

Mischievous Maid Faynie eBook

Mischievous Maid Faynie by Laura Jean Libbey

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CHAPTER I.

The lover's tryst.

It was five o'clock on a raw, gusty February afternoon. All that day and all the night before it had been snowing hard. New York lay buried beneath over two feet of its cold white mantle, and with the gathering dusk a fierce hurricane set in, proclaiming the approach of the terrible blizzard which had been predicted.

On this afternoon, which was destined to be so memorable, two young men were breasting the sleet and hail, which tore down Broadway with demoniac glee, as though amused that the cable cars were stalled fully a mile along the line, and the people were obliged to get out and walk, facing the full fury of the elements, if they hoped to arrive at their destinations that night.

It could easily be ascertained by the gray, waning light that both young men were tall, broad-shouldered and handsome of face, bearing a striking resemblance to one another.

They were seldom in each other's company, but those who saw them thus jumped naturally to the conclusion that they were twin brothers; but this was a great mistake; they were only cousins. One was Clinton Kendale, whom everybody was speaking of as "the rage of New York," the handsomest actor who had ever trod the metropolitan boards, the idol of the matinee girls, and the greatest attraction the delighted managers had gotten hold of for years.

His companion was of not much consequence, only Lester Armstrong, assistant cashier in the great dry goods house of Marsh & Co., on upper Broadway.

He had entered their employ as a cashboy; had grown to manhood in their service, and he had no further hope for the future, save to remain in his present position by strict application, proving himself worthy of a greater opportunity if the head cashier ever chose to retire.

He lived in the utmost simplicity, was frugal, dressed with unusual plainness, and put by money.

He hadn't a relative on earth, save his handsome, debonair cousin, who never sought him out save when he wanted to borrow money of him.

Clint Kendale's salary was fifty dollars per week, but that did not go far toward paying his bills at the Fifth Avenue Hotel, keeping a fast horse and giving wine suppers. In his early youth he had begun the pace he was now going. He had received a fine collegiate education, and at his majority stepped into the magnificent fortune his parents

had left him. It took him just one year to run through it, then, penniless, he came from Boston to New York and sought out his poor cousin. Lester Armstrong succeeded in getting a position for Kendale with the same firm with which he was employed, but at the end of the first week Clinton Kendale threw it up with disgust, declaring that what he had gone through these six days was too much for him. He had rather die than work.

He borrowed a hundred dollars from his Cousin Lester and suddenly disappeared. When he was next heard from he blossomed out, astonishing all New York as the handsomest society actor who had ever graced the metropolitan boards, and caused a furore.

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There was another great difference between the two cousins, and that was a heart; just one of them possessed it, and that one was Lester Armstrong.

On this particular afternoon Kendale had lain in wait for his cousin at the entrance of Marsh & Co.'s to waylay him when he came from the office. He must see him, he told himself, and Lester must let him have another loan.

Lester Armstrong was glad from the bottom of his true, honest heart to see him, but his brow clouded over with a troubled expression when he learned that he wanted to borrow five hundred dollars. That amount seemed small, indeed, to the lordly Kendale, but to Lester it meant months of toil and rigid self-denial.

"Come into the cafe, and while we lunch I will explain to you why I must have it, old fellow," said Kendale, always ready with some plausible story on his glib tongue.

"Haven't time now," declared Armstrong. "I must catch the five-twenty train from the Grand Central Depot; haven't a moment to lose. I will be back on the nine o'clock train. If you will come over to my lodging house then I'll talk with you. I cannot let you have the sum you want. I'll tell you why then, and you will readily understand my position. Ah, this is your corner. We part here. Wish me luck on the trip I am about to take, for I never had more need for your good wishes."

"You are not going off to be married, I hope?" exclaimed Kendale in the greatest of astonishment.

A light-hearted, happy, ringing laugh broke from Armstrong's mustached lips, the color rushed into his face, and his brown eyes twinkled merrily.

"There's the dearest little girl in all the world in the case," he admitted, "but I haven't time to tell you about it now. I'll see you later."

With this remark he plunged forward into the gathering gloom, leaving Clinton Kendale standing motionless gazing after him in the greatest surprise. But the cold was too intense for him to remain there but an instant; then wheeling about, he hastily struck into a side street, muttering between his teeth:

"He must let me have that five hundred dollars, or I am ruined. I must have it from him by fair means or foul, ere the light of another day dawns. I've borrowed a cool two thousand from him in four months. I wonder how much more he has laid by? I must have that five hundred, no matter what I have to resort to to get it, that's all there is about it. I am desperate to-night, and a person in my terrible fix fears neither God nor man."

Meanwhile Lester Armstrong pushed rapidly onward, scarcely heeding the bitter cold and terrible, raging storm, for his heart was in a glow.

He reached the Grand Central Depot just as the gates were closing, but managed to dash through them and swing himself aboard of the train just as it was moving out of the station.

The car was crowded; standing room only seemed to be the prospect, but the young man did not seem disturbed by it, but settled his broad frame against the door and looked out at the sharp sleet that lashed against the window panes with something like a smile on his lips.

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He had scarcely twenty miles to ride thus, but that comforting remembrance did not cause the pleasant smile to deepen about the mobile mouth.

He was thinking of the lovely young girl who had written him a note to say that she expected him at the trysting place, without fail, at seven that evening, as she had something of the greatest importance to communicate to him.

“Of course my dear little girl will not keep the appointment in such a blizzard as this. She could not have foreseen how the weather would be when she wrote the precious little note that is tucked away so carefully in my breast pocket; but, like a true knight, I must obey my little lady’s commands, no matter what they may be, despite storm or tempests—ay, even though I rode through seas of blood!”

Half a score of times the engine became firmly wedged in snowdrifts in traversing as many miles. There were loud exclamations of discomfiture on all sides, but the handsome young man never heard them. He was still staring out of the window—staring without seeing—and the smile on his face had given place to an expression of deep wistfulness.

“Sometimes I wonder how I have dared to aspire to her love—the beautiful, petted daughter of a millionaire, and I only an assistant cashier on a very humble salary—ay, a salary so small that my whole year’s earnings is less than the pin money she spends each month.

“If she were but poor like myself, how quickly I would make her mine. How can I, how dare I, ask her to share my lot? Will her father be amused, or terribly angry at my presumption?

“This sort of thing must stop. I cannot be meeting my darling clandestinely any longer. My honor forbids, my manhood cries out against it.

“But, oh, God! how the thought terrifies me that from the moment they find out that we have met, and are lovers, they will try to part us—tear my darling from me!”

They had met in a very ordinary manner, but to the infatuated young lover it seemed the most ideal, most romantic of meetings. The pretty little heiress had gone to the office of Marsh & Co. to settle her monthly account. The old cashier was out to lunch. His assistant, Lester Armstrong, stepped forward and attended to the matter for the pretty young girl, surely the sweetest and daintiest that he had ever beheld.

That night he dreamed of the lovely, dimpled rosebud face, framed in a mass of golden curls; a pair of bewildering violet eyes, and a gay, musical voice like a chiming of silver bells, and lo! the mischief was done. The next day the assistant cashier made the first

mistake of his life over his accounts. The old cashier, Mr. Conway, looked at him grimly from over the tops of his gold-rimmed glasses.

"I hope you have not taken to playing cards nights, Mr. Armstrong," he said. "They are dangerous; avoid them. Wine is still worse, and above all, let me warn you against womankind. They are a snare and a delusion. Avoid them, one and all, as you would a pestilence."

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But the warning had come to the handsome young assistant cashier too late.

CHAPTER II.

"You must not marry him—heaven intended you for me."

Slowly but surely the sturdy engine struggled on through the huge snowdrifts, reaching Beechwood a little after seven, over an hour and a half behind time.

Lester Armstrong swung himself off the rear platform into fully five feet of snow, floundering helplessly about for an instant, while the train plunged onward, and at last struck the path that led up over the hills in the village beyond.

Beechwood consisted of but a few elegant homes owned and occupied by retired New Yorkers of wealth. Horace Fairfax was perhaps the most influential, as well as the wealthiest of these; his magnificent home on the brow of the farthest hill was certainly the most imposing and pretentious.

Lester Armstrong's heart gave a great bound as he came within sight of it, standing like a great castle, with its peaks and gables, and windows all blazing with light and the red glow of inward warmth against its dark background of fir trees more than a century old, and the white wilderness of snow stretching out and losing itself in the darkness beyond.

All heedless of the terrible storm raging about him, the young man paused at the arched gate and looked with sad wistfulness, as he leaned his arms on one of the stone pillars, up the serpentine path that led to the main entrance.

"What I ought to do is never to see Faynie again," he murmured, but as the bare thought rushed through his mind, his handsome face paled to the lips and his strong frame trembled. Never see Faynie again! That would mean shut out the only gleam of sunshine that had ever lighted up the gray somberness of his existence; take away from him the only dear joy that had made life worth the living for the few months. He had drifted into these clandestine meetings, not by design; chance, or fate, rather, had forced him into it.

Mr. Marsh, the senior member of the firm by whom he was employed, also resided in Beechwood. It was his whim that the keys of the private office should be brought to him each night. Thus it happened that the performance of his duties led Lester each evening past the Fairfax home.

One summer evening he espied Faynie, the object of his ardent admiration, standing in the flower garden, herself the fairest flower of all. It was beyond human nature to resist stopping still to gaze upon her. This he did, believing himself unseen, but Faynie

Fairfax had beheld the tall, well-known form afar down the road, and she was not displeased at the prospect of having a delightful little chat with the handsome young cashier.

Faynie's home was not as congenial to the young girl as it might have been, for a stepmother reigned supreme there, and all of her love was lavished upon her own daughter Claire, a crippled, quiet girl of about Faynie's own age, and Faynie was left to do about as she pleased. Her father almost lived in his library among his books, and she saw little of him for days at a time.

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Therefore there was no one to notice why Faynie suddenly developed such a liking for roaming in the garden at twilight; no one to notice the growing attachment that sprang up and deepened into the strongest of love between the petted heiress and the poor young cashier.

Lester Armstrong had struggled manfully against it, but it was for a higher power than man's to direct where the love of his heart should go. He made strong resolutions that the lovely maiden should never guess the existing state of affairs, but he might as well have attempted to stay the mighty waters of the ocean by his weak will. All in an unforeseen moment the words burst from his lips—the secret he had attempted to guard so carefully was out.

He had expected that beautiful Faynie Fairfax would turn from him in anger and dismay, but to his intense surprise, she burst into a flood of tears, even though she looked at him with smiling lips, April sunshine and showers commingled, confessing with all a young girl's pretty, hesitating shyness that she loved him, even as he loved her, with all her heart. Then followed half an hour of bliss for the lovers such as the poets tell of in their verses of a glimpse of Paradise.

Although they exchanged a hundred vows of eternal affection, Lester Armstrong hesitated to speak of marriage yet. Faynie was young—only eighteen. There was plenty of time. And to tell the truth, he dared not face the possibilities of it just yet. It required a little more courage than he had been able to muster up to seek an audience with the millionaire—beard the lion in his den, as it were—and dare propose such a monstrously preposterous thing as the asking of his lovely, dainty young daughter's hand in marriage. Lester was timid. He dreaded beyond words the setting of the ball rolling which would tear his beautiful love and himself asunder. Heaven help him, he was so unutterably happy in the bewildering present.

His reverie was suddenly interrupted by seeing a little black figure hurrying down the path. Another instant, and the little breathless figure was clasped in his arms, close, close to his madly throbbing heart.

"Oh, Faynie, my love, my darling, my precious, why did you brave the fury of the tempest to keep the tryst to-night? I am here, but I did not expect you, much as I love to see you. I was praying you would not venture out. Oh, my precious, what is it?" he cried in alarm, as the fitful light of the gas lamp that hung over the arched gate fell full upon her. "Your sweet face is as white as marble, and your beautiful golden hair is wet with drifted snow, as is your cloak."

To his intense amazement and distress, she burst into the wildest of sobs and clung to him like a terrified child. All in vain he attempted to soothe her and find out what it was all about.

The first thought that flashed through his mind was that their meetings had been discovered, and that they meant to put him from Faynie, and he strained her closer to his heart, crying out that whatever it was, nothing save death should separate them.

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Little by little the story came out, and the two young lovers, clasped so fondly in each other's arms, did not feel the intense cold or hear the wild moaning of the winds around them. Through her tears Faynie told her handsome, strong young lover just what had happened. Her father had sent for her to come to his library that morning, and when she had complied with the summons, he had informed her that a friend of his had asked for her hand in marriage, and he had consented, literally settling the matter without consulting her, the one most vitally interested. She had most furiously rebelled, there had been a terrible scene, and it had ended by her father harshly bidding her to prepare for the wedding, which would take place on the morrow, adding that a father was supposed to know best what to do for his daughter's interests; that the fiat had gone forth; that she would marry the husband he had selected for her on the morrow, though all the angels above or the demons below attempted to frustrate it.

"You will save me, Lester?" cried the girl, wildly clinging to him with death-cold hands. "Oh, Lester, my love, tell me, what am I to do? He is very old, quite forty, and I am only eighteen. I abhor him quite as much as I love you, Lester. Tell me, dear, what am I to do?"

He gathered her close in his arms in an agony that words are too weak to portray.

"You shall not, you must not, marry the man your father has selected for you, my darling. You are mine, Faynie, and you must marry me," he cried, hoarsely. "Heaven intended us for each other, and for no one else. You shall be mine past the power of any one human to part us ere the morrow's light dawns, if—if you wish it so."

She clung to him, weeping hysterically, answering:

"Oh, yes, Lester, let it be so. I will marry you, and you will take me away from this place, where no one, save Claire—not even my father—loves me."

He strained her to his throbbing heart with broken words, but at that instant the shriek of an approaching train sounded upon his ears. He tore himself away from her encircling embrace.

"To do all that I have to do, I must return to the city, quickly arrange for the marriage and a suitable place to take my bride. I will return by ten o'clock. Be at this gate, my darling, with whatever change of clothing you wish to take with you. I will bring a carriage. The way by carriage road from the city is less than seven miles, you know. We will drive to the minister's in the village below. A few words and I shall have the right to protect you through life, and oh! my darling, my idol, my trusting little love, may God deal by me as I deal with you!"

Those were the last words Faynie heard, for in the next instant her lover had torn himself free from her clinging arms and was dashing like one mad through the drifts

toward the railroad station again. Then, with a strange, unaccountable presentiment of coming evil, Faynie Fairfax turned and stole up the serpentine path into the house again.

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In just an hour's time Lester Armstrong was hurrying along Broadway again, making all haste toward his lodgings. Suddenly some one tapped him on the shoulder, and a voice which he instantly recognised as his cousin's said, laughingly:

"Both bent in the same direction, it seems. Well, we'll travel along together to your lodging house, Lester."

But alas! Who can see the strange workings of destiny? In that instant Lester Armstrong slipped on the icy pavement, and Kendale, bending quickly over him, exclaimed:

"He has broken his neck! He is dying. He won't last five minutes!"

CHAPTER III.

A terrible plot against A helpless young girl.

A gasp of horror broke from Kendale's lips. Yes, Lester Armstrong was fatally injured, he could see that.

Glancing up, he saw that they were within a few doors of his lodgings. Picking him up by main force, he carried him thither at once and placed him upon his couch. He had expected to see him breathe his last, but to his great surprise Lester Armstrong opened his eyes and whispered his name.

"It is all over with me, Clinton," he whispered. "I—I realize that my fall was fatal, and that it is a question of moments with me, but I—I cannot die until I have told you all, and you have promised to go quickly to my darling and tell her my sad fate."

"Any commission you have you may be sure I will execute for you," replied Kendale, and even while he spoke he was wondering whereabouts in that room Lester Armstrong kept his cash.

Between gasps, his voice growing fainter and fainter with each word, poor Lester told his story, of his love, his wooing and the climax which was to have taken place in two hours' time.

Kendale listened with bated breath. To say that he was amazed, dumfounded, scarcely expressed his intense surprise.

Armstrong, his poor plodding cousin, to strike such luck as to be about to marry an heiress! It seemed like a veritable fairy story. Who would have thought the poor cashier would have known enough to play for such high stakes?

Almost as soon as Lester Armstrong had uttered the last word, he fell back upon his pillow in a dead faint.

“The end is not far,” muttered Kendale. “I suppose it would look better to send a call for an ambulance and have him sent to the hospital.”

He acted upon the thought without a moment’s delay, and while the wagon was *en route* made a quick search of his unfortunate cousin’s apartment, a sardonic smile of triumph lighting his face. And as he transferred the money to his pocket, a sudden thought rushed through his brain—a thought that for the instant almost took his breath away.

Like one fascinated, he looked down at the white face. “I could do it; yes, I am sure I could do it,” he muttered, drawing his breath hard.

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At that moment the ambulance wagon rattled up to the door. In another instant the two attaches entered the room.

"What is the difficulty?" queried the man, and briefly Kendale explained.

"It seems hardly worth while to take him to the hospital," said one of the men; "he would hardly last until we reach there. Still, if you insist—"

"Yes, I insist," he cut in sharply.

"What name is to be entered?" asked the surgeon.

"Clinton Kendale. He is an actor, and my cousin," he responded in a low even voice.

He watched them while they carried forth the unconscious man.

"My first test will be with the people of this house," he muttered, shutting his teeth hard.

Thrusting the money still deeper in his pocket, he walked boldly down the stairs, tapping at the door to the right, which he knew to be the living room of the family.

"I am going to give up my room," he said.

"Laws a mercy, Mr. Armstrong!" exclaimed the old lady. "What sudden notice! I am so sorry to lose you!"

He chatted for a few moments, paid what was due her, then turned hastily and left the place, remarking before he went that he should not need the few things that he left in his room; that she could keep them if she liked as remembrances.

Once again he was out on the street, with the cold wind blowing on his face.

"Nothing ventured, nothing won!" he said, under his breath. "Now for the heiress and the million of money. By Jove! it's better to be born lucky than rich. I shall need an accomplice in this affair, and that imp of Satan, Halloran, is just the one to help me out with my scheme. It's lucky I have an appointment with him to-night. I shall be sure to catch him. I think it was a stroke of fate that I wasn't in the cast for the rest of the week, though I kicked pretty hard against it at the time. Good-by, footlights and freezing dressing-rooms. I can make a million of money ere the day dawns."

He hailed a passing cab, jumped into it and was driven across the city.

Halloran, the comedian at the same theatre, was sitting in his room half asleep over a half-emptied rum bottle. He always resorted to this course to drown his sorrows when he was laid off.

An hour later the two men were driving with lightning-like rapidity toward the direction of Beechwood.

"Ten," sounded from the belfry of a far-off church as the horses, plunging and panting, struggled up the road that led to the Fairfax mansion.

"Now see that you play your cards right," warned Halloran.

"Trust me for that," replied his companion, removing a cigar from his white teeth, and blowing forth a cloud of smoke. He was about to draw a flask from his breast pocket, but Halloran put a restraining hand on his arm.

"Remember that is your besetting sin," he said. "You have had enough of that already. It will require a steady nerve to meet the girl and carry out the deception, for the eyes of love are quick to discern. If she should for an instant suspect that you are not her lover, Lester Armstrong, the game is up, and you have lost the high stake you are playing for."

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"You are right," exclaimed the other, "nothing must interfere with the marriage."

"This must be the place," exclaimed Halloran, in a low voice; "large gabled house, arched gate, serpentine walk; yes, there is the figure of a woman in the shadow of the stone post this way. You are actually trembling. Remember, it's only a young girl you are to face on this occasion, and a deucedly pretty one, at that. The time that you will be more apt to be shaky is when you face her father; but I guess you're equal to it."

A low laugh was his companion's only answer. The next moment Kendale called to the driver to halt, threw open the door and sprang out into the main road, hastening toward the little figure that had emerged out of the shadow.

"Oh, Lester, you have been so long," cried the girl, springing into his arms with a little sobbing cry. "I have been waiting here almost half an hour."

"It took longer to come than I had reckoned on, my darling," he answered. "You know I had to stop at the village below and make arrangements for the wedding."

The girl drew back and looked at him.

"Your voice sounds so hoarse and strange, Lester," she said. "Have you been crying?"

His arms fell from her; he drew back, laughing immoderately.

"What, weeping on the happiest day of my life?" he cried. "Well, that's pretty good. I've been up to my ears in business, rushing around, to get everything in shipshape order, but, good Lord! what am I thinking about, to keep you standing here in the snow? Here is the coach, and by the way, I've brought along an old friend of mine, who was wild to witness the marriage ceremony."

As he spoke he took her by the arm and drew the girl toward the carriage in waiting.

What was there about her lover that seemed so changed to the girl, that caused the love to suddenly die out of her heart?

"Lester," she cried, drawing back, "oh—oh, please do not be angry with me, but I've changed my mind. It seemed such a terrible thing to do. Let us not be married to-night."

Something like an imprecation rose to his lips, but he chopped it off quickly, uttering again that laugh, so hard, so cruel, so blood-curdling, that it sent a chill of terror to her young heart.

“It’s too late to change your mind now,” he exclaimed. “It’s only natural you should feel this way; girls always do. Here is the coach and the horses. The driver and my friend will be impatient to be off.”

Either the excitement of his coming triumph or the brandy he had taken had made him recklessly wild.

He drew her along, heedless of her struggles, her passionate protest. His face was flushed, his dark eyes gleamed; he was ready at that moment to face and defy devils and men.

“Don’t make a fuss, my darling. You’ve got to come along,” he exclaimed. “Of course, you have scruples and all that. I think the more of you for them, but you’ll thank me for not listening some day. I’ll bring you back after the ceremony’s over and set you down at your own gate, if you say so, I swear I will,” and as he spoke he caught her in his arms and fairly thrust her into the vehicle, placed her on the seat and sprang in beside her.

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The door closed with a bang and the horses were off like a flash.

Too terrified to utter another word of protest, and half fainting from fright, Faynie sank back, gasping, into the farthest corner. Her companion turned to the man sitting opposite.

"My friend, Smith, Faynie," he said by way of introduction, and adding, before the other could utter one word to acknowledge the introduction, "let's have a little more of that. I'm chilled to the marrow with the cold, standing out there in the snow."

There was a faint move of the little bundle huddled up in the corner. She fell forward in a dead faint.

"So much the better," cried Kendale. "She will not bother us until we've had time to formulate our plans. Ha, ha, ha! how easy it is for a sharp-witted fellow like myself to make a million of money!"

CHAPTER IV.

Fond love to hatred turned.

Despite the severe shock which caused Faynie to swoon, her unconsciousness lasted but a few moments, then, dazed and bewildered, her blue eyes opened slowly, and she realized with horror too great for words that she was whirling swiftly over the snowy road, still in the company of the two men, her lover and his companion.

They were talking together in low, guarded tones. She could not help but hear every word distinctly, and they fell upon her ears with horror so intense she wondered that she lived through it from moment to moment.

It was Lester Armstrong who was speaking at that moment, and she was obliged to clutch her hands tightly together to keep from screaming aloud as she heard him say to his companion:

"I have always been a free lance among the pretty girls, drifting about much after the fashion of the bee wherever my fancy listed, and it will be more than irksome to yoke myself in the matrimonial harness to this girl. She is not of the kind—face, figure, temperament, anything—that is calculated to arouse my admiration. I detest your baby-faced creatures of her stamp, but she's heiress to a million, and I have concluded to swallow the gilded pill.

"There's one thing I assure you of, before she is married to me a fortnight I'll break that cursed temper of hers, if I have to break her neck or her heart, or both, to do it. She shall find that I'm her lord and master from this hour henceforth, and my word is law."

"I'd advise you not to rush the scheme for getting that big sum of money until you have gained her confidence a little. More flies can be caught with molasses than vinegar, you know."

"I shall have little patience with her," declared her lover. "I detested her the first instant my eyes rested upon her, and I am positive the feeling will grow upon me with every passing hour, instead of diminishing."

"It is easy enough to guess the reason for that," laughed the other. "You are in love with the queenly Gertrude, who has already more adorers than she can count. It is common report that you are the beauty's favorite, however, and if you weren't both so confoundedly poor, you'd make a first-class couple. As it is, of course it's not to be thought of."

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"Except in one way," cut in the other in a sharp, dry, hard voice. "If this girl whom I marry to-night were to die suddenly on the wedding trip, for instance, I would come in for her fortune; then, when the excitement blew over, I could go to Gertrude and say—"

The sentence was never finished, for at that moment the door of the vehicle was suddenly wrenched open, and with a piercing cry Faynie sprang out into the raging storm and the inky blackness of the night.

A terrible imprecation broke from the lips of the handsome scoundrel by her side.

"I'll bet a dollar to a doughnut that that little fool tricked us by feigning unconsciousness, and has heard every word we uttered. Of course, it's to be regretted, but that doesn't change my plans a particle. I'll be the husband of the willful little heiress in an hour's time, or my name isn't—"

"Lester Armstrong," put in the other, laconically.

The coach was instantly stopped, and both men made a flying leap into the huge snowdrift that banked both sides of the country road, calling back to the driver to light a lantern, if he had been careful enough to bring one with him, and hand it to them in double-quick order.

The search lasted for fully half an hour. Had the ground suddenly opened and swallowed her? they asked each other, with imprecations both loud and furious.

To have a fortune of a cool million so near his clutches, and suddenly lose it, was more than the villain could endure calmly. He was frenzied. His rage at the girl slipping so cleverly, so audaciously, through his fingers knew no bounds, and he made no attempt to stifle the fierce exclamations that sprang to his lips of what he should do when he once found her.

When Faynie had jumped from the vehicle she lay for an instant half stunned upon the cold, frozen ground where she had fallen. It had taken the coach a minute to stop, but that minute had carried it several rods beyond the spot where she lay. She saw by the uncertain glimmer of the carriage lamp the two forms spring out into the darkness and come back in search of her, and a piteous cry of unutterable fear rose to her blanched lips from the very depths of her panting, terror-stricken heart.

She tried to spring to her feet and fly, but the depth to which she sank with every step exhausted her quickly, and she sank down among the white drifts awaiting her doom like a wounded bird in the brush whom the cruel sportsmen are nearing with their hounds.

She raised her lovely young face to the dark night sky, calling upon God and the angels to protect her, to save her from the man she had loved with all the passionate strength

of her heart up to that hour, and whom she hated and feared now a thousandfold more than she had ever loved him.

All in a few moments of time her idol had fallen from its high pedestal of manly honor and lay in ruins at her feet.

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How could she ever have believed Lester Armstrong noble, good and true, a king among men? Where was the tenderness in voice and manner that had won her heart from her, and his oft-repeated assurance that he cared for her for herself alone; that he wished to Heaven she were no heiress, but as poor as himself, that he might show her the power of his great love? An hour ago—only an hour ago—yet it seemed the length of a lifetime in the shadowy past, she had crept out of the house to meet her lover at the trysting place, her heart beating with love for him, sobbing out to Heaven to send her true love quickly back to her.

As she had closed the door of the great mansion noiselessly behind her, she realized that she was putting wealth and luxury away from her deliberately and choosing a life of rigid economy with the lover whose earnings were, alas, so much smaller than even the pin money she had been accustomed to.

But with love to brighten the way, she felt that she could endure any hardship with noble Lester Armstrong, who loved her so dearly and devotedly.

After a time, perhaps, her father would forgive her for this step, and take her back to his home and heart, and welcome Lester, too. She had read of such things.

The night air blew bitterly cold against her face as she stepped bravely forth, but she did not waver.

The great hall clock chimed the hour of ten, and her heart beat faster, for she said to herself that her lover was nearing the trysting place and she had not much time to spare.

“Good-by, papa,” she murmured, turning for an instant and looking up at his lighted window. “Good-by, my stepmamma,” she whispered. “You have always hated me and wished me out of the way. I am going now, and you will rejoice. Good-by, Claire,” she added, as her eyes wandered upward to the little lighted window in the western wing. “You never hated me. You always loved me as though we had indeed been sisters. Good-by, kind old family servants. You will all miss me, I know, but I am going to happiness and love. What fate could be better?”

She waited some moments at the trysting place ere she heard the sound of crunching wheels on the snow. A moment later she heard the welcome voice saying: “Faynie, where are you?” The next instant she was folded in a pair of strong, masculine arms.

But as the owner of them touched her lips with his own Faynie had started back with a terrible feeling of faintness rushing over her. For the first time her lover’s breath was strong with the odor of brandy.

And the voice, which was always so gentle, kind and endearing, was muttering something about “the cursed darkness of the night.”

No wonder the girl’s soul revolted, and that she changed her mind suddenly about the elopement, which was to make or mar her young life. And what she heard after he forced her into the coach only added to the terror which had grown into her heart against him, and when she made that flying leap from the coach, her one cry to Heaven was that she might escape the man whom she had but so lately madly adored, but whom she now so thoroughly abhorred.

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CHAPTER V.

"Can you perform the marriage ceremony at once, reverend sir?"

It was the hour of eleven by the village clock. Eleven sounded from the old clock on the mantel. The fire burned low in the grate of Rev. Dr. Warner's study. The air was growing chill in the room. Still, the old pastor, who had looked after the village flock for nearly half a century, heeded neither the time nor the chill, he was so intent upon the sermon he was writing for the morrow.

He had scarcely concluded the last line ere he heard a well-known tap upon the door.

He smiled as he arose from his chair, crossed the room and flung open the door.

He knew well whom he should find standing there, old Adam, the village sexton and grave digger, who always stopped when he saw a light in the study window.

"Come in, Adam," said the reverend gentleman; "come up to the fire and warm yourself; it's a wild night to be about. Has any one sent you here for me?"

"No, parson," replied Adam, hobbling in. "There's no call for you to be out on this terrible night, thank Heaven. It's quite by chance that I left my own fireside myself. I had an errand at the other end of the village. The weather caught me returning—a regular blizzard—and I have been floundering about in the drifting snow for hours. I thought I had lost my way until I saw the light in the window, and—"

But the rest of the sentence was never finished, for at that moment both men heard distinctly the sound of carriage wheels without, accompanied by the loud neighing of horses.

Before they could express their wonderment there was a loud peal at the front door bell.

The reverend gentleman answered the summons in person.

Before him stood three persons, two men and a woman, a slender figure wearing a long dark cloak, and whose face was covered by a thick veil.

Both men had their coat collars turned up and their hats pulled low over their faces to protect them from the stinging cold.

"You are the Rev. Dr. Warner?" queried one of the gentlemen. The minister bowed in the affirmative, hurriedly bidding his guests to enter.

“You will pardon our errand,” exclaimed the stranger who had already spoken, “but we are here to enlist your services. Can you perform a wedding ceremony in the old chapel across the way? Our time is limited. We are in all haste to catch a train, and wish the marriage to take place with the least possible delay.”

“Certainly, certainly, sir,” returned the good man. “I am always pleased to join two souls in holy matrimony. Step in; the lady must be thoroughly chilled. This is a dreadful night.”

“We prefer to make our way directly over to the chapel,” remarked the man who had spoken up to this point. “The lady is warm, having but just left the carriage, a few steps beyond.”

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"As you will," responded the pastor. Turning to the old sexton, he said, quietly: "Will you step over to the church, Adam, brush the snow from the steps and light the lamps about the altar?"

Adam hastened to carry out his commands. He had scarcely completed his task when the bridal party entered, preceded by the pastor.

Adam watched them curiously as they filed down the aisle, both men still supporting the slender figure quite until the altar was reached.

The Rev. Dr. Warner, shivering with the severe cold of the place, picked up his book quickly.

"Which is the bridegroom?" he asked, looking from one muffled figure to the other. The man toward the left of the girl dropped back a pace or two, silently waving his hand toward his friend.

The old minister had never heard the names of the contracting parties before, and the idle thought for an instant found lodgment in his mind whether or no they could be fictitious. Then he blamed himself roundly for his momentary suspicion, and went on hurriedly with the ceremony.

The man answered in a low, guarded voice. There was a tone in it which somehow jarred on the good minister's sensitive nerves. The girl's voice was pitifully fluttering, almost hysterical.

But that was not an uncommon occurrence. Few brides are calm and self-possessed.

"You will please lift your veil for the final benediction," said the aged pastor, pausing, book in hand, and gazing at the slim, silent, dark-robed figure, who had made her responses faintly, gaspingly, almost inaudibly. Again it was the stranger to the left who complied with his request, but for one instant both the clergyman and the old sexton caught sight of a face white as death, yet beautiful as an angel's, framed in a mass of dead-gold hair; but the flickering of the lamps caused strange shadows to flit over it. There was a moment of utter silence, broken only by the howling of the wind outside.

Then slowly the minister's voice broke the terrible silence by uttering the words: "Then I pronounce you man and wife, and whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder."

As the last word echoed through the dim old church the cold steel of a revolver, which had been pressed steadily to the girl's throbbing heart by the hand of the bridegroom, concealed by her long cloak, was quickly withdrawn.

“My wedded wife!” murmured the man, and in his voice there was a tone of mocking triumph. The girl swooned in his arms, but, turning quickly with her, he hurried forward into the dense shadows of the church, carrying her to the coach in waiting without attracting attention.

He could scarcely restrain himself from shouting aloud, so exuberant were his spirits.

“Rave. Do whatever you like. You cannot change matters now. I am your husband, ay, the husband of a girl worth a million of money. When we are out of hearing of the old parson I will give three rousing cheers to celebrate the occasion and give vent to my triumph—ay, three cheers and a tiger with a will and a vengeance.”

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The appearance of his friend, who had remained behind to adjust the little matters that needed attention, put a stop to his hilarity for the moment.

“Well, what’s next on the programme? What do you suggest now, Halloran?” he exclaimed, as that individual sprang into the coach and took his seat with chattering teeth.

“I propose that you drive to the nearest inn or hostelry, or whatever they choose to call it hereabouts. I understand there is one some five miles from here, and, indeed, the horses won’t last much longer than that.”

“I’m governed by your advice,” replied his companion, with a hilarious laugh. “Give the order to get to the hostelry as soon as the driver can make it. Anything will suit me. I’m not proud, even if I have made a cool million in an hour’s time. Ha! ha! ha!”

“Are you mad?” whispered his companion, giving him a violent nudge.

“Bah! You needn’t fear that she will hear what I’m saying. The puny little dear has swooned again. Didn’t you notice that I had to fairly carry her from the altar?”

“These dainty little heiresses have to be handled with kid gloves,” remarked Halloran. “Fainting when anything goes wrong seems to be their especial weakness.”

“She will soon find out that I will not tolerate that kind of thing!” exclaimed Armstrong, as he insisted upon being called from that moment out.

“Be easy with her. Don’t show your hand or your temper until you get hold of the money,” warned Halloran. “Remember you are playing for a great stake, and the surest way of winning is by keeping the girl in love with you.”

“She is mine now. I am her lord and master. I shall not bother making love to the milk-and-water, sentimental creature, as the other one probably did. She isn’t my style, and I have little patience with her. There was a decided feeling of antagonism between us from the start, and then my forcing her to go through the ceremony at the point of a cold steel weapon will not have the effect of endearing me to her ladyship. She is sure to hate me, but that won’t bother me a snap of my finger.”

“Don’t get independent too soon,” remarked Halloran. “Pride always goeth before a fall, you know. You haven’t the money in your hands yet. Don’t lose sight of that important fact, my dear boy.”

They talked on for half an hour or more; then suddenly the driver drew rein.

“This is the country tavern, and my horses cannot go any further; they are dead lame and played out,” he announced.

CHAPTER VI.

The villain and his victim.

It was certainly something entirely out of the experience of the old innkeeper at the country crossroads to be aroused from his slumbers at midnight by guests seeking the shelter of his hospitable roof, and that, too, on the most terrible night of the year.

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The old man could scarcely believe his ears when he heard the sound of the old brass knocker on the front door resound loudly through the house.

He quite imagined that he must have dreamed it, until a second and third peal brought him to his senses and his feet at the same instant.

His bewilderment knew no bounds when he appeared at the door a few minutes later and found a coach standing there and the occupants seeking a lodging, also shelter for the horses.

"I haven't but one room to spare," exclaimed the old innkeeper, holding a flaring candle high above his head to better view his visitor.

"Have you a room in which a fire could be made?" asked one of the men. "We have a lady with us."

"I suppose we could let you have my daughter Betsy's, she being off to the city on a visit."

"My companion and his br—his wife could have that; you can dispose of me anywhere," returned the speaker. "I could doze in a chair in the barroom for that matter. The driver could be as easily disposed of."

"Then bring the lady right in," said the old innkeeper. A moment later, the lovely girl, still unconscious, was brought in and laid upon the settee in the best room.

"What is the matter with the young woman?" gasped the innkeeper, his eyes opening wide with amazement.

"Merely fainted from the intense cold," returned one of the men briefly, adding: "If you will see that a fire is lighted in the room that you spoke of I shall be very much obliged."

"I'll have my wife down in a jiffy. No doubt the poor creature's half frozen, but a hot whiskey toddy will thaw her out quicker than you could say Jack Robinson," and he trotted off briskly on his double mission of rousing his wife to look after the girl and his hired help to assist the driver in putting away the horses, while he himself attended to making a blazing fire in the little chamber over the best room.

In less time than it takes to tell it the good housewife was by the girl's side.

"What a beautiful young creature!" she exclaimed, as the veil was thrown back and she beheld the lovely face, white as chiseled marble, framed in its cloud of golden hair. "Is it your sister, sir?" she asked, with all a country woman's thoughtless curiosity.

“No, she is my wife,” exclaimed the stranger, who stood over by the fireplace, his brows meeting in a decided frown.

“Laws a mercy! Isn’t she young to be married?” exclaimed the woman. “Why, she don’t look sixteen. Been married long?”

The stranger by the fireplace deliberately turned his back on the woman, vouchsafing her no reply.

By that time the innkeeper announced that the room above was ready, and that they might come up as soon as they liked.

Again the stranger by the fireplace lifted the slender figure, bore her up the narrow rickety stairway, saying good-night to his friend as he passed him by.

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“Good-night to you, and pleasant dreams,” replied Halloran; “the same to your wife.”

The innkeeper followed the tall stranger with his burden to see that everything was made comfortable, put more logs in the fireplace, then turning, said:

“Is there anything else I can do for you, stranger?”

“Nothing,” replied the man curtly, but as the old innkeeper reached the door he called sharply: “Yes, I think there is something else that would add to my comfort, and that is a good stiff glass of brandy, if you have such a thing about the place.”

The old man hesitated.

“I’ll pay well for it,” said the other, eagerly.

“You see, we haven’t a license, stranger, to sell drinks, and they’re pretty strict with us hereabouts. I generally let a man have it when I know him pretty well, but I can’t say how it would affect you.”

“Have no fear on that score,” returned the other. “Here’s a five-dollar note for a pint bottle of brandy. Will that pay you?”

“Yes,” returned the innkeeper. It was the golden key. The man laughed to see how quickly he trotted off on his errand, returning with the bottle in a trice.

“Anything else, sir?” he said.

“No,” replied the other, “save,” adding, “do not call us too early to-morrow. We’re not of the kind that rise with the sun. Nine o’clock will answer. And see that that wife of yours gets up the best breakfast that can be obtained.”

“You won’t have to complain of that, sir,” exclaimed the innkeeper, pompously. “You’ll get a piece of steak with the blood followin’ the knife; crisp potatoes, a plate of buckwheat cakes, with butter as is butter, and honey that’s the real thing; a mug of coffee that would bear up an egg, with good old-fashioned cream, not skim milk, to say nothing of—”

“That will do,” exclaimed the stranger, with an impatient wave of his white hand. “I never like to know beforehand what I’m going to get.”

“But the lady, sir? Mebbe she’d like somethin’ kind a delicate like—a bit o’ bird or somethin’ like that?”

“We’ll see about that to-morrow all in good time,” fairly closing the door in the garrulous innkeeper’s face “Good-night,” and he shut the door with a click and turned the key in

the lock, and for the first time he was alone with the girl he had forced so dastardly into the cruellest of marriages. He had placed Faynie on the white couch. He crossed the room and stood looking down at her, with his hands behind his back, and a sardonic smile on his face.

“You and your millions of money belong to me,” he cried, under his breath. “Ye gods! what a lucky dog I am after all!” and a low laugh that was not pleasant to hear broke from his lips.

At that instant a broken sigh stirred the girl’s white lips.

“Ah, you are coming to, are you?” he muttered. “The old lady’s toddy is beginning to revive you.”

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He could not help but notice how unusually beautiful the girl was.

“What a chance of fortune this is for me, but it does not follow, even though she was madly in love with my cousin, that she will hold me in the same favor. But I’ll stand none of her airs. I’ll show her right from the start that I’m the boss, and see how that will strike her fancy. There’ll be a terrible time when she comes to—screams, shrieks of anger, that will call everybody to the door.”

He turned on his heel and walked over to the mantel, where the innkeeper had deposited the bottle and the glass.

He poured out a heavy draught and drank it at a single swallow. This was followed by another and yet another.

“Ah, there’s nothing like bracing oneself up for a scene like this,” he muttered, with a sardonic laugh.

The liquor seemed to turn the blood in his veins to fire and set his heart in a glow. He laughed aloud. In that moment he felt as rich as a king, and as diabolical as Satan himself.

He was nerved for any emergency; he was the girl’s lord and master, her wedded husband. She would be made to understand that fact with little ceremony.

He threw himself down in a chair, where he could watch her, and waited results, and each instant he sat there the fumes of the brandy rose higher and higher, until it reached his brain.

“There was a laughing devil in his sneer
That woke emotions of both hate and fear;
And where his scowl of fierceness darkly fell,
Hope, withering, fled and mercy sighed farewell.”

Yes, a few short moments and consciousness would return to the girl—the stormy scene would begin.

Would the sharp eyes of love detect the difference between himself and Lester Armstrong, whom he was impersonating? He knew every tone of his cousin’s voice so perfectly that he would have little difficulty in imitating that. The more closely he watched the girl, the more conscious he became of her wonderful beauty, and his heart gave a bound of triumph.

It was worth a struggle, after all, to have as beautiful a bride as she, even though she hated him.

“If I watch her much longer it will end by my being madly in love with her,” he mused. “I never could withstand a pretty face.”

The wild winds moaned like demons outside. The bare branches writhed and twisted in the storm, tapping weirdly against the window pane. The room grew warmer as the fire took hold of the logs in the grate, and with the heat the fumes of the brandy rose into his brain, and with it his color heightened, his cheeks and lips were flushed and his eyes scintillating. With unsteady hand he reached out for the flask again, uncorked it, and without taking the trouble to reach for the glass, placed the bottle to his lips and drained it to the dregs.

“She is awaking,” he muttered, with a maudlin laugh, and springing from his seat with unsteady steps, he crossed the room and stood by the couch, looking down eagerly into the beautiful white face upon the pillow. As if impelled by that steady, serpentine, fiery glance, the girl moaned uneasily.

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"Awaking at last!" he muttered, with a diabolical smile. At that moment Faynie's violet eyes opened wide and stared up into his face.

CHAPTER VII.

He raised his clinched hand, and the blow fell heavily upon the beautiful upturned face.

With returning consciousness, Faynie's violet eyes opened slowly—taking in, by the flickering light of the candle, the strange room in which she found herself; then, as they opened wider, in amazement too great for words, she beheld the figure of a man, half hidden among the shadows, standing but a few feet away from the couch, his eyes fastened upon her; she could even hear his nervous breathing.

With a gasp of terror Faynie sprang from the couch with a single bound; but the cry she would have uttered was strangled upon her lips by the heavy hand that fell suddenly over them, pressing so tightly against them as to almost take her breath away.

"Don't attempt to scream or make any fuss," cried a hissing voice in her ear—"submit to the inevitable—you are my wife—there is nothing out of the way in your being here with me. Come, now, take matters philosophically and we shall get along all right."

He attempted to draw the girl into his encircling arms, her wonderful beauty suddenly dawning upon him; but she shrank from his embrace, and from the approach of his brandy-reeking lips, as though he had been a scorpion.

With a suddenness that took him greatly aback, and for an instant at a disadvantage, she freed herself from his grasp, and stood facing him like a young tragedy queen in all her furious anger and outraged pride.

"Do not utter another word, Lester Armstrong!" she panted, "you only add insult to injury—why it seems to me some horrible trick of the senses—some nightmare—to imagine even that I could ever have cared for you—to have believed you noble, honorable and—a gentleman. Why, you almost seem to be a different person in his guise—you are so changed in tone and manner from him to whom I gave my heart. The affection that I thought I had for you died a violent death."

She did not notice that the man before her started violently at these words—but the look of fear in his eyes gave place the next instant to braggadocio.

He would have answered her, but she held up her little white hand with a gesture commanding silence, saying, slowly, with quivering lips:

"I repeat, the affection that I believed filled my heart for you died suddenly when I told you that I had changed my mind about eloping, and instead of studying my desires you insisted that the arrangement must be carried out."

"My—my—love for you prompted it, Faynie," he exclaimed, in a maudlin voice. He knew he had the name wrong, but could not think what it was to save his life. "Come, now, let's kiss and make up, and love each other in the same old way, as the song goes."

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"What! love a man who thrusts me into a coach despite my entreaties, takes me to a church, and with a revolver pressed close to my heart—beneath my cloak—forces me to become his wife! No. No! I loathe, abhor you—open that door and let me go!"

With an unsteady spring he placed himself between her and the door, crying angrily as he ground out a fierce imprecation from between his white teeth. "Come, now, none of that, my beauty. You're my wife all right, no matter how much of a fuss you make over it. I want to be agreeable, but you persist in raising the devil in me, and though you may not know it, I've a deuce of a temper when I'm thoroughly roused to anger—at least that's what the folks who know me say.

"Sit right down here now, and let's talk the matter over—if you want to go home to the old gent, why I'm sure I have no objection, providing he agrees to take your hubby along with you. There'll be a scene of course—we may expect that—but when you tell him how you love me, and couldn't live without me and all that—and mind, you put it on heavy—it will end by his saying: 'Youth is youth, and love goes where it is sent. I forgive you, my children; come right back to the paternal roof—consider it yours in fact.' And when the occasion is ripe, you could suggest that the old gent start your hubby in business. Your wish would be law; he might demur a trifle at first, but if you stuck well to your point he'd soon cave in and ask what figure I'd take to—"

"Stop!—stop right where you are, you mercenary wretch!" cried Faynie in a ringing voice. "I see it all now—as clear as day. You—you—have married me because you have believed me my father's heiress, and—"

"You couldn't help but be, my dear," he hiccoughed. "An only child—no one else on earth to come in for his gold—couldn't help but be his heiress, you know—couldn't disinherit you if he wanted to. You've got the old chap foul enough there, ha, ha, ha!"

"You seem to have suddenly lost sight of the fact that there is some one beside myself—my stepmother and her daughter Claire."

He fell back a step and looked at her with dilated eyes—despite the brandy he had imbibed he still understood thoroughly every word she was saying.

"A stepmother—and—another daughter!" he cried, in astonishment—almost incoherently.

"You seem to forget that you always used to say to me—that you hoped they were well," said Faynie with deepening scorn in her clear, young voice.

"Oh—ah—yes," he muttered, "but you see I was not thinking of them—only of you," and deep in his heart he was cursing the hapless cousin—whom he believed dead by this time—for not mentioning that the girl had a stepmother and sister.

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“Had you taken the time to listen to something else that I had to tell you, you might have reconsidered the advisability of eloping with me in such haste,” went on the girl in her clear, ringing tones, “for it has become apparent to me—with even as little knowledge of the world as I possess—that you are a fortune hunter—that most despicable of all creatures—but in this instance your dastardly scheme has entangled your own feet. Your well-aimed arrow has missed the mark. You have wedded this night a penniless girl. An hour before you met me at the arched gate my father disinherited me, and when he has once made up his mind upon any course of action—nothing human, nothing on earth or in heaven would have power enough to induce him to change it.”

The effect of her words were magical upon him. With a bound he was at her side grasping her slender wrists with so tight a hold that they nearly snapped asunder.

Intense as the pain was, Faynie would not cry aloud. He should not see that he had power to hurt her, even though she dropped dead at his feet at last from the excruciating torture of it.

“What is it you say—the old rascal has—disinherited you?” he cried, scarcely crediting the evidence of his own ears.

“That is just what I said—my father has disinherited me,” she replied slowly and distinctly, adding: “His money was his own—to do with as he pleased—he gave me the choice of—of—marrying to suit him or being cut off entirely. I—I—refused to accept the man he had selected for me. That ended the matter. ‘Then from this hour know that you shall not inherit one penny of my wealth,’ he cried. ‘I will cut you off with but the small amount required by law. There is nothing more to be said. You are a Fairfax. You have taken your choice, and as a Fairfax you must abide by your decision!’ You will remember I told you I had something to tell you the moment you came up to me at the arched gate, but you would not listen. Now the consequence is upon your own head.”

“I have married a beggar, when I thought I was marrying an—heiress!” he cried in a rage so horrible that Faynie, brave as she was, recoiled from him in terror and, dismay.

“You have married a penniless young girl,” she corrected, half inaudibly.

He raised his clinched hand with a terrible volley of oaths, before which she quailed, despite her bravery.

“When the old man cast you off you thought you would tie yourself on to me,” he cried. “You women are cunning—oh, yes, you are, don’t tell me you’re not; and you are the shrewdest one I’ve come across yet. You lie when you say you meant to tell me what had happened beforehand, and you know it. But you’ll find out at your cost what it means to bind me to a millstone for a wife. But you shan’t be a millstone. You’ll do your

share toward the support. Yes, by George, you shall. I'll put you on the stage—and you
—”

“Never!” cried the girl with a bitter sob. “I’d die first.”

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“Don’t set up your authority against mine,” he cried, and as he uttered the words—half crazed by the brandy he had drunk so copiously—his clinched fist came down with a heavy blow upon the girl’s beautiful, upturned face, and she fell like one dead at his feet.

CHAPTER VIII.

What happened at midnight on the lonely River road.

For one moment he looked down half stupefied at his work—the girl lay in a little dark heap at his feet just as he had struck her down—the crimson blood pouring from a wound on her temple which his ring had caused.

“I—I’ve killed her,” he muttered, setting his teeth together hard—“she—she provoked me to it—curse her! My God! the girl is actually dying.” Then, through his half-dazed brain came the thought that his crime would soon be discovered, and his only safety lay in instant flight.

It was but the work of a moment to hurry from the room, making his way through the inky darkness as best he could to the barroom, where he knew he should find Halloran and the cabby dozing in the big armchairs.

The full realization of his crime had quite sobered him by this time.

The innkeeper had left a dim light in the barroom. By the aid of this he made his way quickly to his friend’s side. A few rapid words whispered excitedly in Halloran’s ear told him the condition of affairs.

“You are right,” exclaimed Halloran, springing to his feet. “We must get out of here without a moment’s delay. The cabman must go with us, taking his horses, even though we have to pay him the price of them.”

“I—I—will leave everything to you, Halloran,” muttered his companion, huskily, “your brain is clearer and a thousand times shrewder than mine.”

“Nor must the girl be left here,” went on Halloran. “She must not be found dead in this house.”

“Why, what in Heaven’s name could we do with her?” returned the other, sharply. “I tell you she is dying, any one could see that.”

“Put her effectually out of the way, and past all human possibility of any one finding out how she came by her death. I have a desperate plan. I cannot explain it to you now.

All I say is, be guided by my directions to-night—leave everything to me,” said Halloran, with a grim gaze.

“I put myself in your hands, Halloran,” was the husky reply.

The cabby was hurriedly awakened. At first he demurred angrily against the idea of starting off again; but when a roll of bank notes was pressed into his hands as the price of his complying with their demand—a sum that would more than cover the price of the horses if he lost them—he no longer found grounds for complaint, but agreed with alacrity to do their bidding.

Besides, Halloran knew a little secret of the cabby’s past—just how he came by the money to buy that outfit—and as it was done in a particularly shady way, the man dared not make an enemy of him.

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In less time than it takes to tell it the coach stood at the door again.

It was Halloran—nervy, cool-headed Halloran, whom the other had always dubbed half man, half fiend—who stole up to the room above, found the girl lying in the exact spot his companion had described, and, catching up her cloak, wrapped it about her, bore her noiselessly down the stairs and out to the coach in waiting.

“Is it all over with her yet?” whispered the other in a strained, husky voice, showing intense fear.

“Almost,” returned Halloran, briefly, jumping in and closing the door after him.

For some moments they rode along in utter silence. Then, as Halloran made no attempt to break it, his companion leaned over, asking breathlessly: “Where are we going—and—and—what do you propose to do with her?”

“I am just trying to solve that problem in my mind, and it is a knotty one. I must have more time to think it over,” replied Halloran, tersely.

Before his companion could reply, the coach came to a sudden standstill, and both of the men within heard their driver’s voice in earnest colloquy with some one standing by the roadside.

“It is the girl’s father, or friends, who have just discovered her absence and have been scouring the country about to find her,” gasped the fraudulent Lester Armstrong, and the hand that grasped his companion’s arm shook like an aspen leaf.

“Don’t be a coward!” hissed Halloran. “If worst comes to worst, whoever it is can share the girl’s fate,” and with these words he opened the door of the coach, asking sharply, angrily:

“What is the matter, driver?”

“Nothing, save a poor old fellow who wants me to give him a lift on the box beside me. He has lost his way. He’s an old grave digger, who says he lives hereabouts, somewhere. He’s half frozen with the cold tramping about. I told him ‘Yes, climb up;’ it’s a little extra work for the horses, but I suppose as long as I don’t mind it you’ll not object.”

“Ha! Satan always helps his own out of difficulties,” whispered Halloran to his companion; and, without waiting for a reply, he was out of the coach like a flash, and his hand was on the old grave digger’s arm ere he could make the ascent to the box beside the driver.

“Wait a moment, my good friend,” said Halloran, “we have a little work which you of all persons are best fitted to perform for us ere we proceed.”

Old Adam, the grave digger, looked at the tall gentleman before him in some little perplexity, answering, slowly:

“I hope you will not take it amiss, sir, if I answer that I do not fully comprehend your words.”

“Perhaps not; but permit me to make them clear to you, in as plain English as I can command. I want you to dig a grave here and now.”

“A grave—here!” echoed Adam, quite believing his old ears were not serving him truly—that he had certainly not heard aright.

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"That is what I said," returned Halloran, grimly.

"But, sir!" began old Adam, "this is no graveyard."

"Curse you, who said it was?" cut in the other, sharply.

"It is not to be thought of, sir," murmured the grave digger, trembling in every limb, his brain too bewildered to try to reason out the meaning of this strange request, and quite believing the stranger must be an escaped lunatic.

Coolly and deliberately Halloran drew a revolver from his pocket, and placed it at Adam's throbbing temple, saying, grimly, and harshly:

"You will do as I command or your life will pay the forfeit. I give you one moment of time to decide."

It was a moment so fraught with tragic horror that in all the after years of his life Adam always looked back to it with a shudder of deadly fear.

He was no longer young—the sands of life were running slower than in the long ago—still, life was sweet to him, ah, very sweet. He had a good wife and little bairns at home, and an aged mother, to whom he was very dear, and he was their only support.

Who was this dark-browed stranger? Why did he wish a grave dug by the roadside on this terrible night? Whom did he wish to bury there, and was the body within the coach?

All these thoughts were surging rapidly through his brain, when suddenly Halloran said:

"Your moment for contemplation is up. Will you dig the grave here and now as I command you, or will you prefer that the next passer-by should find you on this spot with a bullet hole through your head?"

Even through the semi-darkness old Adam could see the stranger's eyes gleaming pitilessly upon him as he uttered the words, and he realized that if he refused he might expect no mercy at this man's hands.

"Your answer!" said Halloran, pressing the messenger of death still closer to the throbbing brow of the now thoroughly terrified old grave digger.

"Y—es," stammered old Adam.

"That is well," declared Halloran, removing the weapon. "Begin right here by the roadside. This is as good a spot as any. You need not make it the regulation depth—three feet or such a matter will answer. Begin without delay. I will also add that not only

will you save your own neck, but you shall earn a comfortable fee if you work quickly. Mind, every minute counts.”

The old grave digger slowly took his spade from his shoulder, and by the light from the carriage lamp began his work on the spot pointed out, while Halloran stood by watching him with keen interest.

Old Adam was used to work in the terrible heat of summer and in the bitter cold of the winter. He set to work with a will, and the frozen ground yielded quickly to the strokes of his trusty spade, and surely the faint moon, glimmering from between the drifting clouds sweeping across the dark face of the black heavens overhead, never looked upon a wilder, more weird scene.

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Twice old Adam paused, the perspiration pouring down his face like rain.

He was about to cry out: "I cannot go on with this uncanny work," but each time the cold steel of the revolver was pressed to his throbbing brow, and the harsh voice of the muffled stranger said: "Go on; your work is almost accomplished."

CHAPTER IX.

"There must not be A single trace left to mark the spot of the grave you are now digging," Said the muffled stranger.

The old grave digger worked on faster and faster by the fitful light of the carriage lamp, with the wild night winds howling about him, and the perspiration streaming down his face, as the stranger stood over him covering his heart with the deadly revolver.

"That will do, my man," he said, as old Adam paused for breath a moment. "That is deep enough, I guess. It will not take long to place its future tenant therein; then you must replace the earth and pack the snow so carefully about it that it would not attract the attention of the casual passer-by. Do you comprehend?"

"Yes," answered the old grave digger, and it seemed to him that his own voice sounded like nothing human.

The stranger turned and walked leisurely to the coach in waiting.

Old Adam would have fled from the spot in mortal terror, but that his limbs were trembling and refused to carry him.

He leaned heavily on his spade, asking himself in growing fright—what terrible mystery was this that fate had drawn him into, and awaiting with quaking heart what would follow.

He had not long to wait. The stranger who had stepped to the carriage evidently proposed to lose no time.

In less time than it takes to recount it, he had lifted from the vehicle a slender figure, closely wrapped in a long dark garment, and as he did so a second person stepped from the coach—a man, closely muffled like his companion—and wearing his soft hat pulled low over his eyes.

One glance at the flickering light of the carriage lamp fell upon them, bearing the slender figure between them, and old Adam's heart fairly stood still with horror.

He recognized them at once as the parties who had stood before the altar in the old stone church scarcely an hour before.

Great God! could it be? Ah, yes, it must be the body of the beautiful, hapless young bride they were bringing to this wild and lonely grave.

How did she happen to die? She who had been so full of bounding life but one short hour before—only the all-seeing eye of the God above could tell—ay, could solve this horrible mystery.

Another moment, and in utter silence, the slender figure was lowered into the frozen ground by the two strangers.

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This accomplished, the same man turned to old Adam again, saying, abruptly:

“Now finish your work as speedily as possible, I repeat the caution—mind—not a trace must be visible when you have accomplished your task, to mark the spot.”

No word from the old grave digger answered him. He could not have uttered a single syllable if his very life had depended upon it.

While the other had been speaking, a gust of wind had for a single instant tossed aside the heavy cloth that covered the face, and old Adam saw beyond all doubt that it was indeed the lovely young creature who had within that hour been made a bride, and with that terrible discovery came another—there was, as sure as fate, a flush upon the beautiful face of her whom they were consigning to the tomb.

“Hold!” he cried out with all his strength, drawing back from his work, shaking with terror. “The—the—girl is not dead; there is color—”

A fierce oath from the lips of both men simultaneously cut his words short.

“The girl is dead,” exclaimed the man who had so far done the talking. “That is blood you see on her face. She had a hemorrhage. Go on with your work, you fool—or, here! give me the spade. I will make a short shift of it.”

But as the stranger uttered these words, stepping quickly forward to put the thought into execution, a sudden thought, like an inspiration, occurred to the ancient grave digger.

“No—no—I will finish my work,” he muttered. “I—I—can do it best, as I—I—understand it—and—and—you, would not.”

“Make all haste, then; it is growing bitter cold. We shall all freeze to death.”

“Could you not get into the coach, sir, to keep warm?” suggested old Adam; “you can be of no aid to me, you know. When I have finished—you—you can step out and see if it is done to your satisfaction.”

For a moment the stranger hesitated, then said, sharply:

“I think I will take your advice, my man; my feet are about as numb as they could well be, I assure you; and as you say, my standing here will not help you. I can watch from the carriage window, and when the work is done step out and look at it.”

With that he hurried quickly to the vehicle, and with a thankfulness in his heart that words are weak to describe, and with a mental “God be praised,” the old grave digger bent to his task with renewed energy.

Both men watched narrowly and anxiously, as spadeful after spadeful of dirt quickly disappeared from the white ground. Then the white heaping snow was leveled over the dark narrow space, and the grave digger announced that his work was completed.

“I do not know as it is worth while to examine it; the old fellow knows his business,” remarked Halloran to his companion, who was by this time fairly well under the weather from large draughts of brandy he had drunk from a bottle he had seized from the bar. “Step up on the box beside the driver”—thrusting a bank note into the old grave digger’s nervous, trembling hand—“we will take you along the road as far as we go.”

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For an instant old Adam hesitated, but it was only for an instant, for he said to himself he must not arouse the suspicion of this stranger by refusing to ride, especially as he had begged for that permission so short a time before. He could frame no reasonable excuse for asking to remain behind.

Marking the spot as best he could in the intense darkness, he climbed up to the driver's box as he had been bidden, and took his seat.

With a sharp cut of the whip upon their flanks, the horses were started, and swaying to and fro with their every motion as they dashed along over the uneven road, the coach sped onward.

No word fell from the driver's lips, and old Adam was too much excited to vouchsafe a remark.

He knew that the men, as well as the rig, did not belong thereabouts, for he well knew every team in the village, and those of the adjoining farmers.

How far they traversed thus he could not judge, but to his intense relief he saw at last that they were passing a familiar landmark, an old bridge that spanned a dry creek which was scarcely a dozen rods from his own door.

"I will leave you here," said Adam. "I thank you for giving me a lift."

Again the coach came to a halt, and the man within put out his head, inquiring sharply:

"What is the matter now?"

"This man wants to get off here."

"Very well," replied Halloran, drawing back into the warmth of the coach and giving the matter no further thought, and resuming the castles in the air which he had been building when the vehicle came to a stop. "I shall see that you carry out to the fullest detail the little plot I am laying this night for you," he muttered, looking steadily at his companion, who had dozed off into a heavy stupefied sleep upon the opposite seat, "and when you come into possession of the money which your marriage to the little heiress to-night will bring you, I shall come in for the lion's share of it. You dare not refuse my demands, no matter how exorbitant they may be, under penalty of exposure. That will be the sword in my hands that will always hang over your head."

"It would have been more difficult to accomplish my scheme if the girl had lived. It is best as it is. Dead people tell no tales. Of course they will search for the girl when they discover that she has eloped, but will believe she is cleverly eluding them or traveling about the country. I have always had golden dreams of a fortune that would be in my grasp some day, and now, lo! my dream is about to be realized."

While he was thus soliloquizing, old Adam, the grave digger, was standing silently in the road where they had set him down, then suddenly he turned abruptly—not toward his home—but as quickly as his aged limbs could carry him back over the ground the coach had just traversed, praying to Heaven to guide him to the spot where he had dug the lonely grave of the beautiful, hapless young bride of an hour.

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CHAPTER X.

Snatched from the grave.

Back over that terrible road of drifting snow the old grave digger made his way as swiftly as his trembling limbs could carry him.

He had endeavored to mark carefully the spot where he had made that lonely grave, but the snow was drifting so hard with each furious gust of wind as to make it almost impossible to find it upon retracing his steps.

Quaking with terror, and with a prayer on his lips to Heaven to guide him, old Adam sat down his lantern, and by its dim, flickering light peered breathlessly around.

There was the blasted pine tree and toward the right of it the stump. The grave must be less than a rod below it.

With a heart beating with great strangling throbs, he paced off the distance, and then stood quite still, holding his lantern down close to the frozen earth.

For an instant his heart almost ceased beating—there was no sign of the little mound, with the leafless branch of bush he had been so careful to place there.

Then, suddenly a moan from beneath his very feet fell upon his ear, causing him to fairly gasp for breath.

“Thank God! I have found it!” he cried.

In an instant he had thrown off his coat, thin though it was, and set to work as he had never worked in all his life before—against time.

He had thrown in the earth loosely, taking care to leave the head exposed, for he felt as sure as he did of his own existence that life was not yet extinct in the body of the young girl for whom he was forced to prepare that grave at the point of a revolver in the hands of the two desperate strangers.

He had taken his own life in his hands when he had announced the work finished satisfactorily, for had the man stepped from the coach to examine the work he would have found the deep hole which left the head uncovered.

The cold winds and the drifting snow blew into the old grave digger’s face, but he worked on with desperate zeal, realizing that another life might depend upon the swiftness of his rescue.

At last, after what seemed to him an eternity of time, he reached the body, and quickly lifted it from its resting place.

Half an hour later he reached his own humble cottage home, bearing the slender burden in his strong arms.

His good wife had waited up for him. She could never sleep when Adam was away from home.

She heard his footstep on the crunching snow and hastened to open the door for him, starting back with a cry of great surprise as she caught sight of the figure in his arms.

"Is it some neighbor's little girl lost in the storm, Adam?" she cried, clasping her hands together in affright.

"Don't ask any questions now, Mary," he exclaimed, delivering the burden into her willing, motherly arms, and sinking down into the nearest chair, thoroughly exhausted. "I'll tell you all about it later, when I get my breath and my nerves are settled. Do everything you can to revive the poor young creature. She is freezing to death."

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As old Adam's kindly wife threw back the dark cloak which had enveloped the fair young face and form, an exclamation of surprise broke from her wondering lips.

"She is a stranger hereabouts," she observed, but she wisely obeyed her husband's injunctions, making no further remark, knowing she would hear all about it in good time.

In less time than it takes to tell it, the beautiful young stranger was put to bed in the little spare room up under the eaves, wrapped in flannel blankets, with bottles of hot water at the feet, and a generous draught of brandy, which the grave digger's wife always kept in the house for emergencies, forced down her throat.

"She will soon return to consciousness now," she exclaimed to her husband, who stood beside the bedside anxiously watching her labors; "see that flush on her cheeks. We will sit down quietly and wait until she opens her eyes. It won't be long."

And while they waited thus, Adam told his wife the story he had to tell concerning the young girl—this fair, hapless, beautiful young stranger whose wedding he had witnessed and burial he had assisted in within the hour, first binding his wife to solemn secrecy.

The good woman's amazement as she listened can better be imagined than described. For once in her life she was too dumfounded to offer even a theory.

As they glanced toward the bed, to their amazement they saw the girl's eyes fastened upon old Adam with an expression of horror in them, heartrending to behold, and they realized that she had heard every word he had said.

In an instant they were on their feet bending over the couch.

"Is it true—they buried me—and—you—you—rescued me?" she asked, in a terrified whisper, catching at the old man's hands and clutching them in a grasp from which he could not draw them away, her teeth chattering, her violet eyes almost bulging from their sockets.

"Since you have heard all, I might as well confess that it is quite true," he answered. "And God forgive that brute of a husband you just married. He ought to swing for the crime as sure as there is a heaven above us. There will be no end of the good minister's wrath when he hears the story, my poor girl."

Again the beautiful young stranger caught at his hands.

"He must never know!" she cried, incoherently. "Promise me, by all you hold dear, that both you and your wife will keep my secret—will never reveal one word of what has happened this night."

“It is not right that we should keep silent upon such an amazing procedure. That would be letting escape the man who should be punished, if there is any law in the land to reach him for committing such a heinous crime.”

“I plead with you—I, who know best and am the one wronged, and most vitally interested, to utter no word that would cause the story to become blazoned all over the world. Let me make my words a prayer to you both—to keep my pitiful secret.”

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It was beyond human power to look into those beautiful violet eyes, drowned in the most agonized tears, and the white, terrified, anxious face, without yielding to her prayer.

"I do not know what good reason you may have for binding us to secrecy," he said, slowly and reluctantly, "but we cannot choose but to give you the promise—nay, the pledge—you plead for. I can answer for my Mary as well as myself—the story of to-night's happenings shall never pass our lips until you give us leave to speak."

"Thank you! Oh, I thank you a thousand times!" sobbed the girl. "You have lifted a terrible load from my heart. If the time ever comes when I can repay you, rest assured it shall surely be done."

She tried to rise from her couch, but the good wife held her back upon her pillow with a detaining hand, exclaiming:

"What are you about to do, my dear child?"

"Go away from here," sobbed the girl, again attempting to arise from the couch, but falling back upon the pillow from sheer weakness.

She did not leave that couch for many a day. What she had undergone had been too much for her shattered nerves.

Brain fever threatened the hapless girl, but was warded off by the faithful nursing of old Adam's faithful wife.

And during those weeks the good woman could learn nothing of the history of the beautiful young stranger, who persistently refused to divulge one word concerning herself. She would turn her face to the wall and weep so violently when any allusion was made to her past that the grave digger's wife gave up questioning her.

One morning the bed was empty. It had not been slept in. The girl had fled in the night.

Who she was, or where she had gone, was to them the darkest, deepest mystery. Would it ever be revealed? They could not discuss it with the old minister or any of the neighbors, for their lips were sealed in eternal silence concerning the matter.

"I feel sure the end of this matter is not yet," said old Adam, prophetically. "When the girl comes face to face with the dastardly villain she wedded that night, it will end in a tragedy."

"God forbid!" murmured his wife with a shudder; but down in her own heart she felt that her husband had spoken the truth; the tragic end of this affair had not yet come.

CHAPTER XI.

"You are disinherited—everything in this house is mine."

Faynie had indeed departed from that humble home as she had entered it, in the dark, dim silence of the bitter-cold night.

She made her way as best she could to the station which, fortunately enough, was not far distant. The station master was old and anxious to get home, and therefore paid little heed to the little dark-robed figure who bought a ticket to New York, and soon after crept silently aboard of the train which steamed into the little depot of the hamlet, almost buried in the snowdrifts across the hills.

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Weak and faint from her recent illness, Faynie, the beautiful, petted little heiress of a short time before, huddled into a corner of the seat by the door, and drawing her veil carefully over her face, wept silently and unheeded as the midnight express bore her along to her destination.

She was going home to Beechwood; going back to the home she had left in such high spirits to join the lover who was to be all in all to her forever more; the lover who was to shield her henceforth and forever from the world's storms, and was to be all devotion to her and love her fondly until death did them part. And this had been the end of it. Her high hopes lay in ruins around her. Her idol had been formed of commonest clay, and lay crumbled in a thousand fragments at her feet.

Surely, no young girl's love dream ever had such a sad awakening, and was so cruelly dispelled.

She would go home to her haughty old father, tell him all, then lie down at his feet and die. That would end it all. Even in that moment lines she had once read came back to her with renewed meaning:

"And this is all! The end has come at last!
The bitter end of all that pleasant dream,
That cast a hallow o'er the happy past,
Like golden sunshine on a summer stream.

"Sweet were the days that marked life's sunny slope,
When we together drew our hearts atune,
And through the vision of a future hope,
We did not dream that they would pass so soon.

"In happy mood fair castles we upreared,
And thought that life was one long summer day;
We had no dread of future pain, nor feared
That shadows e'er should fall athwart our way.

"But sunken rocks lie hid in every stream,
And ships are wrecked when just in sight of land;
So we to-day wake from our pleasant dream
To find our hopes were builded on the sand.

"I do not blame you that you do not keep
The troth you plighted e'er your heart you knew;
Better the parting now than wake to weep,
When time has robbed life's roses of their dew.

“Another face will help you to forget,
The idle dream that had its birth in trust,
And other lips will kiss away regret,
For broken faith and idols turned to dust,

“Ah, well, you chose, perhaps, the better way;
Another love may in your heart be shrined;
And I—I shall go down my darkened way,
Seeking forever what I ne’er shall find.”

It was two o’clock by the church belfry when she reached Beechwood, and a quarter of an hour later when she reached the great mansion that stood on the brow of the hill.

She remembered that one of the rear doors, seldom used, was never fastened, and toward this she bent her faltering footsteps. It yielded to her touch, and like a ghost she glided through it and up the wide, familiar corridors, her tears falling like rain at every step.

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She knew it was her father's custom to spend long hours in his library, sometimes far into the gray dawn. He found this preferable to the presence of his sharp-tongued second wife, who was always nagging him for more money, or to put his property into her name as proof positive of his unbounded, undying affection for her.

In his library, among his books, there was no nagging. Here he found peace, silence and quiet.

Therefore, toward the library, late as the hour was, Faynie made her way, stealing along quietly as a shadow.

The door stood slightly ajar, and a ray of light, a narrow, thread-like strip, fell athwart the dim corridor.

When Faynie reached the door she paused, trembling with apprehension, a feeling of intense dread, like a presentiment of coming evil, stealing over her like the shadow of doom.

She was prepared for his bitter anger, for the whirlwind of wrath that would be sure to follow, but she would cast herself on her knees at his feet, and with head bowed, oh, so lowly, so piteously, wait for the hurricane of his rage to exhaust itself. Then she would bend over her head still lower, her pride crushed, her pitiful humiliation complete, and sue on her bended knees, with her hands clasped for his pardon and his love again.

She would plead for it for the sake of the fair, hapless young mother whom she had loved and lost in his early youth. Surely, for her sake he would find mercy, perhaps pardon, for the child she had left behind her, the fair, petted, hapless daughter, who had been so lonely, and whose heart yearned so for love ever since he had brought in a second wife to rule over his household.

Ay, from that hour he and his daughter had seemed to drift apart.

Nerving herself for the ordeal, the girl crept to the door and timidly swung it back.

There was a figure bending over the writing desk; not the tall form of her father, but her stepmother.

Faynie drew back with a startled cry.

In a single instant, with the swiftness of a lioness, the woman who had been examining the desk, cleared the space that divided her from the girl, and clutched her by the shoulder.

“You!” she panted, in a voice that was scarcely human, it was so full of venomous hatred. “You!” she repeated, flinging the girl from her, as though she had been something vile to the touch. “How dare you come here?”

Faynie looked at her for a moment with dilated eyes gazing out from her pale face.

Had her stepmother suddenly gone mad? was the thought that flashed through the girl’s brain.

“I—I have come back to my father, and—and to his home—and mine. Any explanation I have to offer will be made to him alone.”

The woman laughed a sneering, demoniac laugh, and her clutch on the girl’s shoulder grew stronger, fiercer.

“How lovely, how beautifully worded, how dutiful!” she sneered. “By that I judge that you have not been keeping abreast of the times, or you would have known, girl, that your father is dead, and that he has disinherited you, leaving every dollar of his wealth to me.”

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"Dead!" Faynie repeated the words in an awful whisper.

It seemed to her that every drop of blood in her veins seemed suddenly turned to ice. A mist swam before her eyes and she put out her hand gropingly, grasping the back of the nearest chair for support.

She did not even hear the last of the sentence. Her thoughts and hearing seemed to end with that one awful word.

"That is what I said," replied her stepmother, nonchalantly, "and you are his murderess, girl, quite as much as though you had plunged a dagger in his heart. Your elopement caused him to have a terrible hemorrhage. He knew all the details about it in less than an hour's time, learning from one of the servants how you stole out of the house and met the tall man at the gate, who took you off in a closed carriage, and just as he made this discovery one of the maids handed him your note, which you left pinned to the pillow, addressed to him. He had no sooner read it than he fell into a rage so horrible that it ended as I have said, in a hemorrhage. Within ten minutes' time your name, which he cursed, was stricken from his will, and he left everything to me, disinheriting you. Do you comprehend the force of my remark?"

The steady, awful look in the young girl's eyes made the woman quail in spite of her bravado. "I—I do not care for my father's wealth, but that he should curse me—oh, that is too much—too much. Oh, God, let me die here and now, that I may follow him to the Great White Throne and there kneel before him and tell him all my pitiful story!"

"That is a pretty theory, but people cannot go to and come at will from the Great White Throne, as you call it. You had better get back to the realities of life on this mundane sphere, where you find yourself just at present. I repeat for the third time that you are disinherited. I cannot seem to make you grasp that fact. This home and everything in it belongs absolutely to me."

Faynie heard and realized, and without a word, turned and staggered like one dying toward the door, but her stepmother put herself quickly before her.

"Sit down there. I have something else to say to you," she added in a shrill whisper, pushing the girl into the nearest seat.

"I must go. I will not listen," cried Faynie, struggling to her feet.

"Yes, you shall listen and comply with my proposition," exclaimed her stepmother, her glittering eyes fastened on the beautiful face of the girl she hated so intensely.

CHAPTER XII.

Impending evil.

We must return for one brief instant, dear reader, to our hero, Lester Armstrong, whom we left as he was being hurried off to the hospital on the night which proved so thrillingly eventful.

At the first rapid glance, the surgeon had believed his patient dying, but upon examination after he had reached the hospital, it was discovered that his injury was by no means as serious as had been apprehended; but a trouble quite as grave confronted the patient.

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"An injury to the base of the brain, such as he has received, no matter how slight, might, in this instance, produce either insanity or partial loss of memory, which is almost as bad," said the surgeon. "It will soon be determined when consciousness, returns to him."

This indeed proved to be the case. Just as daylight broke Lester Armstrong opened his eyes, looking in amazement around the strange apartment in which he found himself.

A kindly-faced nurse bent over him, who, in answer to his look of inquiry, said:

"You had a severe fall and hurt yourself last night and was brought to the hospital. You are doing finely. Can you remember anything about the incident?"

Lester looked up vacantly into the dark-gray eyes. "I—I was in a hurry to close my books at the office; that is all I recollect," he murmured.

From documents found in his pockets, it was learned that he had some connection with the great dry goods house of Marsh & Co., and the senior member of the firm was notified. Within an hour Mr. Marsh responded in person. He was greatly distressed over the occurrence and took it deeply to heart.

"I think as much of that young man as if he were my own son. Do everything in human power for him. Let no pains be spared. I will stand every expense," he said, and then and there he also confided a startling secret to the surgeon.

"I am a lone man in this world, without one kindred tie on earth. Some little time since I made my will. I left every dollar I possessed on earth to my young cashier, Lester Armstrong, though he never even dreamed of such an existing state of affairs. I never intended that he should know that I had made him my heir for perhaps years to come yet."

"Lester Armstrong!" exclaimed the surgeon. "Why, that is not the name he is entered here under, Mr. Marsh. The friend who was with him did not call him that."

"Then the friend who was with him evidently did not know him. I identify him as my cashier, Lester Armstrong."

The surgeon bowed courteously.

"I would also suggest no mention whatever of this affair be given to the newspapers," continued the gentleman. "They would make a sensational story out of it, and I detest notoriety."

"Your wishes shall be respected, sir," replied the surgeon, who had a great reverence for men of wealth.

His prediction proved quite correct. When Lester Armstrong arose from that bed of sickness ten days later, his mind, although as bright and keen as ever on some subjects, on others was hopelessly clouded. Even the slightest recollection of beautiful Faynie Fairfax, the little sweetheart whom he had loved better than his own life, was completely obliterated from his mind. He did not even remember such a being had ever existed.

Another event had transpired on the eventful night of his injury. The humble boarding house where he had made his home so many years, had been destroyed by fire, and the people had gone none knew whither. This was indeed a trying blow to Lester, for the fire had completely wiped out all of his savings which he had kept in the little haircloth trunk in his room. But, without a murmur, he took up the burden of life over again and went back to his work at his desk.

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In going over his accounts he suddenly came across the name of Faynie Fairfax.

The pen fell from his fingers and he brushed his hand over his brow.

“What a strangely familiar ring that name has to me!” he muttered, “but I cannot imagine who it can be. Her checks seem to be paid in here. I must remember to notice who she is when next she comes to this window.”

Life had dropped into the same old groove again for Lester Armstrong, the only difference in the routine of his daily life being that he was not obliged to take his daily trips to Beechwood any more, for the reason that his employer, Mr. Marsh, had taken up his residence in the city again.

But in less than a fortnight another event happened.

Mr. Marsh died suddenly, and to the great surprise of every one, Lester Armstrong was named as his sole heir. At first the young man was dumfounded. He could not believe the evidence of his own senses, when first the news was conveyed to him.

The papers contained columns concerning the young man’s wonderful luck. Those who knew Lester Armstrong said the great fortune which had come to him would not spoil him.

There was one who read this account with amazed eyes, and that was Halloran.

“Great God!” he muttered, his hands shaking, his teeth chattering. “Kendale told me that Armstrong was taken to the hospital in a precarious condition and died there.”

He made all haste to Kendale’s lodgings. The latter, who was still masquerading under the name of Lester Armstrong, had been on a continuous spree ever since the night he had wedded the little beauty, and Halloran had let him take his course, saying to himself that there was plenty of time in the future to carry out their scheme.

For once he found Kendale partially sober. He knew by Halloran’s face that something out of the usual order of events had transpired.

“What is the matter?” he cried; “what’s up now?”

For answer Halloran laid the paper before him, pointing to the column, remarking, grimly:

“The game’s up now, and we’ve gone through all this trouble for nothing. Your cousin, Lester Armstrong, is not dead, but instead is alive and well.”

The papers which contained the account gave another bit of unfortunate information, stating that Lester Armstrong had suffered from loss of memory since he had received the fall on that fatal night.

"Well," said Halloran, as his friend laid down the paper, "you see, the game's up."

"By no means," exclaimed Kendale, perfectly sober by this time. "It's a poor rule that won't work both ways," he added, excitedly.

"I don't understand your cause for rejoicing," returned Halloran, gloomily.

"Don't you?" cried Kendale. "Then let me make it clear to you. We not only have one fortune through the girl that I tied myself to, and can, as her husband, collect all in good time, but with a little strategy I can come in for the Marsh millions. We can decoy Armstrong into a coach, and let the world find out his fate after that if it can. I will coolly take his place, just as I did in that other affair, and who is there to question that I am not he."

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"But they know you there. You worked a week in the employ of Marsh & Co. You forget that."

"It was at one of their branch stores," was the reply, "and they had never heard of Armstrong there, and had never seen him. I left in a week. I did not resemble my cousin so much at that particular time for the reason that my mustache was shaven off then. Without that you would be surprised to see what a wide difference there is between us."

"It is a great scheme, if you are sure that you can carry it through," said Halloran, breathing hard and eying his companion fixedly.

"Trust that to me," replied Kendale, jumping up and walking the floor to and fro excitedly.

It was midnight when Halloran left Kendale's apartments. During those long hours the two plotters had concocted a diabolical scheme, which they meant to carry out ere the morning light dawned.

All unconscious of the nefarious plot against his life, Lester Armstrong was up with the sun the next morning, and was down to the office at an early hour transacting the great amount of business that he found upon his hands, contingent upon being the head of the firm of which he had for so many years been but an humble cashier.

Despite the sudden wealth which had come to him, all that day he felt a strange depression of the heart, a strong impression of impending evil, which he could not shake off. Even those about him noticed what a gloomy look there was in his eyes.

He was the last one to leave the great building that night, and as he stepped out upon the sidewalk, he muttered to himself: "I wonder what is about to happen to me, my heart feels so heavy, so depressed."

CHAPTER XIII.

In the toils of the conspirators.

Lester Armstrong had no sooner stepped to the pavement than he was accosted by a man who stepped suddenly up to him.

"Mr. Armstrong?" he said, interrogatively, touching his hat respectfully.

"Yes," responded Lester, "what can I do for you?"

"I am here on a deed of mercy. A friend of mine, an employee of yours, sir, has met with a serious accident and calls for you repeatedly. I am a hackman, and I volunteered to



come for you and ask you to let me take you to him. It is not very far. My cab stands right here."

"I will go to the poor fellow, certainly," responded Lester, hurrying to the vehicle in question and hastily entering it.

In a moment the driver had mounted the box and was off like the wind. It did not occur to Lester until he was well under way that he had not thought to inquire who the injured man was.

As the cab rolled swiftly along over the crowded thoroughfare, Lester leaned back and gave himself up to his own thoughts.

Wealth had come to him, and with it honors had crowded thick and fast upon him. The world of society held out its arms eagerly to him. Lovely young girls, matrons of the house, offered their congratulations to him with the most bewitching of smiles, and mothers with marriageable daughters from all over the city opened an account with the great dry goods house, whose sole owner was a young and handsome bachelor.

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But for all this there seemed to be something sadly missing in his life, a want which he could hardly define, and it seemed to take the shape of something which he was striving to remember, but could not.

Only that morning he had been talking with some one in the office about it, and had been laughingly informed that there was a method that could bring back to his memory that which he desired so ardently to recollect. "If you will tell me how to unravel this tangle that is in my brain, you will have my everlasting gratitude," declared Lester, earnestly.

"It takes people with nerves of steel to accomplish it. A person who is nervous to the slightest degree would not dare to try it, for fear of turning suddenly insane from the terrible mental struggle. Do you still wish to know what it is?"

"Yes," responded Lester, "and I can use my judgment whether I dare try it or not."

"Very good," replied the gentleman, "then here it is: Counting five thousand backward will either restore your loss of memory, or, as I have taken care to warn you gravely in advance, cause you to go insane. It must be done rapidly, and in a given space of time. In my belief the remedy is by far worse than the malady. I feel, somehow, as though I ought not to have told you about it."

"Nonsense," said Lester. "You need have little fear of my trying it."

He thought of it, however, as the cab rolled rapidly along.

"I wonder if harm would result from my trying it?" he mused. "I have unusually strong nerves, and—and, if anything disastrous should come of it, there is not one soul on the wide earth that would be injured. There is no mother to weep, no fair young sister to grieve, no father or brother to be bowed down with sorrow. I am alone in the world. My foolhardiness would injure only myself—only myself."

He had been thinking so deeply that he had not noted the flight of time, nor that the street lamps had grown fewer and far between, at last ceasing altogether, and that they were traveling a country road. Suddenly the vehicle came to a stop. The driver jumped from his box and opened the door with a jerk, remarking:

"This is the place."

Lester alighted, looking about him in a rather mystified manner, but before he could make the inquiry that rose to his lips the driver hastened to say:

"The path that leads to the house, which is just beyond that clump of trees, is so narrow that we cannot drive there. We will have to walk. It is but a short distance. You will see the house at the first turn in the path."

And as the man uttered the words he gave a peculiar cough.

“Who is the person who sent for me?” Lester queried, stopping short. The man made an evasive answer, which aroused his suspicions that all was not as it should be.

“Why do you not answer my question? I refuse to proceed a step farther until you have satisfied me on this point,” declared Lester, haughtily.

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"That's your opinion. I think differently, my fine fellow," answered the man insolently. "I'd advise you to come along quietly."

Lester Armstrong saw at once that he had been lured into a trap. It was natural for him to jump to the conclusion that it was for robbery, owing to the fact of his coming into possession of the great Marsh fortune so recently, and a sudden sternness settled upon his face. He was not used to broils, but this fellow should see that he was not quite a stranger to the manly art of self-defense, and that he had an adversary worthy of his steel.

"Are you coming along peaceably with me, or shall I be obliged to call upon my pals for assistance?" he asked, grimly.

"I propose to defend myself against all odds," answered Lester, more than angry with himself for falling so easily into the trap that had been so cunningly set for him.

He had but a few dollars in money about him, and the disappointment of his assailant in not finding a large roll of bills would in all probability cause the man to take desperate chances in trying to make away with him. If he was armed he was at the fellow's mercy. There might be half a dozen accomplices in collusion with him, he had little doubt.

Again the cabby uttered that peculiar cough which was half a whistle, and in response two men, whose features were covered by black masks, sprang from the adjacent bushes.

Our hero put up a splendid defense, but the united strength of his three antagonists at length overpowered him.

What was there in the figure of one of the men that seemed so familiar to him? he wondered, and just as they were bearing him to the ground by their united efforts, he suddenly reached forward and tore the mask from his assailant's face.

One glance, and the horror of death seemed to suddenly freeze the blood in his veins. His eyes dilated and seemed to nearly burst from their sockets. The face into which he gazed was that of Clinton Kendale, his cousin.

"You!" he gasped, quite disbelieving the evidence of his own senses.

Kendale laughed a diabolical laugh, while his features were distorted into those of a fiend incarnate.

"I haven't the least hesitation in admitting my identity," he said, coolly. "Yes, you are in good hands, if you give us no trouble, and come along quietly, without compelling us to use further force."

“What is the meaning of this outrage?” cried Lester, white to the lips.

“That you shall learn all in good time, cousin mine,” replied Kendale, mockingly.

In struggling out of their grasp to better protect himself, Lester fell headlong on the icy ground, striking his head heavily against the gnarled, projecting root of a tree and lying at their feet like one dead.

“He will give us little enough trouble now,” said Kendale, grimly. “Lend a hand there, both of you, and get him into the house quickly. I am almost frozen to death here.”

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In less time than it takes to narrate it, Lester Armstrong was hurriedly conveyed into the house.

The place consisted of but two rooms, and into the inner one Lester was thrust with but little ceremony, and tossed upon a pallet of straw in the corner.

He had not entirely lost consciousness, as they supposed, but was only stunned, realizing fully all that was transpiring about him.

"Your scheme has worked like a charm, Halloran," said Kendale. "We have bagged our game more easily than I imagined we would. Now there is nothing in the way between me and the fortune that liberal old fool Marsh willed to my amiable cousin."

"Everything rests with the shrewdness with which you play your part," answered the man addressed as Halloran.

"You ought not to have any scruples on that score," exclaimed Kendale, boastfully. "After leaving my amiable cousin on the night of the accident, did I not go immediately to the pretty little heiress, Faynie Fairfax, and successfully pass myself off as the lover she was waiting to elope with? And the little beauty never knew the difference."

"I must own that you played your cards successfully in that direction," was the response, "but this will be a far different matter from hoodwinking a young, unsophisticated girl."

"Within a month from to-day I shall have the Fairfax fortune and the Marsh millions added to it," said Clinton Kendale, emphatically.

"I would put an eternal quietus upon my fortunate cousin here, did I not need his assistance in one or two matters concerning the method of running the business, which was known only to old Marsh and himself."

"Are you fool enough to think that he will divulge those secrets to you?" said Halloran, impatiently.

"They can be forced from him. I know how," returned Kendale, with a brutal laugh. "Come," he said, turning on his heel.

His companion followed him from the apartment, and the door closed with a resounding bang, and Lester lay there too horror-stricken to move hand or foot, fairly spellbound by the disclosures he had overheard as they stood over him, believing him unconscious.

All in an instant a great wave of awakened memory swept over him, opening out the flood-gates of recollection like a flash. He remembered his interview with his sweetheart, his darling Faynie, and how he was arranging to hurry back to marry her when the fatal accident occurred, and how, believing himself dying, he had confided all

to his treacherous cousin, bidding him take the message to his darling, that even in death his only thought was of her.

Oh, merciful God! how horribly had his treacherous cousin betrayed that sacred trust, because of his fatal resemblance to himself! He cried out to God and the listening angels:

“Heaven help my beautiful darling and save her from the machinations of that desperate villain!”

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He knew that Clinton Kendale would stop at nothing to gain his end, and his agony at the thought that he might be unable to prevent it in time almost drove him to the verge of madness.

He felt that they would hold him there until they tortured from him whatever secret he held which they wished to learn; then they would deliberately make away with him. Clinton Kendale would step into his place, personating himself so cleverly that the great world, under whose very eyes the terrible tragedy had taken place, would never know the difference. Even Faynie would not know how she had been tricked and cheated, and the last thought almost drove him to the point of frenzy, nearly succeeding in turning his tortured brain.

CHAPTER XIV.

"You are our prisoner!"

For hours Lester Armstrong lay like one stunned, turning over and over in his mind the awful revelation he had heard. That a human being, especially his cousin, Clinton Kendale, should have plotted so horribly against him seemed almost past believing. Then he remembered how treacherous he had been in his early days, and he wondered that he had been so mad as to have trusted him.

"Heaven save my darling from him!" he cried out in an agony too great for words. To realize that she was in the mercy of such a man was a sorrow so great that all else on earth paled before it. Then a mighty resolve came to him—to foil the villainous plot, weak though he was; he must make his escape and fly to his darling's aid.

He knew that Clinton Kendale would follow out his line of action, keeping him there as long as it was necessary—that is, until he learned all the secrets that he was so anxious to ascertain—then he would put him out of the way with as little compunction as he would a dog. He might expect little mercy at Kendale's hands, when two fortunes and a beautiful young girl hung in the balance.

For hours he lay there, turning the matter over in his mind. He knew he was terribly weak from the awful fall which he had received, and which had hurt his head the second time in almost the same place; but escape he must from the clutches of the conspirators, even though he were dying.

Suddenly the key turned in the lock, the door swung open and Kendale entered, bearing a lighted candle in his hand.

"Ah, you have come to, have you?" he remarked, seeing the other's eyes turn toward him; and before Lester Armstrong could answer he went on quickly: "You are the only one who knows the combination which opens the safe of the late Marsh & Co., and as I

intend to open it to-morrow morning at the usual hour in place of your punctual self, it will be most necessary for you to give me the required information.”

For one moment Lester Armstrong gazed steadily into the face of the fiend incarnate before him—a look before which the other quailed despite his apparent bravado.

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"I am in your power and at your mercy," he said, "but though you torture me on the rack I shall never tell you what you want to know. That safe contains valuable papers which belong to others; they are secure in my keeping. You can kill me, but the secret of the safe combination will die with me."

Kendale laughed a little short, hard laugh.

"You are mad to thus defy me," he cried, harshly, "when you stop to consider that I can open it in any event. I can simply say the combination has slipped from my mind. Who is there to question Mr. Lester Armstrong, the head of the firm? No one—no one. It will be broken open quite as soon as workmen can be found to accomplish it."

The lines about the sufferer's mouth tightened; he clutched his hands hard. He knew the dare devil Kendale would stop at nothing—nothing.

"I will give you until daylight to decide. I promise you that it will go hard with you if you are not complaisant."

With that he turned on his heel and quitted the room.

During all the long hours of that never-to-be-forgotten night Lester Armstrong lay there on his pallet of straw praying for strength to foil the villain—for Heaven to direct him what to do.

For the Marsh millions he cared nothing; but his heart was wrung with anguish when he trusted himself to think of Faynie.

He knew that Kendale had kept the appointment made by himself, but for some reason the elopement could not have taken place. A thousand causes might have prevented its successful carrying out, though Kendale was sure of a satisfactory finish, he imagined.

Daylight broke at last; he could see it dimly through the dust-begrimed, boarded-up windows; but it was not until the sun had well risen that his cousin put in an appearance again. Lester was suffering intense pain from the terrible bruise on his head at the base of the brain, but he set his teeth hard together, determining that his mortal foe should not know it.

"Ah!" exclaimed Kendale, sneeringly. "Wide awake, I see!—probably the fixed habit of years. You have, no doubt, come to a more sensible frame of mind than I left you in last night, I trust, regarding the information I want concerning the combination of the big safe in the private office of Marsh & Co."

"I will never reveal it to you," cried Lester. "Never!"

For an instant a black, malignant scowl swept over Kendale's face, but after a moment's deep thought he turned on his heel again, laughing immoderately as he stepped to the door and held a low conversation with the two men who were still in the outer apartment, and in a trice they had joined Kendale, one of them still wearing the black mask which he had used the night before.

"We will proceed to relieve him of his private papers, keys, wallet, and so forth," said Kendale; and, as if in compliance with some previously arranged plan, the three set upon Lester, and in his almost helpless condition it was not difficult to overpower him and take from him his possessions, which Kendale quickly took charge of.

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In the encounter, owing to his exhausted condition, Lester lost consciousness; and thus they left him, making him their prisoner by turning the key in the lock again when they reached the outer room.

“And now,” said Halloran, removing the square of black linen from his face, “what’s next on the programme?”

“Our friend, the cabby, will take me back to town with as much speed as possible. You, my dear fellow, will remain here on guard, making yourself as comfortable as is absolutely possible under the dismal circumstances of keeping guard and circumventing any attempt of our prisoner to escape. You know we have great need of him yet, in forcing him to disclose much that is advantageous to us. We can starve it out of him, if threats fail. As long as you have a good warm fire, plenty of provisions and plenty to read here you ought not to complain. You are having the easiest part of the bargain, Halloran, while I am doing all of the hazardous work.”

“What if I should be suspected in the *role* I am about to play for the Marsh millions? Why, it would mean State’s prison instead of the fortune we have planned for so desperately.”

“You will carry it through all right,” declared Halloran, confidently.

“My nerve has never failed me so far, and I’m depending on that,” said Kendale, mechanically.

Two hours later Kendale was breakfasting in a fashionable downtown restaurant, endeavoring to fortify himself with courage for the trying ordeal which he was about to face.

He had given Halloran his promise to abstain from touching even a drop of liquor, fully realizing it to be his mortal foe; but with Kendale a promise amounted to scarcely a flip of his white fingers when it ran contrary to his own desires.

He told himself that he must have a “bracer” to steady his nerves. It was not until a second and a third had been drunk that the proper amount of courage came to him to undertake the dastardly scheme. Half an hour later he walked boldly into the big dry goods emporium. He had no idea where the private office was, but his quick wits served him in this dilemma. Laying his hands on an errand boy who was just passing out, whose cap bore the name of Marsh & Co., he said, carelessly:

“Here, lad, take my coat up to the private office; I will follow you. Go slowly, though, through the crowd of shoppers.”

With a respectful bow the boy took the coat from him.

It so happened that one of the rules of the house was that the employees must not use the elevators, and by the time Kendale had climbed the fourth flight of stairs he was thoroughly exhausted, the perspiration fairly streaming down his face.

“Don’t you know enough to go by way of the elevator, you young idiot?” he roared, almost gasping for breath.

“You forget it’s against the rules for us to do so, Mr. Armstrong,” returned the lad.

“Rules be hanged!” cried his companion. “How many more floors up is it?”

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The lad looked up into his face in the greatest amazement. Such a question on the lips of the head of the firm rather astounded him; but then, perhaps it had not occurred to the gentleman just how many flights of steps the boys were obliged to climb.

"We are only on the fourth floor, sir," he responded, "and it's up the other four flights, you know."

"Get into the elevator," commanded Kendale; and the boy turned, and walked over to it, closely followed by his companion, mentally wondering what in the world had come over courteous, kindly Mr. Lester Armstrong.

CHAPTER XV.

The new Broom did not Sweep clean.

Clinton Kendale showed himself to be a thorough actor in carrying out a part carefully, as he followed the boy through the main office, where all of the bookkeepers were at work, toward the little office in the rear.

"Ah, this is indeed comfortable," he exclaimed, flinging himself into a luxurious leather armchair. "Throw the coat down anywhere, and go," he said, as the boy stood before him awaiting his dismissal.

"Great Scott! What an elegant nest Lester got himself into!" he ejaculated, looking about him. "I can enjoy it far better than he could, though I don't expect to be cooped up here more than an hour or two a day. Those fellows out there in the outer office are paid to do the work, and I'll be hanged if they shan't do it—every bit of it. I'll break 'em in my way, and they'll think it's new rules. By George! they'll find plenty of new rules. Ha! ha! ha! I suppose I'd better be opening that desk."

Feeling in his pocket, he drew forth the bunch of keys which he had taken by force from his cousin. One by one he fitted each to the lock, but none of them seemed to work.

"Confound the thing!" he muttered. "My patience won't last much longer. Then I'll stave it in with my heel.

"Hello, there!" he cried, as, hearing a slight noise behind him, he wheeled around and found an elderly man, with a pen behind his ear, and a sheet of paper in his hand, standing there.

"Why the deuce didn't you knock?" he cried, angrily and flushing hotly, for he realized this man must have witnessed his vain attempts to open the desk. "What do you want?" he asked sharply and ill-humoredly.



Mr. Conway, the old cashier—for it was he—was looking at him with dilated, amazed eyes; but in a moment he recovered himself.

“You said to come into your office quite as soon as you came this morning, as you wished to see me on particular business, Mr. Armstrong,” he replied in the low voice habitual with him.

For an instant the bogus Lester Armstrong’s brows were knit closely together; then he said, coolly, sharply: “I’ve changed my mind; I don’t want to see you.”

Still the man lingered.

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"Pardon me," he said. "I thought probably it might be in regard to those notes of Jordan & Beckwith which you were considering negotiating for."

"Well, you'll have to think again," exclaimed the other, tartly.

Mr. Conway turned toward the door, but as he stretched out his hand to grasp the knob his employer sang out, sharply:

"Hold on, there! Come here and see if you can do anything with this confounded desk. It's got the jim-jams or something. I've been monkeying with it for the last half hour, and can do nothing with it." And as he uttered the words, he held out the bunch of keys toward him.

If Mr. Conway had been startled before, he was certainly alarmed now, and he looked at his companion in amazement which could not be concealed.

"Well," cried the other, his temper rising, the result of the brandy diffusing itself through his brain, "what are you staring at me like that for? Why don't you take the keys and go ahead?"

Quite as soon as speech would come to him the old cashier said, slowly:

"You seem to forget, Mr. Armstrong, that the keys have been done away with some time, and the desk now opens with a secret spring which you yourself devised."

"Well, come here and open it. My fingers are all thumbs to-day," replied his companion, looking at him doggedly.

Mr. Conway stepped forward and touched what appeared to be one of the brass nails that studded the outer rim, and, as if by magic, the desk flew open, the other watching keenly to see how he did it.

Without further comment Mr. Conway turned away and with slow, heavy tread left the private office and walked toward his desk. When he reached it his emotions overcame him completely, and he laid his head down upon his ledger, tears falling like rain down his face.

In an instant half a dozen of his fellow bookkeepers were about him, frightened beyond words at this unusual scene and inquiring what could be the matter.

For a moment the old cashier hesitated, then he resolved to break the truth to them; they would soon find it out for themselves; he would tell them, and at the same time instruct them as best he could in this unfortunate affair. He raised his white head, the head that had grown gray in the employ of the firm he had loved so well and served so faithfully.

“You must know the truth, my fellows,” he answered, slowly, huskily, and with apparent difficulty. “Our Mr. Armstrong has, for the first time since we have all known him, gone wrong; he is under the influence of strong drink, and by no means himself. I may add that I earnestly pray that each of you be loyal to him, even through this misfortune, and not let even a hint of it go forth to the outside world, for at this crisis it would ruin the well-known firm of Marsh & Co., which is now vested in him.”

The horror and amazement on the faces of the men can better be imagined than described. All had loved and revered Lester Armstrong, and to hear that he had suddenly gone wrong because he had become possessed of a fortune was alarming and distressing news to them.

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"Drink changes him so completely in temperament that it is hard to realize that he is the same courteous companion of those other days. He was so far gone from the effects of liquor I am not even sure that he recognized me. Hark! what is that?"

Several of the detectives of the place were rushing through the main office toward the private office, in answer to Mr. Armstrong's summons. The call for them had been so furious that they rushed in pell-mell, without waiting to take time to rap.

The bogus Mr. Lester Armstrong still sat in the luxurious leather armchair, his heels on the desk, fairly hidden in heavy clouds of blue smoke from his Havana cigar, at which he was puffing vigorously, fairly going into convulsions of laughter over a letter bearing a blue and gold monogram, which he was reading.

The unceremonious entrance of the four men caused him to spring suddenly to his feet.

"What the d—! I do you fellows want?" he exclaimed angrily. "How dare you intrude upon me, in my private office, in this unheard-of fashion, like a herd of escaped lunatics?"

"You rang for us," replied one of the men.

"I did not," replied the bogus Mr. Armstrong, resuming his seat pompously.

"The bells certainly rang, sir!" exclaimed the other three, simultaneously.

"Didn't I tell you that I didn't ring?" he answered, stamping his feet furiously.

In less time than it takes to tell it three more men dashed into the private office, exclaiming:

"We are here, sir, at the very first tap of your bell."

"You have all gone suddenly stark mad, or you are a set of the blamest fools in existence, as I have just told these men. I did not ring. What on earth do you mean, by insisting that I did, I should like to know?"

"I beg your pardon, but you are still ringing, sir," declared one of the men. "We can distinctly hear the bell ringing furiously. Do you not see that your foot is still on it?"

"My foot!" exclaimed the bogus Mr. Armstrong, angrily. "Explain what you mean at once."

For answer, the man stepped forward, and pulled aside the mat under his employer's feet, mentally wondering if Mr. Lester Armstrong had not grown suddenly daft himself, thereby disclosing a set of electric buttons which the rug had cunningly concealed.

“You kept your foot on them and they rang, calling us here instantly,” returned the man.

“Bless me! I forgot entirely about those confounded electric buttons,” declared the bogus Armstrong, turning very red. “I’ll have ’em put somewhere else to-morrow; great nuisance; always in the way.” And after an instant a bright thought occurred to him, and he said blandly: “Well, to tell you the truth, men, I was only trying you to see how quickly you would respond; you may all go now.”

The men quitted the private office, looking rather dumfounded into each other’s blank faces, and in less than half an hour afterward every employee in the vast dry goods establishment heard the shocking news, that Mr. Lester Armstrong, whom they all believed well-nigh perfect, was terribly intoxicated up in his private office, but they were to be still more astounded ere the eventful day closed.

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CHAPTER XVI.

The will disinheriting Faynie.

As soon as the men had quitted the private office Kendale sprang to his feet and began pacing up and down the length of the room excitedly, muttering under his breath:

“Ah, what a fatal web we weave
When first we practice to deceive.’

“It seems to me that there are traps in every direction to catch me. I must be extra shrewd. I’ll have those confounded bells changed at once. I shouldn’t be at all surprised to find an electric bell connected with that chair at the desk which would call up the entire fire force of the city if I were to lean back far enough in it.”

He flung himself down in his seat again and took up the letter which he had been perusing and which interested him so.

When he had first broken the seal of this missive his heart had fairly jumped into his throat; at the first glance he saw that it was from Mrs. Fairfax, of Beechwood.

He read it carefully through fully a half dozen times. It ran as follows:

“*My dear Mr. Armstrong:* I wish to extend to you my sincere congratulations over your good fortune in succeeding to the business of my dear old friend and neighbor, Mr. Marsh, late of Beechwood village. I feel as though I know you well from hearing him speak so continually of you. I am indeed thankful that his business fell into the hands of one whom he trusted so deeply. “It was his wish, long ago, that we should meet and know each other, and in remembrance of this, his earnest and oft-repeated wish, I now extend you a cordial invitation to visit our home at Beechwood at your earliest convenience and dine with the family. My daughter and I will have a most hearty welcome for you. Any date convenient to you which you may set will be agreeable to us.

“Trusting that we may have the pleasure of seeing you very soon, I remain, yours very truly,

“*Mrs. Horace Fairfax, Beechwood.*”

The bogus Lester Armstrong laid the letter down and looked abstractedly out of the window.

“Of all places in the world, to think that I should be invited there,” he mused. “While I have just been wondering how they took Faynie’s elopement—and never hearing from

her since—and wondering how in the world I was to discover all that—lo! a way is opened to me!”

Then his thoughts flew back to that stormy wedding night, and that midnight scene in the little inn, when the girl he had just wedded, believing her to be an heiress, revealed to him the exasperating truth, that only that night her father had disinherited her, making a new will in favor of her stepmother and her daughter Claire. The plan which Halloran had laid out was to wait a reasonable time, then put in an appearance, stating that he was Faynie’s husband, and that she had just died, and claim her portion of the estate. Every detail had been most carefully mapped out; but here he saw an easier way of gaining that same fortune without the trouble of litigation—marry the girl Claire.

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They would never know anything about that previous marriage with Faynie, and the dead could tell no secrets.

"I'll go," he muttered. "I shall reply at once, telling her she may expect me two days hence—let me see, this is Tuesday; I will dine with her Thursday, and, at least, see what the girl Claire looks like. It would be the proper caper to gather in as many fortunes as drift my way. I suppose I shall run through half a dozen of them ere I reach the end of my tether."

All in due season his letter of acceptance reached Mrs. Fairfax, and she was highly elated over it.

She had seized upon her neighborly acquaintance with the late Mr. Marsh to invite to her home the young man who had fallen heir to his millions, in order that her daughter Claire might win him—if it were a possibility.

She had succeeded in forcing Faynie to remain beneath that roof, even after informing her that she was disinherited—dependent upon her stepmother—by saying that it was her father's wish that she should thus remain for at least six months.

Mrs. Fairfax's real reason was that the outside world would not know just how affairs stood in the family until she had had time to turn everything into cash and get over to Europe to look up another millionaire widower.

On the very night that Faynie had returned so unceremoniously there had been a most thrilling scene but an hour before between Mrs. Fairfax and her daughter.

Unable to sleep, Claire had wandered down to her late stepfather's library in search of a book.

She was not a little surprised to see her mother there—writing—at that late hour.

Her footsteps had made no sound on the thick velvet carpet, and she stole up to her side quite unobserved, looking over her shoulder to see what interested her mother so deeply.

One—two—three—four—five minutes she stood there, fairly rooted to the spot, then a gasp of terror broke from her white lips, causing her mother to spring to her feet like a flash.

"Claire!" she exclaimed, hoarsely, trembling like an aspen leaf and clinging to the back of the nearest chair for support. "How long have you been here?" she gasped.

"Quite—five—minutes," whispered the girl.

“And you have seen—” The mother looked into the daughter’s eyes fearfully, not daring to utter the words trembling on her lips.

“I saw you change the—the will!” whispered Claire, in a terror-stricken voice. “I saw you erase with a green fluid, which must have been a most powerful chemical, the words of the will, ‘to my daughter Faynie’ in the sentence: ‘I bequeath all of my estate, both personal and real,’ and insert therein the words, ‘my wife, Margaret’ in place of ‘my daughter Faynie.’”

The woman stepped forward and clutched the girl’s arm.

“It was for your sake, Claire, that I did it,” she whispered, shrilly; “he cut us off with almost nothing, giving all to that proud daughter Faynie of his. We would have had to step out into the world—beggars again. We know what it is to be poor—ay, in want; we could never endure it again—death would be easier for both of us.



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"The will was drawn two years ago; I am confident that it is the latest—that there is no other. I took a desperate chance to do what I have done to-night—so cleverly that it could never be detected.

"A few strokes of the pen meant wealth or poverty for us, Claire. I am too old to face beggary after living a life of luxury. You will not betray me, Claire—you dare not, knowing that it was done for your sake, Claire."

The girl was not naturally wicked; she had always had a great respect for the high-bred, beautiful Faynie—her stepfather's daughter by his first wife. There had been no discord between the two young girls.

Still, as her mother had said so emphatically, it was better that Faynie should step out of that lovely home a beggar than that they should lose it.

Claire quite agreed with her mother that Faynie must stay there for the present at all hazards; it would arouse such an uproar if she were thrust from that roof just then.

"If my father has expressed the desire that I shall stay here six months, I—I shall do so, even though it breaks my heart," Faynie had said.

She kept her own apartments, refusing to come down to her meals, and Mrs. Fairfax humored this whim by ordering Faynie's meals served in her rooms.

In vain the old housekeeper expostulated with Faynie, urging her to come down at least to the drawing-room evenings, as she used to do.

Faynie shook her golden curls.

"It is no longer my home," she would say, with bitter sobs; "I am only bidding my time here—the six months that I am in duty bound to remain—then I am going away—it does not matter where."

The old housekeeper had tried in vain to coax from the girl the story of where she had been while away from home.

"That is my secret," Faynie would say, with a burst of bitter tears; "I shall never divulge it—until the hour I lie dying."

CHAPTER XVII.

Every man to his Trade.

After the bogus Lester Armstrong had dispatched his letter of acceptance to Mrs. Fairfax he braced himself for what would happen next by taking a deep draught from the silver brandy flask which he kept in his breast pocket, though he realized that he had need of all his senses for any emergency.

During the next hour a score or more bookkeepers came to him with bills, letters and papers of all descriptions. To one and all he said, with a yawn, and very impatiently: "Leave what you have brought on my desk; I'll look over it this afternoon."

Then it occurred to him that such a great concern must have a general manager, and of course he would know something about the different papers these people had brought for his inspection and for him to pass upon, which were like so much Greek to him.

In answer to his summons, a tall, dignified, keen-eyed elderly man responded—a man who struck considerable awe to Kendale's guilty heart. He said to himself that he wished to the Lord he knew this man's name to be able to call him by it—but of course it couldn't be helped.

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"I have concluded to permit you to attend to these matters for me—get through them the best you can in your own way without bothering me with them; do just as you would if I were away on a vacation, we will say, and left everything in your charge—all matters for you to settle as you deemed best."

The gentleman looked surprised and bowed gravely. "I can attend to most of the documents connected with the firm, but there are a few matters I see there that the parties interested might object to if they saw the name of Manager Wright attached instead of the name of the proprietor."

"In that case, show me where you want me to sign, and I'll put down my name here and now, to end the matter."

"Without first examining the documents carefully?" asked the manager, in amazement, thinking how slipshod in his business methods the new proprietor of the great establishment was becoming since he suddenly found himself raised from a poor cashier to a multi-millionaire, and thinking that good old Mr. Marsh would turn over in his grave if he had heard that.

"Thank Heaven all that is off my mind," muttered Kendale, breathing freer as the manager left the office with the papers, adding, thoughtfully: "I hope I won't have to come in contact with that man very often. I felt so uncomfortable that it was by the greatest effort I could control myself—keep from springing from my chair, seizing my hat and fairly flying out of this place."

"His keen gray eyes seemed to pierce through and through me. I expected every moment to hear him shout out: 'Come hither, everybody—quickly; this man is not Lester Armstrong, striking though the resemblance is. Send for the police, that this mystery may be solved at once!'"

He was not far wrong in his suspicions.

Manager Wright had quitted the private office with a deeply knitted brow and a troubled expression on his face.

"The change in Lester Armstrong since yesterday is amazing," he mused. "Long years of dissipation could not have told more on him than the change these few hours have worked. He must have been out drinking and carousing all night long—the odor of the room from the fumes of strong liquor was almost unbearable; it was blue with smoke, too, and Lester Armstrong always led us to believe that he had never smoked a cigar in his life; and, worst of all, from a gentleman he has suddenly turned into a libertine, if I am any judge of features."

“I cannot begin to account for the great change in him; it mystifies me quite as much as it did the store detectives and Mr. Conway, the cashier. It is all terribly wrong—somehow—somewhere. If it were not that I have been here so many years I would tender Mr. Armstrong my resignation. I am not at all satisfied—and yet, yesterday, when Mr. Armstrong called me into his private office and we had that long talk about the business matters of the house, I felt that all would go well; to-day

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he is like a different man—appears to have forgotten completely all of the instructions he was so particular to give me. Yesterday he said: 'We will go over the books and papers very carefully, you and I, and see that every department is run as carefully and well as heretofore. I should not like any one in the establishment to feel that my taking possession will mean any change for them—save for the better.'

"To-day he is as different as night from day; he does not know what he wants; he seems all at sea over the simplest details which he ought to be decidedly familiar with." His musings were suddenly cut short by an immediate summons to return to the private office.

It was with some misgivings that he entered his employer's presence the second time.

The bogus Mr. Armstrong was almost invisible from a cloud of smoke from a freshly lighted Havana. He held the morning paper in his hand and was perusing its columns with apparent avidity.

"Wright!" he cried, excitedly, "how much ready money do you suppose there is in the safe of this shebang—hey?"

It took Mr. Wright almost a moment to recover his usual calm dignity and make answer:

"Five thousand in cash, and there are negotiable notes amounting to upward of forty thousand more."

"Are you sure of that?" queried Kendale, his excitement growing keener; "how do you know?"

"You placed bills in my hands a few moments since which necessitated conferring with Mr. Conway, the cashier, about meeting them."

"Well, hold on—don't pay out any bills to-day; I want to make use of that money—two great opportunities here. Say!" he added in the next breath, "do you know anything about sailing yachts and trotters?"

The question fairly staggered Mr. Wright, but he answered promptly:

"Nothing whatever, Mr. Armstrong. I have never taken any interest in them; it would be out of place for a man in my position to cultivate a taste for that which is so far beyond his means. I am glad to be able to say to you, sir, that my tastes are simple and my wants few. I have never been on board a yacht, nor have I ever ridden behind what you call a trotter."

“Then you’ve missed a deal of sport,” declared Kendale. “But that isn’t what I sent for you to discuss. What I meant to say is that there’s a fellow from Newport gone all to smash. His fine yacht, the *Daisy Bell*, is to be sold at auction to-day, likewise the contents of his stables. There are two of his animals that are flyers—the Lady Albia and Sterling. Why, the Lady has a record better than 2.05 1-2, open gaited, warranted sound, both of ’em, and no end of traps, tea carts, and buggies. I tell you what, Wright, I must have that yacht and that team. You must go and bid them in for me—get ’em at any price, if you have to run it up to a hundred thousand, and you can even do a little better than that rather than see some other lucky fellow get ’em.”

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Mr. Wright was staring at him as though he quite believed his employer had gone suddenly out of his mind.

“Well,” said the bogus Mr. Lester Armstrong, coolly, “you heard my command to you, didn’t you?”

Without another word the general manager turned and with slow, unsteady steps quitted his new employer’s presence.

“Heaven help me, that I should live to see this hour,” he groaned; “a hundred thousand dollars—ten fortunes to a poor man like myself—frittered away on a yacht and a pair of horses! Mr. Marsh would pitch him out if he could but know and come back long enough to do it. It spoils the best of ’em to have money thrown at them—to come into a fortune that they haven’t worked for. A yacht and a pair of horses! What will people say to see me, a business man of supposed sense and judgment, bidding at a public auction mart for anything like this? Heaven help me, I can see the finish of the time-honored dry goods house of Marsh & Co., in which I have taken such a world of pride. But I suppose I must do as he has ordered, no matter how galling it is to me.”

Mr. Wright had no sooner reached the auction mart than a telegram was handed him. It was from his employer, and read as follows:

“There are also a pair of seal-brown pacers to be sold. Secure these in addition to the others. Price must not stand in the way.”

David Wright crushed the telegram in his hands, and the first oath he had ever uttered in all his life was ground out between his teeth.

The yacht and two pairs of horses were spiritedly bid for by half a dozen gentlemen, who were apparently eager to secure them.

It was easy to see that the quiet, elderly business man, who always went higher than the others, was little used to such contests, but he secured them at last for one hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars, and there was more than one amused laugh in the auction room, knowing ones whispering that he had paid three times more than the owner had been asking for them.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Margery’s love dream.

An hour after Mr. Wright had concluded his purchase for his employer he returned to the establishment, accompanied by one of the persons authorized to collect the money.

When he presented the order at the cashier's window, Mr. Conway, the old cashier, drew back aghast as he looked at the man.

"Is—is it possible you have indorsed this?" he asked, turning to the manager.

Mr. Wright bowed, but his face betrayed deep agitation.

"I cannot pay it without consulting Mr. Armstrong," he exclaimed, in a troubled voice. "Wait a moment."

Could it be possible that Lester Armstrong had authorized the payment of an amount like that, knowing that the firm was a little crippled for cash just at that season of the year? Surely the man must be mad, he told himself; and that for which the money was to be paid fairly staggered him. He had to look a second time to satisfy himself that he had not made a horrible mistake when he read: "For one steam yacht and two pairs of horses, \$125,000; terms cash."

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He set his lips hard together, saying to himself that this was the beginning of the end.

At that same moment quite a thrilling scene was taking place in the private office, which would have unnerved the old cashier completely had he known of it. It so happened, in exploring the nooks of the office, Kendale had by chance touched another bell, the bell communicating with the suit department, which was in charge of Mr. Conway's pretty daughter, Miss Margery. When that bell tapped it meant that the young lady was to make all possible haste to the private office, to which she had been summoned, and this the young girl proceeded to do, not without some little trepidation, however. Fair Margery Conway had a secret romance in her life, a romance which no one in the wide world would ever have guessed.

For many a long day she had been secretly in love with Mr. Lester Armstrong, her father's assistant, of whom; she had heard him speak so much and praise so highly.

She admired him immensely. Many a time she made excuses to speak with her father a moment in their private office. No one in the wide world guessed that grave, handsome Lester Armstrong was the attraction that brought her there.

She had many a casual chat with him, and somehow the hope grew in her heart that he was not altogether indifferent to her.

Once, when she had started home in the pouring rain, he had gone out of his way to see her safely to her destination under the shelter of his umbrella.

He had only been courteous, but she had built up many a hope from this little incident alone.

She had not seen very much of Lester Armstrong since that never-to-be-forgotten day, but her father had told her that he usually asked each morning: "How is your daughter, Miss Margery?" and once her father had said:

"Of all the young men whom I have met, I have the greatest regard for Lester Armstrong. Such young men are the salt of the earth. There is a future before him. When he earns a dollar he puts by more than half of it against a rainy day. He is not extravagant. Few young men making his salary would dress so very plainly and make his clothes do him as long. He has no bad habits; he neither smokes nor drinks, and that is something you can say of very few young men nowadays."

Margery looked up into her father's face with shining eyes. She made no answer, but a vivid flush crept up into her cheeks, and the little hands that were busy with the teacups trembled a little. She knew quite well that in the depth of his heart her father was hoping that she and Lester Armstrong would take a fancy to each other, and that in time

that fancy might ripen into love, and instead of being only acquaintances, she and the assistant cashier might be nearer and dearer to each other.

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Not long after this Margery Conway received a letter, a poem, rather, typewritten. There was no name signed to it, but she felt sure that it came from some one in the establishment of Marsh & Co. More than one salesman looked at pretty Margery Conway with admiring eyes, but she never thought of any of these. The truth was, it was sent by one of the bookkeepers, but the girl jumped at once to the conclusion that it was from Lester Armstrong. She imagined that from the tender, sentimental words. She read the beautiful poem over and over again, until she knew every word by heart. The lines even floated dreamily through her brain in her sleep. She would awaken with them on her lips. Ah, surely, the poem was from Lester Armstrong, she fully believed. It read as follows:

“What have I done that one face holds me so,
And follows me in fancy through the day?
Why do I seek your love? I only know
That fate is resolute, and points the way
To where you stand, bathed in amber light.
Since first you looked on me I’ve seen no night—
What have I done?

“What can be done? As yet no touch, no kiss;
Only a gaze across your eyes’ blue lake.
Better it were, sweetheart, to dream like this,
Than afterward to shudder and awake.
Love is so very bitter, and his ways
Tortured with thorns—with wild weeds overgrown.
Must I endure, unloved, these loveless days?—
What can be done?

“This I say, ‘Marry where your heart goes first,
Dear heart, and then you will be blessed.
Ah, how can others choose for you
What is for your best?
If you’re told to wed for gold,
Dear girl, or for rank or show,
Stand by love, and boldly say,
“No, my heart cries no!””

Like most young girls, pretty Margery was sentimental. She slept with the folded paper beneath her pillow at night, and all day long it was carefully tucked away over her beating heart.

It was quite a week after receiving this ere she saw Lester Armstrong again; then her face turned burning red. Lester saw it, but how was he to dream that he was the cause of her emotion?

“Sweet Margery Conway is not strong,” he thought, pityingly. “How frightened her father would be were he to see that sudden rush of blood to the head.”

He wondered whether or not he should run to her and proffer his assistance. He had once seen a young woman who was thus affected fall to the floor in a fit, and it had been many a long day ere the unfortunate woman could return to her work again. He devoutly hoped this might not be the case with poor, pretty Margery.

She saw him start and look at her searchingly. She could not have stopped and exchanged a word with him if her life had depended upon it. She hurried past him with desperate haste, praying that he might not hear the beating of her heart.

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He noticed that she did not stop to speak, but he quite believed that it was because she was very busy. The next moment he had forgotten all about it, and about the girl, too, for that matter.

He scarcely remembered pretty Margery until he happened to see her again. The girl was fairly stunned by the intelligence that the great millionaire owner of the establishment had made Lester Armstrong his heir.

At first her joy was so great that she could not speak. Then a sudden fright swept over her heart. He was rich now, and she was poor. Would it make any difference with him. She tried to put the chilling thought from her, for it made her heart turn cold as ice. Her gentle eyes did not close in sleep all the long night through. Her pillow was wet with tears. The one prayer on her lips was: "I pray to Heaven this may make no change in him; that he will care for me as much as when he sent me the poem."

She had not seen Lester Armstrong since he had taken his new position as proprietor of the great establishment, and now, when his bell rang for her, no wonder the girl's heart leaped into her mouth, and involuntarily she looked into the long pier glass eagerly. Ah, it was a fair face reflected there. There were few fairer, with its delicate coloring framed in nut-brown curls, gathered back so carelessly from the white brow, and there was a light in the brown eyes beautiful to behold. She had been wondering only the moment before if the hero of her daydreams had forgotten her, and lo! the summons of his bell had seemed to come in answer to the thought.

With trembling, hopeful anticipation, Margery wended her way to her employer's office, taking the nearer route, not through the main office, where her father was, but by a more direct narrow passage, which was seldom used.

All unmindful of his daughter's presence in the main office, the old cashier had bent his steps thither for instructions regarding the bill which had just been presented, but he had scarcely reached out his hand to knock, ere he heard a blood-curdling, piercing scream, in a woman's voice, from within, and recognized, in horror too great for words, the voice of his own daughter, his Margery!

CHAPTER XIX.

Pretty Margery's terrible discovery.

Pretty Margery Conway had made her way eagerly enough to Mr. Lester Armstrong's private office, but her light tap on the door brought no response, and, as it was slightly ajar, she pushed it open and stepped across the threshold.

To her great surprise she saw that her employer was deeply engrossed in the pictures of a comic weekly, and the loud “Ha! ha! ha!” that fell from his lips struck upon the girl’s sensitive nerves most unpleasantly.

She was wondering how she should make her presence known to him, when suddenly he turned around, and then he saw her and a quick gleam of intense admiration leaped into his bold, dark eyes at the vision of the lovely, blushing, dimpled face of the slender, graceful young girl.

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"I am here in response to your summons, Mr. Armstrong," she said, with much embarrassment. "Your bell rang so imperatively that—"

"I didn't ring any bell, my dear," he exclaimed, "but still I am uncommonly glad to see you. Sit down and we'll have a little chat."

"There is a customer awaiting my return as soon as you—"

"Oh, hang the customer," cut in Kendale. "Sit down, pretty one, and we'll make each other's acquaintance."

Margery looked at him in helpless bewilderment.

Had handsome Lester Armstrong, the hero of her dream, gone suddenly mad, she wondered?

"Sit down, my dear," he reiterated, "don't look at me in such affright. I'm not an ogre; I don't intend to eat you, though, upon my honor, those peachy cheeks and pomegranate lips are most wonderfully tempting."

Margery was so intensely surprised she was fairly speechless—incapable of word or action.

From where she stood the fumes of strong brandy reached her, and she realized that the man before her was under its influence to an alarming extent.

No wonder her pretty face paled; even her lips grew white.

She stood before him as one mesmerized by the baleful gleam in his merciless concentrated gaze, as the fluttering, frightened bird does in the presence of the deadly serpent that means to destroy it.

"Won't be sociable, eh?" muttered Kendale. "You are not diplomatic; you don't know your own interests. Sit down here and tell me all about yourself—how long you have been here, and all about it. I ought to know, of course, but I forget. Come, brush up my memory a bit, won't you?"

"Your memory seems indeed very poor all at once," said Margery, spiritedly, "considering the fact that you have known me since I was a little child"—and, in spite of her efforts at self-control, big tears brimmed over the pretty eyes and rolled down the round cheeks.

In an instant Kendale was on his feet.

“There, there, Susie, don’t cry,” he said, reaching her side quickly and grasping both of the little clasped hands in one of his.

“You must have some one else in your mind—that is quite evident. Please to recollect that I am Margery Conway, not—not Susie—whoever she may be.”

He laughed a rollicking, maudlin laugh. The brandy was beginning to diffuse itself through his brain.

“I’ll never call you anything but Margery again,” he cried, “beautiful, peerless Margery, the sweetest, jolliest, most bewitching and lovable shop girl in all New York.”

The young girl looked at him with dilated eyes. Every impulse in her terrified heart warned her to turn and fly from the place, but it was all in vain. She could not have moved hand or foot if her very life had been the forfeit.

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“So you are toiling away in a place like this for a mere pittance,” he went on; “probably hardly enough to keep soul and body together. That’s a confounded shame for a pretty girl like you. Work isn’t for such as you—you ought to be out in the sunshine, dressed in silks and velvets and diamonds galore. It’s bad enough for the old and ugly—those whose hair is streaked with gray and around whose eyes the crow’s feet have been planted by the hand of time, to work—ay, toil for their bread. By Jove, I say you are far too lovely for such a fate!”

“Sir!” cried Margery, drawing herself up to her fullest height. “I work for my living, but I want you to understand that I am proud of the fact, instead of deeming it a disgrace, as you seem to think it.

“Up to this hour I have always considered you a man of honor—one of nature’s noblemen—a gentleman. Now I know you as you are—a *roue*—ay, a scoundrel. I would scorn to remain another hour in your employ. Money earned in this establishment from this moment would burn my fingers.”

“Hoity-toity! Don’t get big feelings too suddenly, my pretty dear,” he cried, with a load, hilarious laugh. “Lord! what simpletons some girls are! You’re standing in your own light, pretty one! Can’t you see that?”

“Sir!” cried Margery, struggling to free herself from the grasp of his strong hand, “it is dastardly, it is cowardly to summon me here to subject me to—insult.”

“Pon my honor, I want to be friendly, but you won’t have it so—you seem determined to kick up a row. Come, now, be friendly; sit down here and we’ll talk it over.”

“Unhand me!” cried Margery in terror. “Let me go, or I shall scream for help!”

“You won’t do any such thing, my little ruffled birdling,” he cut in, an angry light leaping up into his eyes, adding: “I am disposed to treat you very kindly, but you seem determined to make an enemy of me instead of a friend, my dear, and your reason ought to tell you how foolish that is. Come, be sensible and listen to me. I’ve taken a violent fancy to that pretty face of yours. We must be friends—excellent friends. That’s a good beginning, you know.”

Margery glanced toward the door, the fright deepening in her eyes. He had placed himself between her and the door, kicking it to with his foot.

He saw that quick glance, and read it aright, and his brow darkened.

“Don’t be a little fool!” he cried. “Don’t anger me, girl. You had better make a friend instead of an enemy of me.”

“Your enmity or friendship is a matter of equal indifference to me now,” gasped Margery, sobbing bitterly.

“You have slain my respect for you. I—I am sorry—sorry from the bottom of my heart—that I realize you have fallen from such a noble height in my estimation.”

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"That's all bosh and moonshine," hiccoughed Kendale; "respect and high pedestal of honor and all that sort of thing. You're among the clouds; get down to earth. I'm only a man—you mustn't take me for a little god. Come, now, what in the name of reason is the use of making such a fuss over this thing, and storming like an angry princess on the stage because I tell you frankly that I've taken a notion to you. By George, you ought to be mighty pleased to know that you've captured the fancy of a man like me, with no end of money at my command. Do you realize that, little one?"

The girl's terror was growing intense with each passing moment.

Her horror and dread of the man before her was a thousand-fold greater at that moment than her admiration for Lester Armstrong had been in days gone by. He seemed to her a different being in the same form—one suddenly transformed from all that was manly and noble to a very fiend incarnate.

An awful stillness had fallen over the girl—a full realization of the meaning of his jocular remarks was just dawning upon her. She was looking at him with the awful pallor of death on her lovely young face.

"Come, my pretty Margery," he cried, quite mistaking the reason that her struggle to free herself from his clasping hand had so suddenly ceased; "now you are falling into a more complaisant mood. I am glad of that. Sit down and we'll talk. I must lock that door, or some blundering fool will be stumbling in without taking the trouble to knock. But first give me a kiss from those sweet lips, my dear, to assure me you don't quite dislike me, you know."

As he spoke he flung his arm about the girl's slender waist, and it was then that Margery's piercing scream rang out so loudly upon her father's ears, fairly electrifying him as he stood with his hand upon the knob of the door of the private office.

CHAPTER XX.

A FATHER'S RIGHTEOUS INDIGNATION

For an instant the old cashier stood like one suddenly paralyzed before the door of the private office from which that terrified scream had issued.

Great God! was he mad or dreaming, that he should imagine he heard his daughter Margery's voice calling for help from within?

But even as he stood there, trembling, irresolute, the piercing cry was repeated more shrilly, more piteous than before, and it cut through the frightened father's heart like the thrust of a dagger.



"I am coming, I am here, Margery!" he answered, twisting the bronze knob fiercely; But the door did not yield to his touch as usual, and to his horror he realized that it was locked upon the inside!

With the fury of a tiger, David Conway threw himself against it with all his strength; strong as the lock was, it could not withstand the weight that was brought to bear upon it, and in an instant it was snapped asunder, the door falling in with a crash.

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With a terrible imprecation Kendale wheeled about, his grasp around the girl's waist slackening for a single instant.

And in that instant Margery sprang from him, darting into the arms of her father, who had leaped over the threshold.

"How dare you enter here?" shrieked Kendale, fairly beside himself with baffled rage.

The old cashier thrust his daughter behind him and walked up to the foiled villain, gazing him steadily, unflinchingly in the eye.

"I am here just in time to defend my child," he cried, white to the lips, "and here to chastise you, you villain, old man as I am"—and with the rapidity of lightning his clinched fist fell upon the face of the man before him with stinging blows, that resounded with all the strength and force of a steel hammer.

Kendale, who was by this time entirely under the influence of the brandy he had imbibed, was no match for the enraged cashier, who followed up his advantage by ringing blows, which fell as thick and fast as driving hail, until the other, coward as he was, fell down on his knees before him, shrieking out for mercy.

The unusual disturbance soon brought a throng of cashiers, bookkeepers and clerks flocking to the scene.

The old cashier turned upon them, holding up his hand to stay their steps as they crowded over the threshold, Mr. Wright, the manager, calling upon him anxiously to explain at once this unusual scene—this disgraceful encounter between his employer, who seemed unable to speak because of his injuries, and himself.

"It is due you all to know just what has happened," replied the old cashier, in a high, clear voice, "but I say to you, by the God above me, if this hound dares arise from his knees ere I have finished, I will kill him before your very eyes. There is something he has to say before you all while still on his knees. Let no man speak until I have had my say, and then you—my companions of years, my fellow-workers, my friends of a lifetime—shall judge of my action in this matter and deal with me accordingly."

The scene was so extraordinary that no man among them seemed capable of uttering so much as a syllable, so great was their consternation at beholding their employer on his knees, groveling before the old cashier, who stood over him like an aroused, avenging spirit.

In a voice high and clear the old cashier, whom they had known and revered for years, told his story in a simple, straightforward way, yet quivering with excitement, drawing his terror-stricken daughter Margery into the shelter of his strong arms as he spoke.

“I am Margery’s father—her only protector,” he said, in conclusion. “Is there a man among you with a father’s heart beating in his bosom who would not have done as I have done to the villain who dared to thus insult his child. Ay, there are men among you who would not have hesitated to have stricken him dead with a single blow—who would have considered it a crime to have spared him.”

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By this time Kendale was recovering from the stunning blows which had been dealt him—realized that help was at hand; the employees would be in duty bound to protect him from the enraged man before him.

He realized, too, that the old cashier meant that he should remain there on his knees and beg the girl's pardon before all these people.

Ere Mr. Conway could judge of his design the bogus Lester Armstrong had bounded to his feet and into the midst of the crowd.

"You are discharged!" he cried, turning to the old cashier. "I will give you just ten minutes to get out of this building—you and the girl, both of you. It was a plan hatched up between you and her to extort money from me."

The old cashier attempted to spring at him, but the strong hands of indignant, pitying friends held him back.

Suddenly he stopped short, saying, with a dignity wonderful to behold:

"It is not necessary, I think, to ask any of you, who all know me so well and know also my little Margery, not to give credence to so heinous a statement. I am going from this place, friends. I would not stay another moment in this villain's employ, nor would my Margery, though he weighed us down with all the wealth the world holds. Come, Margery."

The crowd slowly parted, making way for them, and together Margery and her father passed through the line of sympathizing faces, hand in hand—the old man white, stern and resolute, pretty Margery sobbing as though her heart would break.

Mr. Wright, the manager, who had been—like the old cashier—fully five and twenty years beneath that roof, turned and faced the throng, saying, huskily:

"Mr. Armstrong, I herewith tender you my resignation. My friend of a lifetime is going, and I shall go, too."

"And I," "And I," "And I," quickly rang out, voice after voice.

"Confound you all, I discharge the whole lot of you!" shouted Kendale, now quite sobered by the excitement he was passing through. "Don't think your going troubles me even a little bit. The set of men don't live who will ever trouble me or my business!"

With great rapidity the men fled from the private office, and, without waiting even to close their ledgers, took down their coats and hats, got into them quickly and filed downstairs.

Kendale never could fully comprehend how it happened that in five minutes' time the five hundred employees of the place heard what had occurred, and in less time than it takes to recount it the strangest event that had ever taken place in the annals of a great New York business house occurred—there was a mighty uproar and by one accord the great throng of employees quitted their tasks—badly as they needed work—and dashed out into the street, leaving the vast emporium to the hundreds of astonished customers with which it was crowded at that hour.

For an instant Kendale was horror-stricken when he realized what was occurring.

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"God Almighty!" he gasped, "I am ruined, disgraced! A thousand furies take that girl; but she shall pay dearly for this. The police will be here to quell the riot and disperse the crowd outside, and turn out the people who are still inside!"

Looking from the window, he saw that the throng of angry employees were gathered around the old cashier and his daughter in a mighty mob.

"Good Lord! if Halloran were only here, to advise me this time," he muttered, turning pale with fear. He could hear their loud, angry voices hurling imprecations at him, and he knew full well that he would never be able to pass through that throng of thoroughly aroused and angry men without their doing him bodily injury, and he told himself in affright that all the Marsh millions for which he had bartered his soul would not save him from the hands of that raging mob.

CHAPTER XXI.

"I like her better than any I have met—I shall marry her."

Kendale was clever and quick of resource. He realized that there must be sudden action on his part. Should he fly headlong from the place and give up all? Then a remembrance of the yacht and the horses came to him, and he set his teeth hard together.

"I will see this game through, come what may," he muttered.

At that instant a daring thought came to him, and he acted upon it before he could have time to back down through cowardice.

Throwing open the window wide, he stepped boldly out upon the ledge in full view of the angry crowd of five hundred employees.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he exclaimed, raising his voice to a high key that all might hear, "I have something to say, and it is only due me that you should listen and then pass judgment.

"Please believe me, one and all, I had no thought, no wish to offend Mr. Conway's pretty daughter Margery. I may as well own the truth. I had fallen desperately in love with the girl and was telling her so, and was just on the point of asking her to accept me as a suitor for her hand when she, mistaking my motives, it appears, called for assistance, and I was not permitted to speak in order to explain.

"Assuring her and all of you that my motives were most honorable, I beg of you to reconsider leaving me in this abrupt fashion. Return to your posts of duty, and this little difficulty will be adjusted satisfactorily to you and to Miss Conway."

Kendale was used to making a hit with an audience—used to throwing his soul, as it were, into anything he had to say.

The effect on the crowd below was magical; for a moment they were stunned.

The old cashier was almost stunned. The young millionaire was just about proposing marriage to Margery! Why, what a mistake he had made—what a terrible mistake! Even Margery had fallen back a step or two and was clinging to her father's hand in the greatest amazement.

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"I—I think I was mad, friends and fellow-workers," he exclaimed, huskily. "I believe I was too precipitate in this affair.

"It is so long since I was young I—I had forgotten that it is the custom of men now, as in the years long since gone by, to speak to a maiden of love before he said anything of marriage.

"It did not occur to me that the great millionaire wanted my little girl for his wife, as he now says.

"Hear me, friends, one and all. I most heartily regret causing this disturbance and I move that we return to our places, as our employer suggests."

There was a murmur of assent among the throng; then, all in a body, they moved forward, entering the building again; and in less than five minutes' time matters were moving on quite as smoothly once more as though no sudden upheaval had ever occurred in the great dry goods establishment.

Mr. Conway, however, was too upset to attend further to his duties that afternoon, and accepted the manager's suggestion that he should go to his home, Margery accompanying him.

Meanwhile Kendale had thrown himself down into the nearest chair, breathing hard, feeling like a general who had achieved a most wonderful victory.

"A few soft, silvery words saved me this time," he muttered, "but it throws the girl on my hands. Well, I suppose I will have to propose marriage to her now—every one expects it; there would be a terrible rumpus kicked up if I did not. Well, let there be an engagement between us; that doesn't mean that there will be a marriage, by any means. The engagement can drag along three or four years, and then we can break off. By that time I shall be ready to marry the heiress of the Fairfax millions. Ah, how much easier it is to scheme for a fortune than to toil for one, as most poor mortals do."

The entrance of the manager with the bill for the hundred and twenty-five thousand put an end to his musings and plans for the present. Mr. Wright emerged from the office ten minutes later with a very troubled expression on his face. It was dearly patent to him that Mr. Lester Armstrong did not care how badly the business was crippled, so long as he secured the yacht and the fast horses.

From that first day, so full of awkward and almost fatal mistakes, Kendale spent as little time as was absolutely necessary in the establishment of Marsh & Company, as it was still called, preferring to let all of the business cares fall upon the manager's already weighted shoulders.

In less than a week it was noised about social circles that the young man who had so suddenly dropped into millions of money was something of a sport—a yachtsman whose magnificent yachting parties were the wonder of the metropolis; a horseman whose racing stables were second to none and were worth a handsome fortune; and it was hinted that he seemed no stranger at cards and gambled sums of gold that would have purchased a king's ransom at a single game—until those who looked on in speechless wonder were sure he must have exhaustless wealth. Every one prophesied, however, that this reckless extravagance must have an ending some time. Meanwhile society held out its arms to the young millionaire, welcoming him with its sweetest smiles.

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The date which he had set to dine with the Fairfaxes, of Beechwood, rolled around at last, and for once in his life Kendale, or rather the bogus Lester Armstrong, was punctual in his appointment.

He was ushered into a drawing-room of such magnificence that for a moment he fairly caught his breath in wonder.

"So this was the home of Faynie Fairfax, the girl whom I wedded in the old church and who died so suddenly on her bridal eve," he soliloquized. "Well, all this could be mine for the fighting for it as Faynie's husband, who has survived her, but, as Halloran would say, 'It's a deal easier getting the same fortune by marrying the stepmother's daughter, who has come into it by Faynie's father cutting her off at the eleventh hour.'"

"I wonder what the girl Claire is like."

There was a portrait of a young girl done in water colors over the mantel. He stepped over to examine it.

"If this is Claire's portrait she's certainly not bad looking," he mused, "but she is one I should not care to cross."

The figure was slight, draped in a gown of some light, airy fabric. The head was small, crowned in a mass of waving dark hair. The contour of the face was perfect; a pair of deep gray eyes looked out of it straight at you; the lips were small, but a little too compressed, showing that the owner of them had certainly a will of her own, which it was neither wise nor best to cross.

He was startled from his contemplation by the sound of silken robes rustling across the carpet, and, wheeling suddenly about, he was confronted by a tall, slim, magnificent woman, who welcomed him most graciously to Fairfax House.

"My daughter Claire will join us in a very few minutes. Ah, she is here now," she announced, as a swift step was heard in the corridor outside; a moment later the portieres parted, and the young girl whose portrait he had been critically analyzing entered the room.

"I shall know at once by the first words he utters whether I shall like him or not," thought the girl, looking straight into his face with her fearless, keen, gray eyes. "He is handsome, and that generally goes with great conceit, Faynie always said."

"I hope we shall be friends, Miss Fairfax," he said, extending his hand and bowing low over the little brown one that lay for an instant in his palm.

“There is a great mistake evident at the outset,” said the girl, looking up into his face. “Mamma said just now: ‘This is my daughter Claire.’ I think mamma intended to add, ‘Miss Claire Stanhope.’ Mr. Fairfax was my steppapa.”

Kendale smiled amusedly, both at the mother’s momentary discomfiture and the young girl’s brusque straightforwardness.

“I like her better than any one I have ever met. I shall marry her,” he promised himself.

CHAPTER XXII.

Claire’s lover.

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During the dinner that followed Kendale longed to introduce the subject of "Faynie," but found no opening. His eagerness to know what they thought and what they had to say concerning her disappearance was intense, but he had to bide his time to find out.

Meanwhile he paid the most flattering attention to Claire.

He had noticed with a keen sense of regret that the girl limped most painfully in her walk, but, despite this defect, for the first time in his reckless life, he was thoroughly fascinated with her.

He took his leave early, promising them that he would certainly avail himself of their gracious permission to call again, very, very soon.

Long after his departure the mother and daughter still sat in the drawing-room discussing him eagerly.

"It is a good thing for you that Faynie declines to come down to the drawing-room to see visitors and insists upon having her meals in her own room. If she had seen this handsome Mr. Armstrong, you would have stood little chance of winning him, my dear," declared Mrs. Fairfax.

Claire rose slowly to her feet, turned and faced her mother.

"You and I do not agree on that point, mamma," she said, quickly, "I have what you call a Quixotic notion, perhaps, and that is that we are attracted toward those whom Heaven intended for us, and if this be so he would not have been attracted toward Faynie if he were intended for me."

"We will not argue the matter, Claire, for we shall never agree," declared her mother, adding: "I shall always be opposed to Mr. Armstrong meeting Faynie or ever hearing one word concerning the existence of such a person. If he should, mind, I predict harm will come of it."

Those were the words that rang in Claire's ears long after she retired to her room.

"I shall tell Faynie that we had a caller last evening and how handsome he was; but I shall take good care to follow mamma's advice and never let her know his name," the girl ruminated.

She was only a young girl, full of girlish enthusiasm, and it was certainly beyond human expectation to believe she could refrain from mentioning that much to Faynie the next morning.

Faynie laid a little white hand on Claire's nut-brown head.

“Take care not to fall too deeply in love with this handsome stranger,” she said, “for handsome men are not always good and true as they seem.”

“I am sure this gentleman is,” declared impulsive Claire emphatically. “He has the deepest, richest, mellowest voice I ever heard, and such eyes—wine dark eyes—those are the only words which seem to express what they are like—and when he takes your hand and looks down into your face, the hand he holds so lightly tingles from the finger tips straight to your heart.”

“I am afraid he has been holding your hand, Claire. Ah, take care—beware!” warned Faynie.

During the fortnight that followed Kendale was a constant visitor at the palatial Fairfax home.

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And those two weeks changed the whole after current of Claire's life, as Faynie observed with wonder. It was certainly evident the girl was deeply in love, and Faynie trembled for her, for love would bring to such natures as hers the greatest peace or the bitterest sorrow.

She wondered if her stepmother saw how affairs were drifting.

If it had not been that she and her stepmother were always at cross-purposes with each other, she would have gone to her and warned her that it was dangerous to throw this handsome young man so often into Claire's society, unless she could readily see that he was pleased with the girl—realizing that poor Claire had a sad drawback in her lameness and that many would seek her society because she was bright and witty, who would never dream of asking her hand in marriage because of it.

Once she attempted to warn Claire of the hidden rocks that lay in love's ocean, but the girl turned quickly a white, pained face toward her.

"Say no more, Faynie," she cried; "the mischief, as you call it, has already been done. My heart has left me and gone to him. If I do not win him I shall die. You know the words:

"Some hold that love is a foolish thing,
A thing of little worth;
But little or great, or weak or strong.
'Tis love that rules the earth.

"The tale is new, yet ever told;
It has often been breathed ere now—
'There was a lad who loved a lass'—
'Tis old as the world, I trow!

"The song I sing has been sung before,
And will often again be sung
While lads and lasses have lips to kiss,
Or bard a tuneful tongue.

"And this is the burden of my rhyme—
Though love be of little worth,
Yet from pole to pole and shore to shore,
'Tis love that rules the earth."

"And it is love that breaks hearts and wrecks lives," murmured Faynie, with streaming eyes and quivering lips. "Oh, Claire! again I warn you to take care—beware!"

For one brief moment she was tempted to tell Claire her own story.

Ah, had she but done so, how much misery might have been spared the hapless girl! But she put the impulse from her with a shudder.

No, no, she could not breathe to human ears the story of her false lover and the tragedy that had ended her dream of love.

She had never permitted her thoughts to dwell upon Lester Armstrong since that fatal night.

If there were times when she thought of him as when she knew him first, seemingly so loving, tender and true, she put the thought quickly from her, remembering him as she saw him that fatal night—transformed suddenly into a demon by strong drink, when he struck her down upon finding that she had just been disinherited—that she was not the heiress that he had taken her to be.

He thought his crime buried fathoms deep under the drifting snow heaps. Ah, how great would be his terror to find that the grave to which he had consigned her had given her back to the world of the living! No, no, she could not shock Claire's young ears with that horrible story!

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It would be bad enough for her to learn of it in after years.

Thus Faynie settled the matter in her own mind, and her lips were sealed.

One morning Claire burst eagerly into the room, quite as soon as it was light.

"I was here late last night, but you were asleep, Faynie," she said, "and I came away, though I could scarcely wait to tell you the wonderful news."

"I think I can guess what it is," replied Faynie, stroking the girl's brown curls, "Your lover has declared his love for you and asked you to be his wife. Is it not so?"

"You know it could be nothing else which could make me so very, very happy," laughed Claire, her cheeks reddening.

"And you have answered—yes?" asked Faynie.

"Of course I said yes," responded Claire.

"And when is the wedding to take place?" queried Faynie, hoping with all her heart that this lover of whom the girl was so desperately fond loved Claire for herself—not for the wealth she had fallen heir to.

Claire raised her bright, blushing face shyly, the dimples coming and going, making her rather plain little face almost beautiful at that moment.

"Mamma wanted the marriage put off for a year—I am so young—but Lester was so impatient that he would consent to no such arrangement. He wants the ceremony performed with as little delay as is absolutely necessary."

"Lester!" The name went through Faynie's heart like the thrust of a knife.

For an instant every nerve in her body seemed to tremble and throb with quick, spasmodic pain, then to stand still as though the chill of death were creeping over her. Her eyes grew dim with an awful darkness, and Claire's voice seemed far off and indistinct. Then the world faded from her altogether and she fell at Claire's feet all in a little heap, in a dead swoon.

CHAPTER XXIII.

The proposal.

With all possible haste Claire summoned the housekeeper and gave Faynie into her charge.

It was more than disappointing to her to have Faynie lapse into unconsciousness just as she had reached the most interesting part of her story and was about to tell her how very romantically handsome Lester had proposed. It had been just like a page from a French novel.

She little dreamed that the art of making love was an old one to him.

Kendale had gone to the Fairfax mansion with the express purpose of proposing marriage that evening, for only that day Mr. Conway, the old cashier, had told him confidentially that the affairs of the great dry goods concern were in a bad shape—that the check for the hundred and twenty-five thousand which had just been paid out had crippled them sorely.

And, after a moment's pause and with a husky voice, he added slowly: "If something like three hundred thousand dollars is not raised within the next sixty days you are a ruined man, Mr. Armstrong."

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This announcement fell with crushing force upon Kendale, who had imagined that there could be no end to the flow of money that was pouring in upon him.

"There's only one way of raking in that much money in a hurry, and that is by marrying the little lame heiress," he soliloquized.

It so happened that he had an engagement to call there on this particular evening, and he resolved that he would not let the opportunity slip past him—that there was no time like the present.

Fortune, fate, call it what you will, favored Kendale on this particular occasion, as it usually did. He found Claire alone in the drawing-room practising some sheet music which he had sent her a few days before.

She started up in confusion as the servant ushered him into the room, a swift blush crimsoning her cheeks.

"Mamma will be down directly, Mr. Armstrong," she said, looking at him shyly from beneath her long lashes.

"Miss Stanhope—Claire!" he exclaimed impulsively, seizing both of her little hands in his, "may we not have a few words together before my card is sent up to your mother? Oh, Claire, you would surely say yes if you knew all I had to say to you. Be kind and consent."

"Since you seem to desire it so earnestly, I am sure I have no wish to object," she answered, trembling in spite of her efforts to appear unconcerned under the fire of his keen, ardent gaze.

"You are an angel," he cried, seating himself in a chair so near her that he could still hold the little fluttering hands, which she fain would have drawn from his clasp, for, although she had never before had a proposal of marriage, she guessed intuitively what was coming.

"Since I have but a few minutes alone with you, Claire, what I have to say must be said quickly," he began.

For the first time in her life Claire was at a loss for an answer.

"I am sure you have guessed my secret, sweetest of all sweet girls," he murmured. "Every glance of my eyes, every touch of my hand, must have told it to you from the first moment we met. Did it—not?"

"No," faltered Claire, her eyes drooping like a flower under the sun's piercing rays.

"Then my lips shall tell you," he cried. "It is this—I love you, little Claire—love you with all my heart, all my soul. You are the light of my life, the sunshine of my existence, my lode-star, my hope—all that a young girl is to a man who idolizes her as the one supreme being on earth who can make him happy. Oh, Claire, I worship you as man never worshiped woman before, and I want you for my wife."

She opened her lips to speak, but he went on rapidly, hoarsely:

"Do not refuse me, for it would be my death warrant if you did. I tell you I cannot brook a refusal from those dear lips of yours. If you do not consent I shall make away with myself in your presence here and now with a revolver which lies in my breast pocket."

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A scream of terror broke from Claire's terrified lips.

"Oh, do not make away with yourself, Mr; Armstrong!" "I—I will promise—anything you—you want me to! Only don't shoot yourself—don't!"

"Then you accept me?" queried Kendale in a very businesslike manner.

"Ye-es—if mamma does not—object," she answered in a stifling manner.

"There must be no ifs," he declared. "You must take me, no matter who objects. If we cannot bring your mamma around to an amicable way of thinking, we must elope—that is all there is about it."

"Elope!" gasped Claire in affright.

"Why, what else would there be left to do?" he asked, with asperity. "I love you and I must have you, Claire, and if you are willing to take me, why, we will marry in spite of anything and everything that opposes.

"Of course, if your mamma sees things as we do, all well and good; but I say now to you, her objections must make no difference whatever in our plans."

"Oh, Mr. Armstrong!" gasped Claire, not knowing what in the world to say to this ardent lover, who was so impetuous in his wooing.

Before he could add a word Mrs. Fairfax came down the grand stairway, her silken gown making a rustling frou-frou upon the velvet carpet.

She looked much surprised at finding him there, as she had not been apprised of his coming.

Kendale arose to greet her in his usual impressive, languid, courteous fashion, managing to whisper in Claire's ear hastily:

"Make some excuse to leave the drawing-room for a few minutes, dear, and while you are gone I will broach the all-important subject to your mother."

Mrs. Fairfax greeted the handsome young man cordially, pretending not to have noticed how near to each other they had been sitting upon her entrance to the drawing-room, and how suddenly they had sprung apart.

Her daughter's blushing face and confused manner told her that the propitious moment had arrived—the handsome heir to the Marsh millions had proposed.



And underneath her calm exterior Mrs. Fairfax's heart beat high with exultation. Her quick ear had also caught that rapidly whispered last remark to Claire, and, realizing that her daughter was too much flustered to act upon it, gave the young man the opportunity to be alone with her which he seemed to desire by remarking:

"Dear me, I have left my fan in my boudoir, Claire, dear, would you mind ringing for my maid to fetch it to me?"

"I will go for it, mamma," returned Claire, shyly, without daring to look at her lover.

"As you like, my dear," returned Mrs. Fairfax, with very natural appearing carelessness.

Claire was gone quite half an hour in search of the fan. When she returned to the drawing-room her mother met her with open arms.

"Mr. Armstrong has told me all, my darling," she murmured, "and I give my consent. You may marry him if you love him, daughter, and quite as soon as he wishes."

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Kendale left the mansion two hours later with a self-satisfied smile on his lips.

“Marrying heiresses is much easier than most men suppose,” he muttered—and he stopped short in the grounds, standing under a tree until the lights went out one by one, shrouding the house in gloom.

Meanwhile, girl like, Claire had flown to Faynie’s apartment to tell her the wonderful news—that her handsome lover had really proposed and her mother had given her consent, and she was to be married at once.

Faynie’s swoon had put a stop to confiding to her all the wonderful things Lester had said. “I will tell her in the morning,” she promised herself, little dreaming what was to transpire ere the morrow dawned.

CHAPTER XXIV.

An awful apparition.

When Faynie awoke to consciousness she found the housekeeper bending over her. Hours had passed and Claire had long since retired to her room.

Faynie opened her eyes slowly, in a half-dazed manner, but as she did so memory returned to her with startling force; but she bravely restrained the cry that rose to her lips.

Claire had called her lover “Lester!” She wondered that the sound of that name had: not stricken her head.

Could Claire’s lover be—Ah! she dared not even imagine such a horrible possibility. Then she laughed aloud, thinking how foolish she had been to be so needlessly alarmed.

The false lover who had wooed and won her so cruelly was not the only man in the world who bore the fateful name of Lester.

“Ah, you are better, my dear,” exclaimed the old housekeeper in great relief. “Your swoon lasted so long that I was greatly alarmed; What caused you to faint, my dear child?”

Faynie murmured some reply which she could not quite catch, for the housekeeper was old and very deaf.

“Take this and go to sleep,” she said, holding a soothing, quieting draught to the girl’s white, hot, parched lips. “You will awaken as well as ever to-morrow.”

Faynie did as she was requested, closing her eyes. She was glad when the kindly old face was turned away and she was left alone—not to sleep, but to think.

Of course it could not be Lester Armstrong who was Claire's suitor, for he was poor, and her haughty stepmother would never encourage the suit of a man who did not have wealth at his command.

If Faynie had but read the papers she would have known what was transpiring, but, alas! she did not and was utterly unaware of the strange turn of fortune's wheel which had occurred in the life of the young assistant cashier to whom she had given the wealth of her love, when he was poor.

Lying there, going over every detail of, the past, which seemed now but the idle vagaries of a fleeting dream, she hardly knew, Heaven help her, whether she still loved—or hated with all the strength of her nature—Lester Armstrong.

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Her heart would fill with yearning tenderness almost unbearable when she looked back at the early days of that brief, sweet courtship.

How strong, noble, true and brave he had seemed—how kind of heart!

She had seen him pick up a little birdling that had fallen from its nest, lying with a bruised wing in the dust of the roadside, and restore it to the mother bird to be nursed back to health and life, and go out of his way to rescue a butterfly that had fallen in the millpond.

It seemed like the distorted imagination of some diseased brain to bring herself to the realization that this same gentle hand that had rescued the robin and the butterfly had struck her down to death—that the kind, earnest voice that had been wont to whisper nothing but words of devotion and eternal love should fling out the vilest and bitterest of oaths at her, because she was not the heiress he had taken her to be.

And without one tear, one bitter regret, he had consigned her to that lonely grave and gone back to the life which he had declared he could never live without her.

Where was he now? she wondered vaguely; then she laughed a low, bitter laugh, sadder than any tears.

He had missed the fortune he had hoped for and was back again in the office of Marsh & Co.

Then the thought came to her again with crushing, alarming force—would he not (believing her dead and himself free to woo and wed again) seek out some other heiress, since that was his design? Many young girls came to the assistant cashier's window just as she had done; he would select the richest and marry her.

The very thought seemed to stab her to the heart with a keen, subtle pain which she could neither understand nor clearly define, even to herself.

“Heaven pity her in the hour when she finds that she has been deceived—that he married her for gold, not love,” she sobbed, covering her face with her little trembling hands.

She prayed to Heaven silently that Claire's lover, whoever he might be, was marrying her for love, and for love alone.

So restless was she that, despite the quieting draught which the housekeeper had induced her to swallow, she could not sleep.

But one thing remained for her to do, and that was to get up and dress and go down to her father's library and read herself into forgetfulness until day dawned.

Faynie acted upon the impulse, noting as she stepped from her room into the corridor that the clock on her mantel chimed the hour of two.

She had proceeded scarcely half a dozen steps ere she became aware that she was not alone in the corridor.

She stopped short.

The time was when Faynie would have shrieked aloud or swooned from terror; but she had gone through so many thrilling scenes during the last few weeks of her eventful young life that fear within her breast had quite died out.

Was it only her wild, fanciful imagination, or did she hear the sound of low breathing? Faynie stood quite still, leaning behind a marble Flora, and listened.

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Yes, the sound was audible enough now. There was somebody in the corridor creeping toward the spot where she stood, with swift but noiseless feet.

Nearer, nearer the footsteps crept, the soft, low-bated breathing sounding closer with every step.

With a presence of mind which few young girls possessed, Faynie suddenly stepped forward and turned on the gas jet from an electric button, full head.

The sight which met her gaze fairly rooted her to the spot.

For one brief instant of time it seemed to Faynie as though her breath was leaving her body.

She stood paralyzed, unable to stir hand or foot, if her very life had depended upon it.

Outside the wind blew dismally; the shutters creaked to and fro on their hinges; the leafless branches of the trees tapped their ghostly fingers against the panes.

Faynie tried to speak—to cry out—but her tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of her mouth, powerless. Her hands fell to her side a dead weight, her eyes fairly bulging from their sockets.

It almost seemed to the girl that she was passing through the awful transition of death.

The blood in her veins was turning to ice, and the heart in her bosom to marble.

In an upper room, afar off, she heard one of the servants coughing protractedly in her sleep.

Oh, God! if she could but burst the icy bonds that bound her hand and foot and cry out—bring the household about her. Her lips opened, but no sound came from them.

The very breath in her body seemed dying out with each faint gasp that broke over the white, mute lips.

Outside the night winds grew wilder and fiercer. A gust of hail battered against the window panes and rattled down the wide-throated chimneys. Then suddenly; all was still again!

Oh, pitiful heavens! how hard Faynie tried to break the awful bonds that held her there, still, silent, motionless, unable to move or utter any sound, staring in horror words cannot picture at the sight that met her strained gaze.

It had only been an instant of time since the bright blaze of the gas had illuminated the darkened corridor, yet it seemed to Faynie, standing there, white and cold as an image carved in marble, that long years had passed.

CHAPTER XXV.

"I intend to watch you die, inch by inch, day by day!"

Before going on further with the thrilling event which we narrated in our last chapter it will be necessary to devote a few explanatory lines to the still more thrilling scene which led up to it, returning to the real Lester Armstrong, whom we left in the isolated cabin in the custody of Halloran.

Lester's intense anxiety when Kendale forcibly took the keys from him and disappeared can better be imagined than described.

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In vain he pleaded with Halloran to release him, offering every kind of inducement, but the man was inexorable.

Your Cousin Kendale will pay me twice as much for detaining you here," he answered with a boisterous laugh, adding:

"Besides, I have a grudge against you of many years' standing, Lester Armstrong, which this affair is wiping out pretty effectively."

"I was not aware that I had ever seen you before," replied Lester.

"Permit me to refresh your memory," exclaimed the other grimly. "When you were a boy of about fourteen years you attended the public school on Canal Street."

"Yes," said Lester, still mystified.

"At that time," went on Halloran, "the school was unusually crowded, owing to the enforcement of the law that the children of the neighborhood must attend school, thus bringing in all the urchins of the poor thereabouts; you surely remember that?"

"It seems to me I have a faint recollection of some such circumstance," replied Lester, eying the man who stood over him, his dark, scowling face growing more foreboding with each word he uttered.

"If you carry your mind back you will also remember that there was a ragged boy sitting to the right of you, who seemed to have a weakness for purloining your pencils and other like articles."

Lester did not answer; his mind was traveling back to the time this man recalled.

"You will also recollect the boy who sat in front of you, who was the envy of all the boys in the school by being the possessor of a fine, new five-bladed jackknife, with which he used to whittle kites and whistles during recess. Ah! I see you do remember," said Halloran grimly, "and you also remember the day the ragged boy, sitting at the right of you, believing no one was looking, reached over and quietly, deftly, inserted his hand in the other's pocket and abstracted the coveted jackknife.

"He meant to as quietly replace it in the other's pocket after he had whittled out a kite and whistle for himself; but, lo! without giving him time to carry out his intentions, you, good boy that you were, squealed and brought all the teachers in the room to the spot. You cried out to them what had occurred, and the ragged lad was caught red-handed with the knife in his possession. He was expelled from the school that day, but the affair did not end there. The father of the boy who owned the knife was a great judge, and he caused the ragged lad to be sent to a State reformatory, where the next five years of his life were spent in rigid discipline—stigmatized as a common thief! And all these years



the bitterness of a terrible hatred rankled in his bosom against you—who were responsible for all this.

“And he vowed a bitter vow of vengeance, that he would repay that act of yours if it took him a lifetime to accomplish it; that he would make you suffer like one on the rack for thrice five years, and then tell you why.

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"It will not take much stretch of imagination for you to surmise, Lester Armstrong, that I am that boy upon whom you peached, and on whom, through you, such a severe penalty was inflicted.

"My hatred against you has intensified as the years rolled on, Lester Armstrong. You are in my power; I hold your life in my hands. Do you think if you were to pray to me on your bended knees that I would release you? No, a thousand times no! Every groan that falls from your lips is music to my ears.

"Again I repeat, you are at my mercy, and I will give you a dose of that same mercy which you showed me in those other days. Ha! you turn pale, as well you may!

"Listen! Let me tell you what I intend to do. I think you guess it from all that has gone on before, but I will repeat it. I intend to watch you die, inch by inch, day by day!

"They tell of a man who put himself on exhibition in New York, challenging the people to come and see him fast forty days, during which time neither food nor drink should pass his lips.

"But you will not last so long, Lester Armstrong; I think a week's time will be your limit. You will understand now how perfectly useless it would be to plead with me."

"Do not imagine for one moment that I intend to do so. I am a man of nerve and iron will, and I can die like one. You have shackled me hand and foot and placed me in this death trap, but your ears shall not be greeted with any moans or cries of complaint. The vengeance you have mapped out will fall short in that."

A sneer broke from Halloran's lips; he could not help but admire the dauntless courage of the man before him, but he would not have admitted it for anything the wide world held. With a fiendish laugh that rang in Lester's ears for long hours afterward, Halloran turned and left him, sauntering into the outer room and banging and locking the door after him.

It was a night never to be forgotten by Lester to the last day of his life. His mouth was parched with thirst; the blood in his veins seemed turning to lava, and his eyes were scorched in their sockets.

Once the door suddenly opened and Halloran thrust in his head, exclaiming:

"Let me give you a piece of news to dream over, my dear fellow: Your Cousin, Kendale, is with the beautiful Faynie just now, probably holding her in his arms, kissing the lovely rosebud mouth. 'Pon my honor. I envy the lucky dog; don't you?"

The door closed quite as quickly again, and Lester was alone with his bitter thoughts.



“What have I done that a just God should torture me thus?” he cried out in an agony so intense that great beads of cold perspiration gathered on his forehead and rolled unheeded down his white cheeks. “If he tortured me to the gates of death I could endure it, but the very thought that my innocent darling, my beautiful, tender little Faynie, is in that dastardly villain’s power, fairly goads me to madness. Oh, Heaven! if I but had the strength of Samson for but a single hour, to burst these cruel bonds asunder and fly to my dear one’s side!”

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But, struggle as he would, the thongs which bound him, rendering him powerless to aid the girl he loved, would not give way.

Thus a fortnight passed, and Halloran was beside himself with wonder to find each morning that Lester was still alive and that he had not gone mad.

But Lester Armstrong's guardian angel had not quite forgotten him; Heaven had not intended that he should die by thirst and starvation in that isolated cabin, and served him in a strange, unlooked-for way.

He soon discovered that a family of squirrels had made a home beneath a piece of flooring within easy reach of where he lay, and upon forcing up the piece of rotten plank he found to his intense joy an almost endless supply of nuts, and close beside their burrow a running stream of clear, cool, fresh, bubbling spring water.

In an instant he had slaked his thirst and laved his burning brow.

From that hour he felt sure that Heaven intended him to escape from his foes. He took good care, however, to conceal his wonderful discovery from Halloran's keen, sharp eyes when he looked in each day.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A fiendish act.

"Like some lone bird
Without a mate,
My lonely heart is desolate;
I look around
And cannot trace, a friendly
smile, a welcome face.
Even in crowds
I'm still alone, because I
cannot love but one."

Thus a fortnight passed, and under the rigid diet of the strengthening, nutritious nuts and clear spring water Lester rapidly gained strength.

He only waited a fitting opportunity to make a dash for liberty.

Halloran was well armed; he realized that fact, and that he would shoot him down like a dog ere he would suffer him to escape the fate that had been laid out for him.

Therefore his only hope was to get away by strategy. He laid several plans, but each time they were frustrated by some unexpected act of Halloran's.

Meanwhile the latter was pondering over his case, considerably mystified.

"Confound the fellow! he does not seem to grow either pale or emaciated," he muttered. "I could almost say that starving seems to agree with him. I am quite tempted to give him his quietus and end this vigil. Remaining in this solitary hut does not quite come up to my liking. I wonder what Kendale is doing. He promised to let me know how he got on.

"I have not heard from him for nearly a week now. Perhaps they made the discovery that he was not the real Lester Armstrong, and have placed him in limbo; but it strikes me that in such a predicament he would hasten to communicate with me, apprising me of the fact.

"Then, again," he ruminated, "Kendale is thoroughly selfish to the backbone, and if he has successfully hoodwinked these people and is living off the fat of the land and rolling in money, as it were, ten chances to one he has quite forgotten my very existence.

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"He ought to have sent me more provisions to-day, and more tobacco; and it is nightfall and no sign of any one."

The next day and the next passed in the same fashion.

By this time Halloran had become thoroughly exasperated.

"This settles the bill," he muttered; "I leave this place to-night. I do not see much need of staying here any longer, anyhow. Armstrong will not last many hours longer; he couldn't; it's beyond human physical possibility."

In the semi-twilight he looked in at his prisoner.

Lester had fallen into so deep a sleep that he seemed scarcely to breathe, and the dim, fading light falling in through the chinks of the boarded window gave his face, which was beginning to grow pale because of his confinement, an unusually grayish pallor at this twilight hour.

"Ha! ha!" muttered Halloran, setting his teeth hard together; "it is perfectly safe to leave him now. He is dying; his hour has come at last."

Turning on his heel he strode into the outer apartment, banging the door to after him, but not taking the trouble to lock it on this occasion.

"As there seems to be little need of my remaining here longer, now that he is done for, I'm off for the city," he muttered; "and a pretty tramp I'll have of it over this barren country road, fully seven miles to the railway station, and hungry as a bear at that."

Again he looked at Lester, to assure himself beyond all possibility of a doubt that he was actually dying.

And again he was thoroughly deceived.

"It's all over with him," he muttered, "and Kendale's secret is safe between him and me, and he'll have to pay me handsomely to keep it; that's certain."

On the threshold he halted.

"Dead men tell no tales," he muttered, "and he would be past all recognition by the time any one came across him in this isolated spot. Then, again, some one might happen to wander this way.

"It's best to be sure; to put it beyond human power to discover his identity, and the only way to secure that end is to burn this place. Ay! that is the surest and safest way to effectually conceal the crime."

He had muttered the words aloud, and they fell distinctly upon the ears of Lester Armstrong, who had awakened at the sound of his footsteps the second time, although he had given no sign of having done so. The words fell with horrible dread upon his ears because of the fact that he was bound hand and foot by an iron chain, fastened to a heavy ring in the floor.

For the last week he had used every endeavor to force the links apart, but they had frustrated his most strenuous efforts.

And he said to himself, if the fiend incarnate before him carried out his intention of firing the place it would be all over with him. The horrible smoke would assuredly suffocate him ere he could, even by exerting the most Herculean strength, succeed in liberating himself.

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With bated breath he heard Halloran enter the outer apartment.

And he heard his impatient, muttered imprecations as he fumbled about for matches, seemingly without finding any.

"This is where I put them," exclaimed Halloran, with an oath, "but they are not here now."

After a moment's pause his voice broke the awful stillness, exclaiming:

"Ah! here they are! I imagined they were not far away. One should always know where to put his hands on such things, even in the dark. A whole bunch of 'em; I did not remember that I had so many!"

For the next few moments Lester heard him walking to and fro, apparently dragging heavy articles over the floor, and he knew that he was piling pieces of boards together in the middle of the room to start the blaze.

His blood fairly ran cold in his veins at the thought.

The moments that followed seemed the length of eternity.

Each instant he expected to hear the dull scratching of the matches, quickly followed by the swift, crackling blaze.

With all his strength he strove to rend asunder the heavy steel chain, but it resisted his every effort.

"God in heaven! am I to die here like a rat in a trap?" he groaned, the veins standing out like knotted whiplash on his forehead, the perspiration pouring down his face like rain.

For some moments there was a strange, unaccountable silence in the outer room.

Lester paused in his efforts to wrench the iron bands asunder which bound his wrists, wondering what that ominous silence meant.

The suspense was terrible, yet each moment meant that much of a respite from the horrible fate which awaited him.

What could Halloran be doing? Surely he had not abandoned his intentions to set fire to the cabin?

It was almost too good to be true. And yet that awful uncertainty was almost unbearable.



In the outer room Halloran sat quietly thinking over his plans, match in hand, telling himself that he had better perfect them then than wait until he was journeying toward the railway station.

He would take the first train bound for New York, seek Kendale at once, and have an understanding with him before he would disclose to him the fact that Lester Armstrong was effectually out of his way.

“Yes, that is the only course to pursue,” muttered Halloran, and springing to his feet, he struck half of the matches in his package at once, and lighted the pile heaped in the center of the cabin floor.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Halloran meets with his Reward.

In an instant after the match had been applied a fiery tongue of flame leaped to the ceiling, lighting the interior of the cabin with a blinding glare of red light.

Seizing his hat, Halloran dashed from the place and down the road, never pausing until he had reached the fork of the roads. Then he stopped for breath and looked back over his shoulder.

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A high ridge of ground intervened, completely hiding the doomed place from his view.

He did not even behold the column of fire and smoke, as he had anticipated.

“Those old boards are so damp that it will probably take some time to ignite them, and there’s no use waiting to see that,” he muttered. “I will be well on my way to the railway station by that time.”

He redoubled his speed to get as far away from the scene as possible, for, villain though he was, this was his first actual crime, and his conscience troubled him a little.

Another mile or more he traversed through the heavy snow; then he suddenly became conscious that there were rapidly approaching footsteps behind him.

Great heavens! had Lester Armstrong succeeded in making his escape? No, it could not be. Even if so, he was too weak to run in that rapid fashion. Involuntarily he paused and glanced backward over his shoulder. The next instant a wild, panting cry of mortal terror broke from his lips.

In that backward glance he had beheld a huge black bear, making rapidly toward the spot where he stood, fairly paralyzed with horror.

It dawned upon him suddenly that only a few days before he had read of the escape of one of the most ferocious black bears of the zoological gardens, and, though two days had elapsed and men were scouring all parts of the adjacent places, no trace of the animal had been found, and great fears were expressed of the grave damage the bear might do before he was recaptured.

This was undoubtedly the animal that had escaped which was making toward him with great leaps and savage growls, as though it had already marked him for its prey.

His teeth chattered like castanets; his eyes fairly bulged from their sockets; the breath came in hot gasps from his white lips; his brain reeled, as he took in, in that rapid glance of horror, his awful doom.

Nearer and nearer sounded the hoarse, awful growls; nearer and nearer moved the huge black mass over the white, crunching snow.

The moon was slowly rising over the horizon, rendering all objects clearly distinct to his frightened gaze.

He was passing through a narrow belt of woodland, and like an inspiration it occurred to him that his only hope of escape lay in climbing one of the trees and thus outwitting the bear.

He saw with sinking heart that they were scarcely more than saplings, and whether or not they would bear his weight without snapping in twain he dared not even pause to consider.

With a groan of mortal terror he sprang for the nearest tree. Fright seemed to lend him wonderful strength and agility; he succeeded in reaching the lowest limb as the animal, with glittering eyes and widely distended jaws, reached the tree.

Up, up, crept Halloran, his teeth chattering, his strength almost leaving him as the animal's roar of baffled rage fell upon his ear.

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To and fro bent the sapling under his weight, threatening to snap asunder each moment and cast him into the jaws of the enraged beast.

The hours that followed were of such keen, mortal terror that he vaguely wondered that he did not lose his reason through fright.

With fascinated eyes he watched the antics of the thoroughly enraged animal. The bear made many efforts to climb the tree in pursuit of his prey, but the swaying sapling was too slender to give him a hold, and its bark too slippery with its coating of ice to insert the claws, which had been clipped quite close, rendering them almost powerless in taking a firm grasp.

The night had closed in intensely cold, and Halloran could feel his cramped limbs and hands slowly stiffening, but he dared not lose his grip.

The moon rose higher and higher in the night sky, shedding a white, clear, bright light over the snow-clad earth.

He knew that the animal was watching his every movement closely, as each time he shifted his position brought a savage growl from the bear, which was circling round and round the tree, eying him intently.

For long hours this lasted, until the half frozen man, hanging on for dear life to the upper branches of the sapling, thought he should go mad.

With the coming of daylight the bear changed his tactics, lying down directly under the tree, still eying his prey with his small, beady, expectant eyes, as though measuring the time that his victim could hold out.

The daylight grew stronger; slowly in the eastern horizon the red sun rose, gilding the white, glistening snow with its rosy light.

Hour by hour it climbed the blue azure height, crossed the zenith, and then slowly sank behind the western hills, heralding the oncoming of another night.

Still the brute, with almost incredible cunning, sat in the same position under the tree, watching Halloran's every move.

"God rescue me!" he cried, lifting his white face to the Heaven he had so offended.

"If I pass another night here I shall go mad—mad!"

He was famished with hunger, numb with cold, and his mouth and throat were dry with unconquerable thirst.

In those hours of suffering he thought of Lester Armstrong, and of the awful fate he had doomed him to. He realized by his own experience of a few hours what he must have endured, and a bitter groan of remorse broke from his clammy lips.

“This is Heaven’s punishment,” he cried. “Oh, Lester Armstrong. God has surely avenged you! If I could but atone; if it were to be done over again, I would have no hand in the atrocious crime that has dyed my hands just as surely as though I had plunged a knife into your heart!”

In his haste on leaving the cabin he had not taken time to secure his revolver; he had no weapon; he was doomed to meet the same fate that he had meted out to Lester Armstrong—starve to death slowly, hour by hour—knowing that when he was too weak to hold longer to the branch he would fall.

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Oh, God in heaven! fall into the gaping jaws of the enraged animal that was waiting to receive him.

He had led too wicked a life to pray; he did not know a prayer; he could only raise his agonized eyes to the far-off sky, wondering how long his awful torture could last—how long he would be able to hold out—how long.

He felt his blood slowly turning to ice in his veins, and slowly and surely the dusk deepened and the darkness of another night fell over the world.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

“Some terrible presentiment is warning me that my darling is in danger.”

There never was a night so long that another day did not dawn—at last—and when the morrow’s light broke, Halloran was slowly but surely collapsing—giving himself up to the horrible doom that awaited him—for the bear had not quitted his position under the tree, nor had he taken his eyes off his intended victim for a single moment.

As the sun rose, Halloran watched it with dazed, bloodshot eyes, exclaiming:

“Good-by, golden sun, I shall never see you set, nor witness you rise again upon another day. I—” the sentence was never finished, for over the snowy waste rang a voice like a bugle blast:

“Keep quiet, take heart, help is at hand; I am going to shoot the animal and deliver you,” and simultaneously with the voice four shots in rapid succession rang out upon the early morning air.

There was a wild howl of pain, a terrible roaring bellow, a sudden dash toward a dark figure hurriedly approaching, two more shots, and the bear rolled over dying beyond power to harm, his red blood dyeing the white snow in great pools. Halloran knew no more. His strength and endurance seemed suddenly to leave him, darkness closed in about him, his hold loosened and he fell backward down, down through space.

He did not know that a pair of strong arms caught him, thus saving him from a broken neck. When he opened his eyes a few moments later, to his intense surprise he found Lester Armstrong bending over him, and the sight rendered him fairly dumb with amazement.

Before he could ask questions that sprang to his lips, Lester explained to him that owing to the dampness of the place, the fire Halloran had kindled had quickly gone out, thus saving the young man from being burned to death. He told him, too, why death had not come to him through starvation, as had been intended, and that it had taken him all that

time to force apart the links of the chain, when he found that there was no one to hear or prevent, no matter how much noise he made in so doing.

He had seen the revolver, which had been forgotten, and little imagining it would be of such vital use, had thrust it in his pocket and started forth to make his way back to New York, when he unexpectedly came upon the scene of the bear under the tree, and a fellow-being in deadly peril.

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"You saved me—me," cried Halloran, huskily, "your deadly foe, who tried to rob you of your life."

"It was my duty, 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord,'" quoted Lester, quietly.

Halloran fell on his knees, covering the other's hands with passionate kisses, tears falling like rain from his eyes.

"From this hour the life that you have saved shall be devoted to you—and God!" he cried brokenly. "Oh, will Heaven ever forgive me for the past? There are two bullets left in the revolver; you ought to shoot me dead at your feet, Lester Armstrong. I deserve it."

Lester shook his head.

"Do better with your life than you have done in the past," he said.

Halloran tried to rise to his feet, but fell back exhausted on the snow.

"I cannot walk," he gasped. "I—I am sure my limbs are frozen."

With a humane kindness that won him Halloran's gratitude to his dying day, Lester helped him to the railway station, and to board the incoming train, taking him to a hospital when they reached New York City.

Halloran had lapsed into unconsciousness, but Lester was too kind of heart to desert him in his hour of need.

The clock was striking five as Lester left the hospital.

On the pavement he paused, asking himself if he could go to a hotel presenting that soiled, unkempt appearance. Then like an inspiration it occurred to him that the best place in the world to go to was Mr. Conway's; and he put the thought into execution at once, reaching there nearly an hour later.

Mr. Conway and Margery were just sitting down to breakfast as he rang the bell of the humble little cottage.

Mr. Conway answered the summons.

The scene which followed can better be imagined than described.

It was hard to convince father and daughter, at first, that in telling his story he was not attempting to play some practical joke upon them.

That he had a cousin who so cleverly resembled him that even those who had known Lester intimately for long years should be so cleverly deceived by him seemed almost incredible. Margery hid her face in her trembling hands while her father gave Lester a full account of what had transpired, while the latter's emotion was great; and his distress intense, upon learning that Kendale had dared betroth himself to Margery in his name, and that the gentle-hearted girl had learned to care for the scamp, despite her repugnance to him at first.

Lester thought it best, under the circumstances, to confide in full to Margery and her father concerning his own love affair, lest they might expect him to carry out the contract his cousin had made in regard to marrying his old friend's pretty daughter.

Margery's next words, however, set his troubled heart at rest in that respect.

She looked up at him suddenly through her tears, saying shyly:

"There is another who cares for me, not knowing of this affair, one whom I once thought I could love. Yesterday he wrote me a letter, asking for my heart and hand.

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"Last night I wrote him a reply, saying 'No,' and telling him why. I shall destroy that letter to-night, thankful enough that I did not have time to send it. And my answer will then be 'Yes.'"

"You have my best wishes for your happiness, little Margery," said Lester, adding smilingly: "And when; the wedding occurs, which I hope will be soon, you may, expect a very handsome present from me."

Long after Mr. Conway and his unexpected visitor had finished their simple breakfast, they talked over the strange situation of affairs, and what was best to be done to avoid great publicity.

"The bogus Lester Armstrong went to Beechwood last night," said the old cashier. "He probably will remain there, as is his custom, until to-day noon. You had better confront him there; meanwhile I will break the amazing story to those of the establishment whom it is absolutely necessary to tell. The rest of the employees and the public at large need never know of the glaring fraud that was so cleverly practised under their very eyes."

Lester had sprung to his feet trembling with excitement, at the information that Kendale had gone to the home of Faynie, despite the fact that Mr. Conway had assured him that Kendale was not married.

"Only yesterday he told me he contemplated marriage with a little heiress out at Beechwood, and if his wooing went on smoothly he would be a benedict in a few days' time—those were his exact words!" declared Mr. Conway.

"Thank Heaven the mischief has not yet been done," cried Lester, fervently.

He would have started for Beechwood at once, had it not been for Mr. Conway, who induced him to lie down for a few hours and take a little much-needed rest, explaining that he could not go in that apparel, and it would take some little time to secure suitable raiment, and renovate his appearance.

Lester yielded to his judgment.

Neither Mr. Conway nor Margery had the heart to awaken him, as hour after hour rolled by; he seemed so thoroughly exhausted and his deep sleep was doing him such a world of good, although the complete outfit which Mr. Conway had sent for had long since arrived.

It was night when Lester opened his eyes—imagining his surroundings for the moment but the idle vagaries of a dream.

Mr. Conway's kindly, solicitous face bending over him soon brought him to his senses, and a remembrance of all that had occurred.



“Oh, Mr. Conway! You should not have let me sleep,” he cried. “I ought to have been at Beechwood hours ago; something in my heart—some terrible presentiment is warning me that my darling is in danger!”

“You are only fanciful,” returned his old friend. “Anxiety makes you imagine that.”

“I hope it may prove as you say,” replied Lester, huskily, and in an hour’s time he was on his way to Beechwood and Faynie.

CHAPTER XXIX.

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"Great god, it is A ghost—the ghost of Faynie!"

We must now return to Faynie, and the thrilling position in which we so reluctantly left her.

As the bright blaze of light illumined the corridor Faynie beheld the dark form of a man creeping toward her.

"Great Scott! Some one must have touched an electric button somewhere—the wrong button!" he cried, instantly springing behind a marble Flora—but not before Faynie had distinctly beheld him, being herself unseen, because she was standing in the dense shadow.

"It is he! It is Lester Armstrong!" was the cry that sprang from her terrified heart to her lips, but no sound issued from them as they parted.

She leaned back faint and dizzy against the wall, unable to utter even the faintest sound. "So this is Claire's lover—the Lester she told me about—whom she is soon to marry! The dastardly wretch who wrecked my life and left me for dead under the cold, drifting snow heap," was the thought that flashed through her dazed brain as she watched him, with bated breath and dilated eyes.

"It was only a false alarm; nobody would be roaming through the corridor of this place at this ghostly hour!" he muttered, sallying forth. "It seems that I was more scared than hurt on this occasion. Now for the library, to find that sum of money which my foolish mamma-in-law-that-is-to-be mentioned having placed there. It's a daring risk, stealing into the house like a thief in the night to search for it, but there's no other way to get it, and money I must have without delay.

"It's mighty dangerous going through this corridor in this bright light. I wish I knew where to turn it off; the chandelier is too high or I'd do it in that way. I'm liable to be seen at any moment, if any one should take it into their head to come down through the house for any reason whatsoever."

The next moment he had disappeared within the library, closing the door neatly to after him. The next moment he had lighted the shaded night lamp that stood on the table.

Turning out the gas in the corridor, Faynie glided forward like a shadow, and, reaching the library, noiselessly pushed open the door, which he had left slightly ajar.

"What was he doing here?" she wondered vaguely, her eyes blazing with fierce indignation as she stood there considering what her next action should be. He decided, the question by exclaiming:

“Ha! This is the little iron safe she mentioned: of course the money is here, and the will is probably here, too, for that matter, which states that all of the Fairfax fortune goes to the old lady—which means the pretty Claire ultimately. Well, the more money the better; there is no one more competent to make it fly at a gay pace than myself. A prince of the royal blood couldn’t go at a faster pace than I have been going during these last three weeks! Ha, ha, ha!”

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In a moment he was kneeling before the safe. To his intense satisfaction the knob yielded to his deft touch.

"I shall have less trouble than I anticipated," he muttered, with a little chuckle.

Faynie stood motionless, scarcely three feet behind him, watching him intently, with horror-stricken eyes and glued tongue.

She saw him take a roll of bills, and after carefully counting them, transfer them to his pocket.

Heirlooms, too, in the way of a costly diamond stud, sleeve links, and massive watch and chain, which had been her father's, went the same way.

Faynie seemed incapable of interfering.

"Now we will soon determine what else there is here of importance—my time cannot be more profitably spent than by informing myself."

Paper after paper he carefully unfolded, glancing quickly through their contents, and as quickly tossing them back into the safe.

Evidently he had not yet found that for which he was searching so intently.

Suddenly he came across a large square envelope, the words on which seemed to arrest his attention at once. And in a whispered, yet distinctly audible voice, he read the words:

"Horace Fairfax, last message to his wife—dated March 22, 18—."

"Why that is the very date upon which he died," muttered Kendale. "This must have been written just before he committed suicide. Well, we will see what he had to say."

And slowly he read, half aloud, as follows:

"My dear wife: When you read the words here penned I shall be no more. I know your heart will be most bitter against me for what I have just done, but, realizing that my end was near, I have done it for the best.

"I refer to the making of my will.

"When a man sees death before him, he naturally wishes to see those nearest and dearest to him provided for, so far as he is able to do so.



“You will remember distinctly the conversation we had at the time I proposed marriage to you. I reminded you that I was a widower, with a daughter whom I loved far better than the apple of my eye.

“I told you that this daughter would succeed to all my wealth, if she lived, when time was no more with me; that no being on earth could ever change my views in this regard—ay, in fulfilling my duty.” I asked you to marry me, knowing fully my intention in this matter, stating at the time that I would give you in cash an ample sum of money, which, if used frugally and judiciously, should last you the remainder of your natural life, providing you outlived me.

“You accepted me under those conditions; you married me, and I, as agreed, gave to you in a lump sum the money stipulated.

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"It is needless to recall to you the fact that our wedded life has been a failure. You have made my life miserable—ay, and that of my sweet, motherless, tender little Faynie, until, in sheer desperation, she has fled from her home on the night I write this, and my grief is more poignant than I can well endure.

"You must feign neither surprise nor indignation when it is learned that my will gives all my fortune to Faynie, save the amount set aside for you.

"Horace Fairfax."

"Well! By all that's wonderful, if this isn't a pretty how-do-you-do. Mrs. Fairfax and her girl are penniless, and I came so near marrying Claire. I have found this thing out quite in the nick of time. The girl is clever enough, but it takes money, and plenty of it, to make me put my head into the yoke of matrimony.

"I must find this will he speaks of. It will be here unless the woman has been shrewd enough to destroy it, and women never are clever enough to burn their telltale bridges which lie behind them, and that's how they get found out—at last.

"I see through the whole thing now. Mrs. Fairfax trumped up a will in favor of herself, a brilliant scheme. I admire her grit immensely. Ah, yes, here is the real will, in the same handwriting as the letter. Yes, it gives all to his daughter Faynie. And here is the spurious one, a good imitation, I admit, still an expert could easily detect the handwriting of Mrs. Fairfax from beginning to end—signature and all.

"I think I will take charge of this one giving all the Fairfax wealth to Faynie."

But he did not succeed in transferring it to his pocket, for like a flash it was snatched from his hand.

With a horrible oath, Kendale wheeled about.

One glance, and his eyes fairly bulged from their sockets, his face grew ashen white, his teeth chattered, and the blood in his veins seemed suddenly to turn to ice.

"Great Heaven! It is a ghost!" he yelled at the top of his voice; "the ghost of Faynie!"

CHAPTER XXX.

At the last.

The sound of that hoarse, piercing, awful cry echoed and re-echoed to every portion of the house, and in less time than it takes to relate it, the servants in a body, headed by

Mrs. Fairfax and Claire, were rushing toward the library, from whence the sound proceeded.

One glance as they reached the open doorways, and a cry of consternation broke from Mrs. Fairfax's lips, which was faintly echoed by her daughter Claire.

The servants were too astounded at the sight that met their gaze to believe the evidence of their own eyes.

Mrs. Fairfax was the first to recover herself.

"What is the meaning of this!" she exclaimed, striding forward and facing Faynie and the horror-stricken man who stood facing her, his teeth chattering, as he muttered:

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"It is her ghost!—her ghost!"

"Faynie Fairfax, why do I find you here, in the library, in the dead of the night, in the company of the man who is to wed my daughter Claire, and who parted from her scarcely two hours since, supposedly to leave the house? Why are you two here together! Explain this most extraordinary and most atrocious scene at once. I command you!" she cried, her voice rising to a shrill scream in her rising anger.

Faynie turned a face toward her white as a marble statue, but no word broke from her lips.

The presence of the others seemed to bring Kendale back to his senses.

"It means," spoke Faynie, after a full moment's pause, "that the hour has come in which I must confess to all gathered here the pitiful story I have to tell, and which will explain what has long been an unsolved mystery to you—where, how and with whom I spent the time from the hour in which I left this roof until I returned to it.

"You say that this is the man who is your daughter's lover, Mrs. Fairfax—the man who is soon to marry Claire.

"I declare that this marriage can never be, because this man has a living wife," she cried, in a high, clear voice.

"It is false!" shrieked Kendale. "The girl I married in the old church is dead—dead, I tell you. I—I saw her buried with my own eyes!"

"She is not dead, for I am that unfortunate girl," answered Faynie, in a voice that trembled with agonized emotion.

"Listen all, while I tell my story," she sobbed. "Surely the saddest, most pitiful story a young girl ever had to tell."

Then, in a panting voice, she told her horrified listeners all, from the beginning to the very end, omitting not the slightest detail, dwelling with a pathos that brought tears to every eye, of how she had loved him up to the very hour he had come for her to elope with him; her horror and fear of him growing more intense because of the marriage he forced her into, with the concealed revolver pressed so close to her heart she dared not disobey his slightest command.

And how the conviction grew upon her that he was marrying her for wealth only, and the inspiration that came to her to test his so-called love by telling him that she had been disinherited, though she was confident that her father had made his will in her favor, leaving her his entire fortune.

Dwelling with piteous sobs on how he had then and there struck her down to death, as he supposed, and that he had made all haste to make away with her; and that she would at that moment have been lying in an unmarked grave, under the snowdrifts, if Heaven had not most miraculously interfered and saved her.

Faynie ended her thrilling recital by adding that she had not known, until that hour, that this man was Claire's lover, because they had refrained from mentioning the name of the man in her presence. How she had come to the library in search of a book and had encountered him stealing through the halls, a veritable thief in the dead of the night, bent upon securing a sum of money which he had learned in some way was in the safe, and that he now had it in his pocket, and that she had prevented him from securing her father's will by snatching it from his grasp.

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Mrs. Fairfax had fallen back, trembling like an aspen leaf. She recognized her husband's will in Faynie's hands, and that, although the girl did not say so before the servants, she knew her treachery.

"Come, Claire, my child," she said, turning to her daughter, "this is no place for you."

But Claire did not stir; she stood quite still, looking from the one to the other, as though she could not fully comprehend all that she saw and heard.

By this time Kendale had recovered from his shock, and as he listened to Faynie's recital, realized that she was not indeed a ghost, but the heiress of the Fairfax millions, and his own wife at that. And when he found his voice he cried out:

"The girl tells the truth! She is mine, and as her husband I am lord and master of this house, and of her."

As he uttered the words he strode toward Faynie with a diabolical chuckle, and seized her slender wrists in his grasp.

"Unhand me!" shrieked Faynie, struggling frantically in his grasp, almost fainting with terror.

"No one dares interfere between man and wife," replied Kendale, mockingly.

He did not see three dark forms spring over the threshold, thrusting the servants hastily aside.

But in less time than it takes to tell it, a strong arm thrust him aside, and a tall form sprang between him and Faynie, while a voice that struck terror to his very soul cried out:

"You have come to the end of your rope, Clinton Kendale. You have lost the game, while it was almost in your grasp!"

"Great Heaven, is it you, Lester Armstrong!" cried the guilty villain, fairly quivering with terror. "Oh, Lester, have pity—have mercy—I—"

"You shall have the same quality of mercy dealt out to you that you have meted out to others!" replied Lester, sternly.

Suddenly Kendale wrenched himself free from his grasp, crying out, hoarsely and triumphantly:

"I am game yet. I have married the girl you love. She is my lawfully wedded wife. I have lost the Marsh millions, but you are checkmated, Lester Armstrong. I have the Fairfax fortune, and your Faynie!"

"Don't delude yourself into believing so prettily an arranged scheme," exclaimed a voice from the doorway, and a woman whom Kendale had not noticed among the crowd before glided hastily forward, threw back her veil, confronting the villain.

"Gertrude!" he cried aghast, staggering back.

"Yes, Gertrude, your wife," she replied. "Your wife, though you tried hard to induce me to go to Dakota and secure a divorce from you. I had instituted it and would soon have obtained it had I not read in the papers of the great fortune you had fallen into, for you had told me your cousin Lester Armstrong was dead, and you were to take his name and place as assistant cashier—no one knowing of his death, and you could easily pass yourself off for him owing to your wonderful resemblance to each other.

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"For my sake," she added, "Mr. Armstrong has promised to let you go free, providing you go with me."

"It is false!" shouted Kendale. "All you say is a lie, woman!"

"The man who accompanied us to the altar a year ago is here," he said. "He has with him my marriage certificate," pointing toward some one on the threshold, adding, "come forward, please."

And Halloran, who had left a sickbed to accompany her, came slowly forward.

"So you are against me, too!" cried Kendale. "Then all is up, indeed. I acknowledge that all that has been said is true. I had a few weeks of a gay, merry life, and I'm not sorry, either. Come, Gertrude!"

And without a backward glance they slowly left the Fairfax mansion.

The reuniting of Faynie and her lover was extremely affecting, and within an hour a minister was called in who made them one forevermore.

Mrs. Fairfax and her daughter were offered a home for life, but they chose to leave the following day. Faynie and Lester had gone through many thrilling experiences, but were happily reunited—at last.

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