This was a frequent threat, so Liane did not pay much heed, she only gazed fixedly at the old hag, and said:

"Granny, suppose I were to go away and leave you forever, do you think you could be happy without me?"

"Humph! And why not, pray?"

Liane sighed, and answered:

"I was just thinking how I have been your slave, beaten and cuffed like a dog for eighteen years, and I was wondering if in all that time, when I have been so patient and you so cruel, if you had in your heart one spark of love for your miserable grandchild!" [Pg 264]

"Eh?" cried granny, staring at her fixedly, while Liane continued:

"Ever since I could toddle I have labored at your bidding, fetching and carrying, with nothing, but scoldings and beatings in return, and not a gleam of sunshine in my poor life. You have not shown me either mercy or pity; you have made my whole life as wretched as possible, and I have sometimes wondered why Heaven has permitted my sufferings to continue so long. Now, I have a strange feeling, as if somehow it was all coming to an end, and I wonder if you will miss me, and regret your unnatural conduct, when I am gone out of your life forever?"

She spoke with such sweet, grave seriousness that the old woman regarded her earnestly, noting, as she had never closely done before, the beauty and sweetness of the young eyes turned upon her with such pathetic solemnity.

"Maybe you mean to run away with some rascal, like your mother!" she sneered at length.

"I was not thinking of any man, or of running away, granny; only, it seems to me, there's a change coming into my life, and I am going out of yours forever!" [Pg 265]

"Do you mean you're going to die?"

"No, granny, I mean that I shall be happy, after all these wretched years; that my starved heart will be fed on love and kindness, and I want to tell you now that if Heaven grants me the blessings I look for, I shall leave you that forty dollars as a gift, for then I shall not need it," returned Liane solemnly.

"Better give it here, now; you might forget when your luck comes to you. And—and, you ain't never going to need it after to-night, anyway!" returned granny, with a ghastly grin.

"No, I prefer to wait till to-morrow!" the young girl answered, with a sudden start of fear, for the glare the old woman fixed on her was positively murderous.

She got up, thinking she would go down and see if Lizzie had returned from her work yet; but granny sprang from her chair and adroitly turned the key in the lock, standing with her back against the door.

Liane's eyes flashed with impatience.

"Let me out, granny!" she cried. "This is not fair!"

[Pg 266]

"Give me that money!" grumbled the hag, with the tone and look of a wild beast.

"I—I—Mrs. Brinkley put it in a savings bank for me!" faltered Liane, bracing herself for defense, for her startled eyes suddenly saw murder in the old woman's face.

She felt all at once as if she would have given worlds to be outside that locked door, away from the deadly peril that menaced her in the beastly eyes of half-drunken granny.

She was not a coward. Yesterday she had faced death bravely for Mrs. Clarke's sake, and would have given her life freely for another's; but this was different.

To be murdered by the old hag who had blasted all her young life, just as her hopes of happiness seemed about to be realized, oh, it was horrible! Unrelenting fate seemed to pursue her to the last.

She drew back with a gasping cry, for the old woman was upon her with the growl of a wild beast and the well-remembered spring of many a former combat, when the weak went down before the strong.

Liane, who had always been too gentle to strike back before, now realized that she must fight for her life. Granny intended to kill her this time, she felt instinctively, and silently prayed Heaven's aid.

[Pg 267]

She opened her lips to shriek and alarm the household, but granny's skinny claw closed over her mouth before she could utter a sound, and then a most unequal struggle ensued.

Liane was no match for the old tigress, who scratched, and bit, and tore with fury, finally snatching up a club that she had provided for the occasion, and striking the girl on her head, so that she went down like a log to the floor.

Granny Jenks snarled like a hyena, and stooped down over her mutilated victim.

She lay white and breathless on the floor, her pallid face marked with blood stains, not a breath stirring her young bosom, and the fiend growled viciously:

"Dead as a doornail, and out of my pretty Roma's way forever!"

Suddenly there came the loud shuffling of feet in the hall, and the pounding of eager fists on the locked door.

Granny Jenks started in wild alarm. She realized that the sounds of her struggle had been heard, and regretted her precipitate onslaught on Liane.

[Pg 268]

"I should have waited till they were all asleep; but that whisky fired my blood too soon!" she muttered, as, paying no heed to the outside clamor, she dragged the limp body of her lovely victim to the inner room, throwing it on the bed and drawing the covers over it, leaving a part of her face exposed in a natural way, as if she were asleep.

She was running a terrible risk of detection but nothing but bravado could save her now.

She dimmed the light, and returned to the other room, demanding:

"Who is there? What do you want?"

Several angry voices vociferated:

"Let us in! You are beating Liane!"

At that she snarled in rage and threw wide the door, confronting Mrs. Brinkley and her sister, with the two new boarders.

"You must be crazy!" she exclaimed. "I was pounding a nail into the wall to hang my petticoat on, and Liane is asleep in the bedroom. If you don't believe me, go and look!"

They did not believe her, so they tiptoed to the door and peeped inside, and there, indeed, lay the girl, seeming in the dim half light to be sleeping sweetly and naturally.

[Pg 269]

"You can wake her if you choose, but she said she was very tired, and hoped I would not disturb her to-night," said artful granny coolly, though in a terrible fright lest she be taken at her word.

They retreated in something like shamefaced confusion, leaving granny mistress of the situation.

"What made you so sure she was beating the girl?" asked Carlos Cisneros of Sophie Nutter, who had raised the alarm.

"I used to know them at Stonecliff, where they lived, and she beat her there, poor thing, so when I heard the noise I thought she was at her old tricks again!" replied Sophie, going back downstairs to the parlor, where she had been looking at Mrs. Brinkley's photographs.

The language teacher followed her, and as he was rather handsome, and knew how to be fascinating with women, he soon gained her confidence, and found out everything she knew about Stonecliff, even to the cause of her leaving Roma Clarke's service. His eyes gleamed with interest as she added earnestly:

"Although I have seen Mr. Devereaux alive since, and they tell me I was raving crazy that night, still I can never be persuaded that I did not see Miss Clarke push a man over the bluff to his death." [Pg 270]

She was astounded when he answered coolly:

"You were not mistaken, but the man was not Devereaux. It was another, who held a dangerous secret of hers, so that she wanted him dead."

Sophie looked at him suspiciously.

"Did you see her push him over the bluff as I did? Ugh! That horrible scene! It comes before me now, as plain as if it was that night!" she shuddered.

She was amazed when he answered:

"I was the man she tried to drown!"

He was secretly delighted that there had been a witness to Roma's crime. It made his hold upon her that much firmer.

He added, in reply to Sophie's gasp of wonder:

"I was saved by a passing yacht, and put in a hospital, where I nearly died from a wound on my head."

Sophie gasped out:

"And—and aren't you going to punish the hussy?"

His eyes flashed, but he answered carelessly:

"Well, not just yet!" [Pg 271]

"Shall you ever?"

"Wait and see," he replied. "Can you imagine what brought her into this house to-day?"

"I cannot. I suppose she knew Granny Jenks at Stonecliff; but I am sure she hated sweet Liane, because she carried off the beauty prize over her head."

Carlos Cisneros gleaned all he could from Sophie, but he gave her no further information about himself, content with making a very good impression, indeed, on Sophie's rather susceptible heart.

Meanwhile, upstairs, granny, having locked the door with a stifled oath, dropped down on the rug, and lay for long hours in a drunken stupor, while the dreary night wore on.

Suddenly, as the bells hoarsely clanged four in the morning, granny started broad awake, shivering with cold in the fireless room, and sat up and looked about her, whimpering like a startled child:

"Liane! Liane!"

A sudden comprehension seemed to dawn upon her, and, getting up heavily, she stalked into the inner room.

The dim lamp was burning low, casting eerie shadows about the room, and she walked over to the bed, where she had thrown something the evening before. [Pg 272]

The ghastly thing lay there still, just as she had placed it with the coverlid drawn up to the chin, the silent lips fallen apart, the eyes a little open and staring dully, as granny placed her skinny claw over the heart, feeling for a pulsation.

There was none. She had done her work well. Her victim—the victim of eighteen years of most barbarous cruelty—lay pale and motionless before her, the mute lips uttering no reproach for her crime.

The old woman gazed and gazed, as if she could never get done looking, and then her face changed, her lips twitched, she blinked her eyelids nervously, and sank down by the bed, overcome by a sudden and terrible remorse.

"My God! What have I done?" she groaned self-reproachfully.

Far back in granny's life was a time when she had been a better woman. It seemed to return upon her now.

She groped beneath the coverlid for Liane's cold, stiff hand. [Pg 273]

"Liane, little angel, I am sorry," she muttered. "I would bring you back if I could! Oh, why did the foul fiend send her here to tempt me to the damnation of this deed? But she is safe now! Roma is

safe now! And she has promised that I shall not miss Liane's labor."

A new thought struck her. It would soon be day, and she must hasten to hide the evidence of her crime.

She started up nervously, and busied herself searching Liane for the coveted money, but not finding it, she began other necessary preparations.

It was that dismal hour that comes before the dawn, when she stole through Mrs. Brinkley's dark halls and passed like a shadow through the side door, escaping safely into the street with a shawled and hooded burden that must be safely hidden from the sight of men.

Lightly and softly fell the cold December snow, covering up the footprints of the skulking woman; but they could not blot the dark stain of crime from her black soul.

Dawn came slowly, and broadened into perfect day, and in the Brinkley house the household stirred and went about accustomed tasks. Soon granny's voice went snarling through the open door, calling shrilly downstairs:

"Liane! Liane!"

Lizzie White answered back from the kitchen:

"She is not here!"

Then granny tapped on Miss Nutter's door.

"Is that lazy baggage in here?"

"I have not seen her since last night," answered Sophie, and presently the house rang with granny's cries of anger and distress.

All went in haste to her rooms, and she reported that Liane had certainly run away, as she had many times threatened to do. All her clothes and little trinkets, together with her little hand bag, were missing.

Granny's blended anger and grief were so superbly acted that her simple listeners did not doubt her truth.

Mrs. Brinkley, thinking of the fine presents Liane had received from some unknown admirer, secretly doubted the story the girl had told her, and confided to Lizzie her belief that she had indeed eloped, and would most likely come to a bad end.

[Pg 274]

CHAPTER XXVIII.

[Pg 275]

A SWORD THRUST IN HIS HEART.

A hopeless love must always evoke pity in a generous mind. Devereaux could not help being touched when he found Roma installed as his sister's guest, and comprehended that it was love for himself that had brought her there.

Men, even the bravest and strongest, are pitifully susceptible to woman's flattery. Roma's persistent love, faithful through all the repulses it had received, was a subtle flattery that touched Devereaux's heart, cruelly wounded by Liane's rejection, and made him think better of himself again.

Roma brought all the batteries of her fascination to bear on her recreant lover that first evening, and he submitted to be amused with charming grace, that thrilled her with renewed hope.

Mrs. Carrington, too, lent her womanly aid to further the little byplay she saw going on between the estranged lovers. She knew that propinquity is a great thing in such a case, and believed that a reconciliation was certain. Of course, she did not know that Devereaux's heart belonged to Liane, or she would not have been so confident.

[Pg 276]

Roma telegraphed for her maid the next morning, fully resolved to make the most of her visit, and after breakfast, when she saw Devereaux preparing to go out, in spite of her blandishments, she asked him to call on her mother at the hotel, and tell her that she would be Mrs. Carrington's guest during her short stay.

She was more than ever determined to marry the young millionaire now, and thus make her position in life secure, even if by any untoward accident she should be ousted from her place as the Clarkes' daughter and heiress.

Devereaux promised to do as she asked, and sallied forth, in reality tired of Roma's company, though too polite to show it.

About the middle of the day he called at Mrs. Clarke's hotel to convey Roma's message, and was surprised to find her father there also.

They greeted him most cordially, and Mrs. Clarke exclaimed:

"Is it not tedious, waiting by the hour for a caller who never comes?"

"Do you mean your daughter?" he asked, hastening to deliver Roma's message.

"Then she has not heard of my accident yet?" exclaimed the lady.

[Pg 277]

"No!" he replied, and with unwonted animation she hastened to pour out the whole story of yesterday.

She did not spare herself in the least, frankly describing her pride and hauteur.

"I will not deny that I was vexed and jealous, and hated her because she had rivaled Roma for the beauty prize," she confessed. "I am ashamed of it now, and bitterly repented after learning her angelic sweetness and nobility of heart."

Devereaux's heart thrilled with joy at these generous praises of lovely Liane, and he listened in eager silence to all Mrs. Clarke had to say, glad, indeed, that she proposed to adopt the girl, but wondering much if Roma would agree to the plan.

"So, then, it is Miss Lester you are awaiting?" he said, with a quickened heart throb.

"Yes; and I think it most strange that she has not kept her promise to come here early this morning. If I knew her address, I should have gone long ago to her house, but, unfortunately I forgot to ask it," sighed Mrs. Clarke, while her husband listened to everything with a glad, eager face. [Pg 278]

"I wrote you, Mr. Clarke, two days ago, sending you her address, which I had myself just discovered," said Devereaux, looking at him.

"That is very strange. I did not receive it."

"Perhaps it had not been delivered when you left home."

"Perhaps so."

"And," pursued Devereaux, with a crimson flush mounting up to his brow at thought of seeing the dearest of his heart again, "if I can serve you in doing so, I will go and bring Miss Lester here to see you. It may be her excessive modesty that keeps her away."

They fairly jumped at his offer, and he hurried away, most eager, indeed, to do them this favor, glad in his heart of this grand opportunity for poor Liane.

Mrs. Clarke looked at her husband, with a half sigh tempering her soft smile.

She exclaimed:

"He is in love with that charming girl! Could you not see it? Alas, for my poor Roma!"

"Roma scarcely deserves our sympathy in the matter. She lost him by her own folly," Mr. Clarke replied impatiently, and the subject was dropped. He did not care to discuss Roma with his heart full of his own dear child. [Pg 279]

Meanwhile Devereaux took a carriage to Liane's humble abode, full of a joy he could not repress at thought of seeing Liane again.

But he sighed to himself:

"I shall feel guilty in her presence, because I was indirectly the means of her losing Malcolm Dean! Ah, had she but loved me instead, what happiness would be mine instead of this aching loneliness of heart."

When he alighted at Mrs. Brinkley's door and rang the bell, the small family, excepting a servant, was out, and a neat maid answered the ring.

"Miss Lester?" with a comprehensive grin. "Oh, sir, she beant here! She runned away last night with her beau!" she exclaimed.

It was like a sword thrust quivering in his heart, those sudden words. He grew pale, and stared at her, muttering:

"Impossible!"

"But, sir, it's true as gospel! And her poor granny is in a fine taking over it, too. She says as how Liane was cruel to go off so, and leave her in poverty to end her days in the poorhouse!"

"Where is the old woman? I should like to see her," he said dismally, hoping for some light. [Pg 280]

"She's out, sir, looking for the girl, swearing to kill the man as persuaded her off."

"And the family?"

"All out, sir. Mrs. Brinkley went to market, and her sister Lizzie to the store, where she and Liane worked."

Devereaux pressed a dollar into the good-natured servant's hand, and stumbled back to the carriage, almost blind with pain from this sudden stroke of fate.

The servant looked after him with mingled wonder, admiration, and gratitude, and describing him afterward to the family, exclaimed:

"The prettiest man I ever saw in my life—coal-black eyes and hair, straight nose, dimple in his chin, slim, white hands, diamond ring, good clothes, fit to kill! He must 'ave been another of Liane's beaus, for, when I told him she had eloped, he turned white as a corpse, and kind of staggered, like I had hit him in the face. But he didn't forget his company manners, for he bowed like a prince and put a whole silver dollar in my hand as he went back to his carriage."

"That sounds like Jesse Devereaux, Miss Clarke's lover!" cried Sophie Nutter, and Mrs. Brinkley said quickly: [Pg 281]

"Well, Liane knew that man, and was in love with him, but he snubbed her with the proudest bow I ever saw, one day when we passed by his grand home on Commonwealth Avenue."

"So he lives on Commonwealth Avenue!" remarked Carlos Cisneros, with a flash of his somber, black eyes. He was thinking of the house he had followed Roma's carriage to yesterday—the palatial mansion on Commonwealth Avenue.

"So she is there at my rival's house, and she dares to think I will let her marry him! And I have two scores to settle with the handsome Devereaux!" he thought.

Devereaux could scarcely believe the terrible news.

He hoped there might be some mistake, and he determined to go to the store and see if she might not be there.

But there were no pansy-blue eyes smiling over the glove counter, but a pair of sparkling black ones, whose owner smiled.

"Miss Lester? No; she is not here to-day. I cannot tell you anything about her; but there's her friend, Miss White, you can ask her—Lizzie!" [Pg 282]

Lizzie White hurried forward, but she could tell him no more than he had already heard.

She wondered whom the handsome stranger could be, but she was too timid to ask his name, only she thought within herself that he must surely be in love with Liane, he was so pale and disturbed looking.

It seemed to her that he was most loath to accept the theory that the girl had gone away with a lover.

"Is there no possibility she has run away alone to escape her grandmother's cruelty?" he insisted.

Lizzie said she could not tell, she had never heard Liane mention any man's name, but she had been more confidential with her mother.

"Could you—would you—tell me her lover's name?" he pleaded; but Lizzie answered that it would not be right to betray her friend's confidence.

"He was a rich young man, and not likely to marry my poor friend," she added sorrowfully, and after that admission he could extract no more from Lizzie.

With a sad heart he returned to the Clarkes' with his ill news. [Pg 283]

Mr. Clarke was terribly excited:

"I will not believe she has gone with any man! I should sooner believe that that old hag has made way with the girl! Give me the address, Devereaux, and I will go and wring the truth from her black heart, if you will stay and cheer my wife while I am gone!" he exclaimed, springing up in passionate excitement.

CHAPTER XXIX.

[Pg 284]

THE BRIDAL.

Dolly Dorr arrived duly that afternoon at the Devereaux mansion, her little head full of fancies as vain as Roma's—both dreaming of winning the same man.

But when Dolly saw her hero's magnificent home her hopes began to fall a little. She began to comprehend that there were heights she could not reach. Miss Roma would be sure to get him back now—of course, she had come there for that purpose.

Dolly felt as angry and disappointed as was possible to one of her limited brain capacity, but she hid her feelings and tried to attend to her various duties as Roma's maid.

She saw that her mistress was subtly changed since she had left Cliffdene. A harrowing anxiety gleamed in her eyes, and when they were alone Roma was more irritable than she had ever seen her before.

The reason was not far to seek. Jesse Devereaux had returned a while ago with news that nearly drove her mad.

It was the story of her mother's rescue yesterday by Liane Lester, and the consequent resolve to adopt Liane as a daughter. [Pg 285]

Roma listened to him with the most fixed attention; she did not move or speak, but sat dumbly with her great, shining eyes fixed on his face, drinking in every word with the most eager attention.

Inwardly she was furious, outwardly calm and interested, and at the last she said, with marvelous sweetness:

"You have almost taken my breath away with surprise. So I am to have a sister to dispute my reign over papa's and mamma's hearts! How shall I bear it?"

He was astonished at the equanimity she displayed. She had a better heart than he had thought.

"So you do not care?" he exclaimed curiously.

"What does it matter whether I care or not? No one loves poor Roma now!" she sighed, with a glance of sad reproach.

The conversation had taken a reproachful turn, and he adroitly changed it.

"But I had not told you all. Your parents' good intentions must come to naught, for the reason that Miss Lester went away mysteriously last night, and the cause of her disappearance is supposed to be an elopement." [Pg 286]

"Oh! With whom?"

Roma's attempt at surprise was not very successful.

"No one knows," he replied, and she exclaimed:

"How sorry poor mamma will be!"

"And you?" he asked curiously.

Roma had drawn so close to him that she could speak in an undertone. She locked her jeweled fingers nervously together now in her lap, and lifted her great eyes to his, full of piercing reproach, murmuring sadly:

"It does not matter to me either way, Jesse. I have lost interest in everything, now that you have turned against me!"

It was most embarrassing, her pathetic grief, and it touched his manly heart with deepest pity.

"My dear girl, I am sorry you take our estrangement so hardly! Believe me, I have not turned against you, as you think. I am still sincerely your friend," he answered, most kindly.

But the great red-brown eyes searched his face with passion.

"Oh, Jesse, I do not want your friendship! I want your love—the love I threw away in the madness of a moment! Give it back to me!" she cried, with outstretched hands pleading to him. [Pg 287]

Impulsively he took one of the jeweled hands in his, holding it nervously yet kindly while he said:

"It is cruel kindness to undeceive you, Roma, but I cannot let you go on hoping for what can never be! You never had my heart's love, Roma. It was only an ephemeral fancy that is long since dead. I thought you wished to flirt with me, and I entered into it with languid amusement. Somehow—I never can quite understand how—I drifted into a proposal. I regretted it directly afterward, and realized that my heart was not really interested. You broke our engagement, and I was glad of it. Forgive my frankness and let us be friends!"

But her face dropped into her hands with a choking sob, her whole frame shaking with emotion, and he could only gaze upon her in silent sympathy, feeling himself a brute that he could not give the love she craved.

Roma remained several moments in this attitude of hopeless grief, then, rising with her handkerchief to her eyes, glided slowly past him—so slowly that he might have clasped her in outstretched arms had he chosen. [Pg 288]

But he remained mute and motionless, sorrow and sympathy in his heart, but nothing more.

Sobbing forlornly, Roma passed him by, and went to her own room.

There Dolly had an exhibition of her imperious temper, culminating in a threat to slap her face.

Dolly's quick temper flamed up, and she retorted fiercely:

"Slap me if you dare, and I'll leave your service on the spot! Yes, and I'll go and tell Mr. Devereaux the fate of his letter to Liane Lester, too! I—I—wish I hadn't never had anything to do with you, either. I'm sorry I treated sweet Liane so mean! She was a heap nicer than you!"

Roma turned around quickly, holding out a pretty ring with a little diamond in it.

"Don't leave me, Dolly; at least, not yet," she sighed mournfully. "I'm sorry I was cross to you. Forgive me, and let's be friends again. Take this little ring to remember me, for I shall never need it after to-night!"

"What do you mean, Miss Roma?" cried the girl, slipping the ring coquettishly over her finger, but Roma threw herself face downward on a sofa without replying. [Pg 289]

Dolly went into another room to arrange the clothes she had brought her mistress, and to admire herself occasionally in a long pier glass, and so the time slipped past, and in the gloaming Roma's voice called faintly:

"Dolly!"

"Yes, miss."

Roma was standing up, very pale, very tragic-looking, by the couch, in her hands a letter and a tiny vial of colored liquid.

"Dolly, you are to take this letter to Mr. Devereaux and ask his sister to come with him to my room. Tell them both I have swallowed poison, and shall be dead in a few minutes!"

Dolly snatched the letter and ran shrieking from the room, while Roma sank back on the couch, her eyes half closed, her face death-white, the vial of poison, half drained, clasped in her fingers.

Devereaux tore open the letter, and read the single line it contained:

"I cannot live without your love! I have taken poison!"

He and Mrs. Carrington almost flew upstairs after hurriedly telephoning for a physician.

[Pg 290]

They knelt by her couch, reproaching her for her rashness, declaring that they had sent for a physician to save her life.

"It is useless. I will not take an antidote. I am determined to die!" she replied stubbornly, and looked at Devereaux reproachfully, while Lyde caught her hands, exclaiming:

"Oh, Jesse, why couldn't you love her and make up with her, so that she needn't have been driven to this?"

Encouraged by this outburst of sympathy, Roma whispered audibly in her ear:

"If he would only make me his wife, I could die happy!"

"Do you hear?" nodded Lyde to her brother.

"Yes."

"I have dreamed of it so long. I have loved him so well, I cannot be happy even beyond the grave unless I can call him my husband once before I die!" sobbed Roma piteously, and by her labored breathing and spasms of pain it seemed as if each moment must be her last.

"Give her her dying wish lest she haunt you!" whispered the nervous, frightened Lyde.

Roma's sufferings grew so extreme that his reluctance yielded to pity. He bowed assent, and hurried from the room to summon a minister.

[Pg 291]

The physician entered in haste, but Roma repulsed him.

"Stand back! I will not take an antidote! I am already dying!" she screamed.

He caught the vial from her fingers.

"How much have you taken?"

"The bottle was full—and you see what is left!"

"Then God have mercy on your soul. I am powerless to save you from your own rash act, poor girl, even if you permitted me to try. Why have you done this dreadful thing?"

"A quarrel with my lover!"

"Yes, it is true," sobbed Lyde. "She and Jesse quarreled, and she rashly swallowed the poison."

She added chokingly:

"They—they—are going to be married presently. Please stay to the ceremony."

Jesse Devereaux entered at that moment with a minister.

Roma was moaning in pain, her eyes half closed.

"Can you do nothing, doctor?"

"Alas, no! She must be dead in a few minutes!"

[Pg 292]

He bent down and took her hand.

"Are you ready, Roma?"

"Oh, yes, yes! Heaven bless you, dear!"

The ceremony began in its simplest form, the minister standing close by the couch to catch the faint responses of the dying girl. They were uttered clearly and audibly, with a faint ring of joy in the accents, very different from Devereaux's low, reluctant tones:

Then the minister said solemnly:

"I pronounce you man and wife!"

CHAPTER XXX.

[Pg 293]

BEFORE THE DAWN.

None could envy Edmund Clarke's feelings as he hastened on his way to find out the fate of the fair girl he believed to be his daughter!

He could not credit the story of her elopement.

Harrowing suspicion pointed to the probability that Roma, having found out the truth about herself, had hurried to Boston to have the real heiress put out of the way.

What more likely than that the wicked girl had intercepted Jesse's letter containing Liane's address and made capital of it to further her own evil ends?

The man shuddered as he realized what a fiend he had cherished as his daughter. He realized that it was the old fable of warming a viper in the bosom that stings and wounds the succoring hand.

Roma could never come under his roof again. Her vile attempt on his life and Doctor Jay's

precluded such a possibility.

But he groaned aloud as he thought of having to break all the truth to his frail, delicate wife— unless he should be able to first find Liane and get the proofs of her real parentage. [Pg 294]

With a trembling hand he rang Mrs. Brinkley's bell, starting back in surprise when it was answered by no less a person than Sophie Nutter.

"Mr. Clarke!" she faltered, in blended surprise and pleasure.

"Sophie!" he exclaimed, following her into the little parlor, as she said:

"Come in, sir. All the folks are out but me, and I must say I am as much surprised to see you here to-day as I was to see Miss Roma yesterday."

Artful Sophie, she distrusted Roma, and took this method to find out if he knew of his proud daughter's goings-on.

"Roma here yesterday!" he exclaimed, in a voice of agony, feeling all his suspicions confirmed.

"Yes, sir, she was here to see old Mistress Jenks yesterday, and spent an hour with her!" returned Sophie quickly, scenting some sort of a sensation in the air.

She saw him grow pale as death, and he almost groaned:

"Liane? Where was she?"

[Pg 295]

"At her work, sir, at the store."

"Where is she now?"

"It is thought she has run away with some rich young man, sir. She is missing this morning, and all her clothes gone!"

"The old woman—where is she? I must see her at once!"

"Lordy, sir, the poor old creature ain't here this afternoon. She went out to look for Liane, vowing to kill the fellow that persuaded her away!"

Mr. Clarke had always liked Sophie when she was a member of his household. Her kind, intelligent face invited confidence.

"Do you think that her distress was genuine, or was she playing a part?" he asked, adding: "To be frank with you, Sophie, I have a deep and friendly interest in Liane Lester, and I suspect foul play on the old woman's part."

It needed but this to make Sophie pour out all that she knew of the old hag's cruelties to Liane up to last night, when the sounds of a supposed scuffle had penetrated to her ears, causing the family to intrude on the old woman en masse, to find that granny had only been driving a nail, and that Liane was asleep in bed.

"You saw her asleep?" he asked.

[Pg 296]

"Yes; we all tiptoed to the door, and she lay peacefully in bed, with the covers drawn up to her chin."

"You are sure that she was breathing?" he asked hoarsely.

"Why, no, sir—but—my God, do you think there could have been anything wrong?" cried Sophie, alarmed by his looks.

He answered in a voice of anguish:

"I suspect that you were looking at the corpse of sweet Liane; I suspect that the noise you heard was old granny beating her to death, and that she has hidden the dead away, and put out a hideous lie to account for her disappearance!"

Sophie was so terrified that she burst into violent weeping.

But Edmund Clarke's face wore the calmness of a terrible despair. He felt now that Liane had been foully murdered, and that nothing remained to him but to take the most complete vengeance on her murderers.

He exclaimed hoarsely:

"Do not weep so bitterly, my good girl; tears will not bring back the dead. All that remains to us now is to take vengeance on her enemies. To do this we must find proofs of their crime. Come with me, and let us search Granny Jenks' room."

[Pg 297]

It was not hard to break open the locked door, and they went into the gloomy apartments, Sophie opening the window and letting in a flood of light.

Then she saw what had escaped their eyes last night—stains of blood on the bare, uncarpeted floor. In the bedroom, the pillow where Liane's head had rested last night was also marked by red stains that told in their own mute language the story of a terrible crime.

Their horrified eyes met, and he groaned:

"It is as I told you! She was murdered, sweet Liane! Oh, I will take a terrible vengeance for the crime!"

Sophie replied with heartbroken sobbing, and they remained thus several moments, shuddering with horror in the bare, fireless room.

But not a tear dimmed the man's eyes. He was stricken with despair that lay too deep for tears. His heavy eyes wandered about the room, lighting on a small black trunk in a corner.

"If I could only find the proofs!" he muttered, and unhesitatingly broke the lock, scattering the contents out upon the floor.

It was filled with yellowing relics of a bygone day, and he turned them over rapidly, saying to Sophie: [Pg 298]

"I am searching for something to prove a suspicion of mine—a suspicion of a deadly wrong!"

She dried her eyes and looked on with womanly curiosity, while he picked up and shook a little red box in the bottom of the trunk.

A dozen or two trinkets and letters fell out on the floor, and he searched them eagerly over, lighting at last on a slender golden necklace belonging to an infant.

He held it with a shaking hand, saying to Sophie:

"See this little clasp forming in small diamonds the word 'Baby'? It belonged to my wife in infancy, and when our little Roma was born she clasped it on her neck."

"And Granny Jenks has stolen it!" she cried indignantly.

"Worse than that! She stole also the child that wore it!" he answered, with a burst of the bitterest despair.

His heart was breaking with its burden of concealed misery, and Sophie's eager, respectful sympathy drew him on till he could not resist the temptation to tell her all, sure of her sympathy. [Pg 299]

It was like reading a novel to Sophie—the story of the lost babe, the spurious one substituted, and all that had happened since to the present moment.

"Oh, my dear sir, I believe you are quite right! Sweet, beautiful Liane was surely your daughter, while as for the other, she never had the ways of a lady, for all her grand bringing up, and she had the same cruel spirit like granny, always wanting to beat any one who displeased her. She slapped my face several times when I was her maid, and maybe you know, sir, that I left her service because I saw her push a man over the cliff one night."

"I have heard it whispered that you fancied something of the kind. My wife said you were crazy," returned Mr. Clarke.

"Crazy—not a bit of it, sir! It was God's holy truth! I can show you the man! He escaped the death she doomed him to, and lives in this very house!" cried Sophie, glad that she could defend herself.

"I should like to see the man!" cried Clarke, who was eager to get all the evidence possible against Roma. [Pg 300]

"He will be coming in directly from his school," cried Sophie; and, indeed, at that moment a step was heard in the hall, and the dark, bearded face of the new boarder appeared passing the door.

"Come in!" called Sophie imperatively, and as he obeyed: "Mr. Clarke, this is Carlos Cisneros, the man Miss Roma pushed over the bluff."

Cisneros bowed to the stranger and scowled at the informer.

"Why did you betray my confidence?" he cried threateningly.

"Because I knew you wanted to get your revenge on her, and this man will help you to it."

The two men glared at each other, and Mr. Clarke asked:

"Why did she thirst for your life?"

"I held a dangerous secret of hers, and she believed me dead. When I hunted her down and threatened to betray her, she tried to kill me. She pushed me over the bluff, but I was picked up by a passing yacht, and my life was saved."

"What was that secret?"

"She has promised to pay me richly for keeping it," sullenly answered the man.

"She cannot keep her promise, because she is not my daughter at all, but an adopted one, and, finding out that she has attempted many crimes, I shall cast her off penniless." [Pg 301]

"That alters the case. If she cannot pay me for holding my tongue, I'll take my revenge instead," answered Carlos Cisneros, with flashing eyes. "Sir, Roma is my wife. We were married secretly at boarding school. Then she tired of me and went home, while I was ill. When I hunted her down she attempted to murder me!"

Suddenly they were startled by a tigerish snarl of rage.

Granny, creeping catlike along the hall, came suddenly upon the open door, and the group within her room.

She staggered over the threshold, and glared like a tiger in the act of springing.

Mr. Clarke, still holding the shining necklace in his hand, cried bitterly:

"Miserable murderess, you are detected in your crimes! Here is the proof in my hand that you are the fiend that stole my infant daughter from her mother's breast, and made her young life one long torture! Here upon the floor and the bed are the blood stains that prove you murdered my [Pg 302]

child last night. My God, I only keep my hands off your throat so that you may tell me what you have done with my precious dead!" his voice ending in a hollow groan.

The detected wretch crept closer to Cisneros, whining:

"Don't let him kill me! I know I deserve it, but don't let him kill me!"

"Tell him the truth, then!" cried Cisneros, who, although not a very good man himself, was astonished at the story he had heard, and felt a keen disgust for the repulsive, whining old creature.

"What is it you want to know?" she muttered, gazing fearfully at Clarke.

"Was not Liane Lester my own child?"

"Yes, I s'pose it's useless to deny it, now that you've found your baby's necklace in my trunk."

"And the girl I adopted as my daughter is your grandchild?"

"Yes—but you'll have to keep her now, and give her all your gold. You won't never find Liane no more!" she muttered, with a cunning leer, as of one demented.

"Tell me why you stole my child!"

"It won't do you any good to find out now. She won't never come back any more!" she muttered stubbornly. [Pg 303]

He groaned in anguish, but reiterated:

"I insist on having the truth. Answer my question."

"Tell him the truth, you she devil!" growled Cisneros, pinching her arm as she huddled closer to his side.

She whined with pain, but she was mastered; she did not dare persist in her obstinacy.

So she whimpered:

"My daughter Cora stole the baby from your wife's breast, and she loved it so that I daren't take it away, lest she should die. So I let her keep it, and when her own child came she wouldn't never have naught to do with it, but clung to the other one, poor, crazy thing! So I thought I would raise them as twins, but when Doctor Jay sent me to get one from the foundling asylum in its place, the devil tempted me to keep your baby because Cora loved it so, and I put my own grandchild in your wife's arms, hoping you wouldn't find out the truth, and that Cora's child would be a great rich lady. My poor girl went stark mad, and they put her in the crazy asylum for life, but I was ashamed of the disgrace. I told every one she had run away again to be an actress. And I kept the baby to work for me till it grew a great girl, with a face like an angel, and a heart like an angel, too, but somehow I always hated her, because I had a bad heart!" [Pg 304]

"And then your grandchild found out the truth, and came and told you to kill Liane?" cried her accuser.

"How did you know that?" she demanded, shrinking in deadly fear.

"No matter how. You know it is true."

The light of mingled madness and defiance glared out of the woman's eyes. She growled:

"Well, I had to do it when she told me. Roma always would have her way, just like Cora, her mother! I said I hated to do it, the girl was such a lamb; so sweet, so gentle; but you cannot take Roma's place from her now, since Liane's dead: though I hated to do it, she was such a little angel."

Sophie Nutter burst into violent sobbing, Mr. Clarke's lips twitched nervously so that he could not speak, but Cisneros, with flashing eyes, exclaimed:

"So you killed the sweet angel, you fiend from Hades! Well, I hope you will swing for your diabolical crimes! A dozen lives like yours would not pay for one like hers! Come, now, we want to know where you hid her body." [Pg 305]

She glanced at him resentfully, answering, to his surprise:

"They may hang me if they want to! I don't love my life since I killed Liane! I miss her so, sweet lamb, I miss her so! I thought I hated her, and I used her cruelly, but when she was dead, when I saw the blood on her white face, I loved her! I kissed her little cold hand. I told her I was sorry I had done it, and wished I could bring her back to life! She was good to me, little angel, and I hate Roma because she made me kill her! I told her it was not right to kill her, but she hounded me to it! Now she can keep Liane's place at Cliffdene, but I don't want to see her any more. Cruel, wicked Roma, that made me a murderess!"

She rocked her body miserably to and fro, maundering hoarsely on, while Sophie's vehement sobbing filled the room as she recalled last night, when she had looked her last on Liane's still, white face, cruelly fooled by the old woman's lies.

Mr. Clarke cried, with fierce, despairing anger:

"No more of this paltering, woman! Tell us where to find Liane's body!" [Pg 306]

To his joy and amazement, the half-crazed woman answered:

"Roma told me to throw her in the river or the sewer, but she was so sweet I could not do it! I hid her in an old cellar, very dark and cold, and when I begged her to speak to me, she opened her

sweet eyes again! Come with me, and I will show you!"

Almost afraid to hope that she spoke the truth, they followed the half-crazed woman to an old unoccupied house several blocks away, and there, indeed, they found Liane, faintly breathing and half frozen, lying on the floor of a cold, dark cellar, half covered with some scraps of carpet that granny had laid over her in her late repentance.

Again Sophie's passionate sobs broke out, echoed dismally by granny, who muttered pleadingly:

"Don't take her from me if she lives; don't give me Roma to live with! I hate her now, the wicked wretch, and I'd rather have my little angel, Liane! I'll never beat her again; no, never! Do you hear me promise, Liane?"

But there was no recognition in the half-open eyes of the poor girl, as they searched their faces, and, pushing granny sharply aside, Edmund Clarke took up his daughter in his arms and bore her back to Mrs. Brinkley's, while Carlos Cisneros was sent in haste for a physician. [Pg 307]

Granny, seeming to have no fear of arrest for her dreadful crimes, hovered anxiously about, eager as any to aid in undoing her evil work.

Liane was laid in Sophie's soft white bed, and the girl said tenderly:

"I will nurse her myself, and no one knows better than I how to care for her, for I used to be a nurse in a hospital."

"Keep the old woman out," said Mr. Clarke sternly, and she went back to her own rooms, sobbing like a beaten child.

The doctor was soon on the scene, and he looked very grave, indeed, when he had made his examination.

"It is a serious case," he said. "There has been a severe blow on the head that stunned her, and all her faculties are numbened. How long this state will last I cannot tell, but I hope I shall bring her around all right."

Mr. Clarke rejoiced exceedingly at even this small ray of hope, and, engaging the doctor to remain until his return, set out impatiently to Devereaux's house to tax Roma with her crimes. [Pg 308]

He was burning with impatience. He could not wait, he was so eager to tell wicked Roma the truth that all her schemes had failed, and that, by Heaven's good mercy, Liane would be restored to her parents' hearts, while she, the wicked usurper, would be driven out to live with the old hag who had helped her in her nefarious plot against his daughter's life.

He took with him Carlos Cisneros, and, unknown to them both, Granny Jenks followed in their wake, cunningly curious to see how Roma took her downfall.

At nightfall they reached the Devereaux mansion, just a few moments after the ceremony that had made Roma the wife of the young millionaire. Indeed, Lyde and the other two witnesses had just withdrawn from the apartment, on Roma's request to be left alone with her husband.

She looked up at him with shining, love-filled eyes, murmuring:

"Please kneel down by me, Jesse, so that I may put my arms around your neck and die with my head upon your breast."

He pitied the rash girl so much that he could not refuse her anything in her dying hour. He obeyed her wish, and held his arm around her with her bright head on his bosom, expecting every moment to be her last. [Pg 309]

But the minutes flew, and Roma showed not a sign of dying. Instead, her breathing was very strong and regular, and she tightened her arms about him, exclaiming:

"Oh, my husband, would you be glad if life could be granted to me now, that I might live, your happy bride?"

"Do not let us dwell on the impossible, Roma," he answered kindly.

"But why impossible, Jesse, dearest? I am not really certain of dying. I do not feel like it now, at all, and perhaps the dose I took was not really sufficient to kill me! Now that I am your wife, it seems as if a new elixir of life is coursing through my veins, and I long to live for your precious sake! Oh, surely you do not wish me to die!"

Here was a dilemma, certainly. Jesse Devereaux, holding the warm, palpitating figure in his arms, did not know how to answer her piteous appeal, and he was saved the necessity, for at the moment the door opened, admitting Lyde, followed by Edmund Clarke, with granny, who had forced herself in, bringing up the rear. [Pg 310]

Lyde had told him hurriedly what had happened, and he had asked to see Roma; hence the intrusion.

The bride still clung fondly to her husband, and when they entered, she exclaimed, in strong, natural accents:

"Papa, dear, congratulate us. We are married."

"So I have heard," he replied, with keen sarcasm, adding: "I was told that you were dying, but you do not look much like it. Your cheeks are red, your eyes bright and clear, and your voice does not falter."

Roma actually laughed out softly and triumphantly, saying:

"I have just told my dear husband that I do not feel like dying at all, and that love and happiness have given me a new elixir of life."

Edmund Clarke would have spared exposing her if it had been really her dying hour, but he saw that she had grossly deceived Devereaux, so he returned, with bitter sarcasm:

"As you feel so strong and happy, I have some exciting news to break to you."

"News, papa?" sweetly.

[Pg 311]

"Do not call me papa," he answered bitterly. "You know well that I am not related to you, and that your discovery of the truth has caused you to attempt the most heinous crimes to keep my real daughter from coming into her birthright. I am here to tell you that your plot to kill Doctor Jay and myself has been discovered. Your attempted murder of Liane Lester came near success, but, happily, she has revived, and Granny Jenks, your wicked grandmother, has confessed that you were substituted in her place, and that Liane is my own child!"

"Heavens!" cried Devereaux, his arms falling from around Roma; but she clung to him, exclaiming passionately:

"I am your wife! No matter what he charges, I am your wife; do not forget that, Jesse!"

"And no doubt you pretended that you had swallowed poison, just to entrap him in your toils!" cried Edmund Clarke scornfully, while Devereaux, looking at her as she clung to him, exclaimed:

"Is this true, Roma?"

Her eyes flashed with defiance as she answered, rising, quickly:

"Yes, it is true. I only swallowed some colored water to frighten you all, and to make you marry me, because I loved you so dearly! You must forgive me, my darling husband, for you cannot alter anything now!"

[Pg 312]

He recoiled from her touch with loathing, and Mr. Clarke broke in:

"Do not trouble yourself over her words, Jesse, for she has no claim upon you. She has already a living husband—one whom she tried to murder, to put him out of her way, but he is here to testify to the truth of my words."

Through the open door stepped the wronged husband with a manly air, saying to startled Roma:

"Every man's hand is against you but mine, Roma, and even my heart recoils at your wickedness; but I love you still, and if you will repent of your sins and promise to lead a better life, I will take you back, and our old dream of a dramatic life shall be fulfilled."

It was a noble touch in the life of a man who had not been very good, but who was at least Roma's superior in everything, and she could not help but recognize it.

Beaten, foiled, in everything, she turned to the man she had wronged, saying:

[Pg 313]

"It is worth all the rest to find such a constant heart."

She laughed mirthlessly, mockingly, and left the room, scowling as she passed at Granny Jenks, huddled against the door, holding back her skirts from contact with her granddaughter, while she muttered: "I don't love you any more, and I wish never to see you again. I am going back to Liane."

CHAPTER XXXI.

[Pg 314]

WHEN THE CLOUDS ROLLED BY.

It was Christmas morning at Cliffdene, and snow lay deep upon the ground, while the boom of the sea, lashed into fury by howling winter winds, filled the air, but within all was light, and warmth, and joy.

A few days ago the Clarkes had come home, with their daughter Liane restored to health after weary weeks of illness and nervous prostration from her terrible beating at Granny Jenks' hands and the subsequent exposure in the cold cellar.

They called her Liane still, because the name of Roma was associated with so many unpleasant things that they had no wish for her to bear it.

Mr. Clarke had spent a thrilling hour making clear to his wife all the happenings of the past eighteen years, but she had borne the shock better than he expected. Her love for Roma, never as strong as the maternal love, though carefully fostered, died an instant death when she heard the story of the girl's terrible crimes. Bitter tears she shed, indeed, but they were for her own daughter's sufferings in those cruel years while she had been kept back from her own.

[Pg 315]

"We will make it up to her, my darling, by devotion now," cried her husband, kissing away her tears; then they hastened to the bedside of Liane, for she could not be moved yet from her humble abode.

After several days of unconsciousness she began to improve, and in a week was able to have the truth carefully broken to her by her own mother, who with Sophie Nutter shared the task of nursing her back to health. Doctor Jay was sent for to assist with his medical skill, and great was

his joy to find her restored to her own, and so beautiful and worthy, in spite of the rearing she had had from brutal granny, the miserable old hag, who was so crushed by the contempt and scorn of every one that she sought consolation in the bottle and drank herself to death in a week, expiring miserably in a hospital.

As soon as Liane was well enough to see a visitor Mrs. Carrington called.

"Do you remember me, my dear?" she asked, and Liane murmured:

"I sold you gloves."

"Yes, and fascinated me at the same time. I have been in love with you ever since."

[Pg 316]

Lyde wondered at the sudden blush on the girl's cheek as Liane thought within herself that she would be glad if Lyde's brother only loved her also.

As for him, of course, she did not see him till she left her room, but flowers came for her every day—great red roses, breathing the language of love—and on the day before they went to Cliffdene, her devoted mamma said:

"Dear, if you feel well enough, I should like you to send a kind little note to Jesse Devereaux, thanking him for the flowers he has been sending every day."

"I will write," Liane replied, with a blush and a quickened heartbeat, and her fond mother added:

"Jesse is a fine young man, and admires you very much."

When he received the note, so neatly and gracefully written, without a mistake in wording or spelling, Devereaux was puzzled.

It was certainly not like the writing of the letter in which she had rejected him. He concluded that her mother or her maid Sophie had written it.

[Pg 317]

"Poor girl, she will have to have private instructors to repair the defects in her education," he thought.

A few days before Christmas the Clarkes bade a kind farewell to the good-natured Mrs. Brinkley and Lizzie White, and returned to Stonecliff, whither the news had preceded them in letters to friends.

Devereaux was at the station to bid them farewell, and by the most open hinting he managed to secure from Mrs. Clarke an invitation to spend Christmas with them at Cliffdene.

He arrived on Christmas morning, and was presently shown into the holly-wreathed library, where Liane was sitting alone, exquisitely gowned in dark-blue silk, from which her fair face arose like a beautiful lily.

Devereaux's greeting was joyous, but Liane was cold and constrained. She could not forget how he had snubbed her in Boston when she was only a poor working girl.

But they had not exchanged a dozen words before they were interrupted by the unexpected entrance of Dolly Dorr.

Dolly had been staying at her own home ever since Roma's flight with her husband, and she had been having a hard battle with her conscience, which culminated in the triumph of the right; hence her presence here to-day.

[Pg 318]

Dolly made her little curtsy, and began bashfully:

"Miss Clarke, and Mr. Devereaux, I have wronged you both, and I have come now to try to make amends."

They gazed at her in silent surprise, and she hurried on, eager to tell her story and escape their reproachful eyes:

"Miss Liane, when you went away to Boston, I got a letter addressed to you from the post office, and Miss Roma opened it, and we read it together. Then she bribed me to answer it, and I guess Mr. Devereaux has the ugly letter she made me write. Here's yours, and—please forgive me. I am sorry I behaved so badly," tossing a letter into Liane's lap and flying precipitately from the apartment.

Liane opened the letter bewilderedly, and read, with Devereaux's eager eyes upon her face, and her cheeks scarlet, his passionate love letter and proposal of marriage. As she finished, he said eagerly:

[Pg 319]

"I received a rejection in answer to that letter, but, Liane, dearest, may I ask you to reconsider it?"

Her lovely eyes met his in a happy, eloquent glance, and, springing to her side, he wound his arms about her, drawing her close to his breast, while their yearning lips met in a long, clinging kiss.

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Transcriber's Notes:

Added table of contents.

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Page 8, Changed "ben" to "been" in "had been substituted."

Page 31, Retained possible typo (or uncommon spelling) "torquoise."

Page 84, corrected "cirrcumstances" to "circumstances" ("circumstances leave me").

Page 91, added missing quote after "bear good witness for us."

Page 95, corrected "slippd" to "slipped" ("slipped readily into her pocket").

Page 121, removed unnecessary quote after "no difference in the result."

Page 135, removed unnecessary quote after "pretty, petted girl."

Page 149, "dying down to Boston" seems like an error but is reproduced as printed.

Page 174, added missing comma in "It was my own, granny."

Page 180, corrected "presenty" to "presently" ("presently he realized").

Page 190, corrected "aristocrat" to "aristocrat."

Page 193, removed unnecessary quote after "pale and thin."

Page 194, added missing quote after "her whereabouts!"

Page 196, added missing quote after "confiding in you, Dean!"

Page 211, removed unnecessary comma from "and whip her."

Page 212, added missing quote after "fiendish Nurse Jenks."

Page 224, changed ? to , after "door on retiring."

Page 229, changed ? to . after "Wait till I question you on the subject."

Page 234, added missing quote after "and sobbing all night."

Page 263, corrected "clattring" to "clattering" ("clattering of dishes").

Page 277, corrected "Leslie" to "Lester" in "Miss Lester you are awaiting."

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