

# **The Haunted Chamber eBook**

## **The Haunted Chamber by Margaret Wolfe Hungerford**

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# Page 1

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The Haunted Chamber

By "The duchess"

1888

## CHAPTER I.

The sun has "dropped down," and the "day is dead." The silence and calm of coming night are over everything. The shadowy twilight lies softly on sleeping flowers and swaying boughs, on quiet fountains—the marble basins of which gleam snow-white in the uncertain light—on the glimpse of the distant ocean seen through the giant elms. A floating mist hangs in the still warm air, making heaven and earth mingle in one sweet confusion.

The ivy creeping up the ancient walls of the castle is rustling and whispering as the evening breeze sweeps over it. High up the tendrils climb, past mullioned windows and quaint devices, until they reach even to the old tower, and twine lovingly round it, and push through the long apertures in the masonry of the walls of the haunted chamber.

It is here that the shadows cast their heaviest gloom. All this corner of the old tower is wrapped in darkness, as though to obscure the scene of terrible crimes of past centuries.

Ghosts of dead-and-gone lords and ladies seem to peer out mysteriously from the openings in this quaint chamber, wherein no servant, male or female, of the castle has ever yet been known to set foot. It is full of dire horrors to them, and replete with legends of by-gone days and grewsome sights ghastly enough to make the stoutest heart quail.



In the days of the Stuarts an old earl had hanged himself in that room, rather than face the world with dishonor attached to his name; and earlier still a beauteous dame, fair but frail, had been incarcerated there, and slowly starved to death by her relentless lord. There was even in the last century a baronet—the earldom had been lost to the Dynecourts during the Commonwealth—who, having quarreled with his friend over a reigning belle, had smitten him across the cheek with his glove, and then challenged him to mortal combat. The duel had been fought in the luckless chamber, and had only ended with the death of both combatants; the blood stains upon the flooring were large and deep, and to this day the boards bear silent witness to the sanguinary character of that secret fight.

Just now, standing outside the castle in the warmth and softness of the dying daylight, one can hardly think of by-gone horrors, or aught that is sad and sinful.

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There is an air of bustle and expectancy within-doors that betokens coming guests; the servants are moving to and fro noiselessly but busily, and now and then the stately housekeeper passes from room to room uttering commands and injunctions to the maids as she goes. No less occupied and anxious is the butler, as he surveys the work of the footmen. It is so long since the old place has had a resident master, and so much longer still since guests have been invited to it, that the household are more than ordinarily excited at the change now about to take place.

Sir Adrian Dynecourt, after a prolonged tour on the Continent and lingering visits to the East, has at last come home with the avowed intention of becoming a staid country gentleman, and of settling down to the cultivation of turnips, the breeding of prize oxen, and the determination to be the M.F.H. when old Lord Dartree shall have fulfilled his declared intention of retiring in his favor. He is a tall young man, lithe and active. His skin, though naturally fair, is bronzed by foreign travel. His hair is a light brown, cut very close to his head. His eyes are large, clear, and honest, and of a peculiarly dark violet; they are beautiful eyes, winning and sweet, and steady in their glance. His mouth, shaded by a drooping fair mustache, is large and firm, yet very prone to laughter.

It is quite the end of the London season, and Sir Adrian has hurried down from town to give directions for the reception of some people whom he has invited to stay with him during the slaughter of the partridges.

Now all is complete, and the last train from London being due half an hour ago Sir Adrian is standing on the steps of his hall-door anxiously awaiting some of his guests.

There is even a touch of genuine impatience in his manner, which could hardly be attributed to the ordinary longing of a young man to see a few of his friends. Sir Adrian's anxiety is open and undisguised, and there is a little frown upon his brow. Presently his face brightens as he hears the roll of carriage-wheels. When the carriage turns the corner of the drive, and the horses are pulled up at the hall door, Sir Adrian sees a fair face at the window that puts to flight all the fears he has been harboring for the last half hour.

"You have come?" he says delightedly, running down the steps and opening the carriage door himself. "I am so glad! I began to think the train had run away with you, or that the horses had bolted."

"Such a journey as it has been!" exclaims a voice not belonging to the face that had looked from the carriage at Sir Adrian. "It has been tiresome to the last degree. I really don't know when I felt so fatigued!"

A little woman, small and fair, steps languidly to the ground as she says this, and glances pathetically at her host. She is beautifully "got up," both in dress and complexion, and at a first glance appears almost girlish. Laying her hand in Sir





Adrian's, she lets it rest there, as though glad to be at her journey's end, conveying at the same time by a gentle pressure of her taper fingers the fact that she is even more glad that the end of her journey has brought her to him. She looks up at him with her red lips drooping as if tired, and with a bewildered expression in her pretty blue eyes that adds to the charm of her face.

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"It's an awful distance from town!" says Sir Adrian, as if apologizing for the spot on which his grand old castle has been built. "And it was more than good of you to come to me. I can only try to make up to you for the discomfort you have experienced to-day by throwing all possible chances of amusement in your way whilst you stay here."

By this time she has withdrawn her hand, and so he is free to go up to his other guest and bid her welcome. He says nothing to her, strange to say, but it is his hand that seeks to retain hers this time, and it is his eyes that look longingly into the face before him.

"You are tired, too?" he says at length. "Come into the house and rest awhile before dinner. You will like to go to your rooms at once, perhaps?" he adds, turning to his two visitors.

"Thank you—yes. If you will have our tea sent upstairs," replies Mrs. Talbot plaintively, "it will be such a comfort!" she always speaks in a somewhat pouting tone, and with heavy emphasis.

"Tea—nonsense!" responds Sir Adrian. "There's nothing like champagne as a pick-me-up. I'll send you tea also; but, take my advice, and try the champagne."

"Oh, thank you, I shall so much prefer my tea!" Mrs. Talbot declares, with a graceful little shrug of her shoulders, at which her friend Miss Delmaine laughs aloud.

"I accept your advice, Sir Adrian," she says, casting a mischievous glance at him from under her long lashes. "And—yes, Dora will take champagne too—when it comes."

"Naughty girl!" exclaims Mrs. Talbot, with a little flickering smile. Dora Talbot seldom smiles, having learned by experience that her delicate face looks prettier in repose. "Come, then, Sir Adrian," she adds, "let us enter your enchanted castle."

The servants by this time have taken in all their luggage—that is, as much as they have been able to bring in the carriage; and now the two ladies walk up the steps and enter the hall, their host beside them.

Mrs. Talbot, who has recovered her spirits a little, is chattering gayly, and monopolizing Sir Adrian to the best of her ability, whilst Miss Delmaine is strangely silent, and seems lost in a kind of pleased wonder as she gazes upon all her charming surroundings.

The last rays of light are streaming in through the stained-glass windows, rendering the old hall full of mysterious beauty. The grim warriors in their coats of mail seem, to the entranced gaze of Florence Delmaine, to be making ready to spring from the niches which hold them.

Waking from her dream as she reaches the foot of the stone staircase, she says abruptly, but with a lovely smile playing round her mouth—

“Surely, Sir Adrian, you have a ghost in this beautiful old place, or a secret staircase, or at least a boggy of some sort? Do not spoil the romantic look of it by telling me you have no tale of terror to impart, no history of a ghostly visitant who walks these halls at the dead of night.”

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"We have no ghost here, I am sorry to say," answers Sir Adrian, laughing. "For the first time I feel distressed and ashamed that it should be so. We can only boast a haunted chamber; but there are certain legends about it, I am proud to say, the bare narration of which would make even the stoutest quail."

"Good gracious—how distinctly unpleasant!" exclaims Mrs. Talbot, with a nervous and very effective shudder.

"How distinctly delicious, you mean!" puts in Miss Delmaine. "Sir Adrian, is this chamber anywhere near where I shall sleep?"

"Oh, no; you need not be afraid of that!" answers Dynecourt hastily.

"I am not afraid," declares the girl saucily. "I have all my life been seeking an adventure of some sort. I am tired of my prosaic existence. I want to know what dwellers in the shadowy realms of ghost-land are like."

"Dear Sir Adrian, do urge her not to talk like that; it is positively wicked," pleads Dora Talbot, glancing at him beseechingly.

"Miss Delmaine, you will drive Mrs. Talbot from my house if you persist in your evil courses," says Sir Adrian, laughing again. "Desist, I pray you!"

"Are you afraid, Dora?" asks Florence merrily. "Then keep close to me. I can defy all evil spirits, I have spells and charms."

"You have indeed!" puts in Sir Adrian, in a tone so low that only she can hear it. "And, knowing this, you should be merciful."

Though she can not hear what he says, yet Mrs. Talbot can see he is addressing Florence, and marks with some uneasiness the glance that passes from his eyes to hers. Breaking quickly into the conversation, she says timidly, laying her hand on her host's arm—

"This shocking room you speak of will not be near mine?"

"In another wing altogether," Sir Adrian replies reassuringly. "Indeed it is so far from this part of the castle that one might be safely incarcerated there and slowly starved to death without any one of the household being a bit the wiser. It is in the north wing in the old tower, a portion of the building that has not been in use for over fifty years."

"I breathe again," says Dora Talbot affectedly.

"I shall traverse every inch of that old tower—haunted room and all—before I am a week older," declares Florence defiantly. After which she smiles at Adrian again, and follows the maid up the broad staircase to her room.

By the end of the week many other visitors have been made welcome at the castle; but none perhaps give so much pleasure to the young baronet as Mrs. Talbot and her cousin.

Miss Delmaine, the only daughter and heiress of an Indian nabob, had taken London by storm this past season; and not only the modern Babylon, but the heart of Adrian Dynecourt as well. She had come home to England on the death of her father about two years ago; and, having no nearer relatives alive, had been kindly received by her cousin, the Hon. Mrs. Talbot, who was then living with her husband in a pretty house in Mayfair.

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Six months after Florence Delmaine's arrival, George Talbot had succumbed to a virulent fever; and his widow, upon whom a handsome jointure had been settled, when the funeral and the necessary law worries had come to an end, had intimated to her young cousin that she intended to travel for a year upon the Continent, and that she would be glad, that is—with an elaborate sigh—she would be a degree less miserable, if she, Florence, would accompany her. This delighted Florence. She was wearied with attendance on the sick, having done most of the nursing of the Hon. George, while his wife lamented and slept; and, besides, she was still sore at heart for the loss of her father. The year abroad had passed swiftly; the end of it brought them to Paris once more, where, feeling that her time of mourning might be decently terminated, Mrs. Talbot had discarded her somber robes, and had put herself into the hands of the most fashionable dress-maker she could find.

Florence too discarded mourning for the first time, although her father had been almost two years in his quiet grave amongst the Hills; and, with her cousin, who was now indeed her only friend, if slightly uncongenial, decided to return to London forthwith.

It was early in May, and, with a sensation of extreme and most natural pleasure, the girl looked forward to a few months passed amongst the best of those whom she had learned under her cousin's auspices to regard as "society."

Dora Talbot herself was not by any means dead to the thought that it would be to her advantage to introduce into society a girl, well-born and possessed of an almost fabulous fortune. Stray crumbs must surely fall to her share in a connection of this kind, and such crumbs she was prepared to gather with a thankful heart.

But unhappily she set her affection upon Sir Adrian Dynecourt, with his grand old castle and his princely rent-roll—a "crumb" the magnitude and worth of which she was not slow to appreciate. At first she had not deemed it possible that Florence would seriously regard a mere baronet as a suitor, when her unbounded wealth would almost entitle her to a duke. But "love," as she discovered later, to her discomfiture, will always "find the way." And one day, quite unexpectedly, it dawned upon her that there might—if circumstances favored them—grow up a feeling between Florence and Sir Adrian that might lead to mutual devotion.

Yet, strong in the belief of her own charms, Mrs. Talbot accepted the invitation given by Sir Adrian, and at the close of the season she and Florence Delmaine find themselves the first of a batch of guests come to spend a month or two at the old castle at Dynecourt.

Mrs. Talbot is still young, and, in her style, very pretty; her eyes are languishing and blue as gentian, her hair a soft nut-brown; her lips perhaps are not altogether faultless, being too fine and too closely drawn, but then her mouth is small. She looks

considerably younger than she really is, and does not forget to make the most of this comfortable fact. Indeed, to a casual observer, her cousin looks scarcely her junior.

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Miss Delmaine is tall, slender, *posee* more or less, while Mrs. Talbot is prettily rounded, *petite* in every point, and nervously ambitious of winning the regard of the male sex.

During the past week private theatricals have been suggested. Every one is tired of dancing and music. The season has given them more than a surfeit of both, and so they have fallen back upon theatricals.

The play on which they have decided is Goldsmith's famous production, "She Stoops to Conquer."

Miss Villiers, a pretty girl with yellow hair and charming eyes, is to be Constantia Neville; Miss Delmaine, Kate Hardcastle; Lady Gertrude Vining, though rather young for the part, has consented to play Mrs. Hardcastle, under the impression that she looks well in a cap and powdered hair. An impossible Tony Lumpkin has been discovered in a nervous young man with a hesitation in his speech and a difficulty about the letter "S"—a young man who woefully misunderstands Tony, and brings him out in a hitherto unknown character; a suitable Hastings has been found in the person of Captain Ringwood, a gallant young officer, and one of the "curled darlings" of society.

But who is to play Marlow? Who is to be the happy man, so blessed—even though in these fictitious circumstances—as to be allowed to make love to the reigning beauty of the past season? Nearly every man in the house has thrown out a hint as to his fitness for the part, but as yet no arrangement has been arrived at.

Sir Adrian of course is the one toward whom all eyes—and some very jealous ones—are directed. But his duties as host compel him, sorely against his will, to draw back a little from the proffered honor, and to consult the wishes of his guests rather than his own. Miss Delmaine herself has laughingly declined to make any choice of a stage lover, so that, up to the present moment, matters are still in such a state of confusion and uncertainty that they have been unable to name any date for the production of their play.

It is four o'clock, and they are all standing or sitting in the library, intent as usual in discussing the difficulty. They are all talking together, and, in the excitement that prevails, no one hears the door open, or the footman's calm, introduction of a gentleman, who now comes leisurely up to where Sir Adrian is standing, leaning over Florence Delmaine's chair.

He is a tall man of about thirty-five, with a dark face and dark eyes, and, withal, a slight resemblance to Sir Adrian.

"Ah, Arthur, is it you!" says Sir Adrian, in a surprised tone that has certainly no cordiality in it, but, just as certainly, the tone is not repellent.



“Yes,” replies the stranger, with a languid smile, and without confusion. “Yesterday I suddenly recollected the general invitation you gave me a month ago to come to you at any time that suited me best. This time suits me, and so I have come.”

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He still smiles as he says this, and looks expectantly at Sir Adrian, who, as in duty bound, instantly tells him he is very glad to see him, and that he is a good fellow to have come without waiting for a more formal repetition of his invitation. Then he takes him over to old Lady FitzAlmont, the mother of Lady Gertrude Vining, and introduces him to her as “my cousin Mr. Dynecourt.”

The same ceremony is gone through with some of the others, but, when he brings him to Mrs. Talbot, that pretty widow interrupts his mode of introduction.

“Mr. Dynecourt and I are old friends,” she says, giving her hand to the new-comer. Then, turning to her cousin, she adds, “Florence, is it not a fatality our meeting him so often?”

“Have we met so often?” asks Florence quietly, but with a touch of *hauteur* and dislike in her tone. Then she too gives a cold little hand to Mr. Dynecourt, who lingers over it until she disdainfully draws it away, after which he turns from her abruptly and devotes himself to Dora Talbot.

The widow is glad of his attentions. He is handsome and well-bred, and for the last half hour she has been feeling slightly bored; so eager has been the discussion about the Marlow matter, that she has been little sought after by the opposite sex. And now, once again, the subject is being examined in all its bearings, and the discussion waxes fast and furious.

“What is it all about?” asks Arthur Dynecourt presently, glancing at the animated group in the middle of the room. And Sir Adrian, hearing his question, explains it to him.

“Ah, indeed!” he says. And then, after a scarcely perceptible pause—“Who is to be Kate Hardcastle?”

“Miss Delmaine,” answers Sir Adrian, who is still leaning over that young lady’s chair.

“In what does the difficulty consist?” inquires Arthur Dynecourt, with apparent indifference.

“Well,” replies Sir Adrian, laughing; “I believe mere fear holds us back. Miss Delmaine, as we all know, is a finished actress, and we dread spoiling her performance by faults on our side. None of us have attempted the character before; this is why we hesitate.”

“A very sensible hesitation, I think,” says his cousin coolly. “You should thank me then for coming to your relief this afternoon; I have played the part several times, and shall be delighted to undertake it again, and help you out of your difficulty.”

At this Miss Delmaine flushes angrily, and opens her lips as if she would say something, but, after a second's reflection, restrains herself. She sinks back into her chair with a proud languor, and closes her mouth resolutely.

Sir Adrian is confounded. All along he had secretly hoped that, in the end, this part would fall to his lot; but now—what is to be done? How can he refuse to let his cousin take his place, especially as he has declared himself familiar with the part.

Arthur, observing his cousin's hesitation, laughs aloud. His is not a pleasant laugh, but has rather a sneering ring in it, and at the present moment it jars upon the ears of the listeners.

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"If I have been indiscreet," he says, with a slight glance at Florence's proud face, "pray pardon me. I only meant to render you a little assistance. I thought I understood from you that you were rather in a dilemma. Do not dwell upon my offer another moment. I am afraid I have made myself somewhat officious—unintentionally, believe me."

"My dear fellow, not at all," declares Sir Adrian hastily, shocked at his own apparent want of courtesy. "I assure you, you mistake. It is all so much to the contrary, that I gratefully accept your offer, and beg you will be Marlow."

"But really—" begins Arthur Dynecourt.

"Not a word!" interrupts Sir Adrian; and indeed by this time Arthur Dynecourt has brought his cousin to believe he is about to confer upon him a great favor. "Look here, you fellows," Sir Adrian goes on, walking toward the other men, who are still arguing and disputing over the vexed question, "I've settled it all for you. Here is my cousin; he will take the difficulty off your hands, and be a first-class Marlow at the same time."

A suppressed consternation follows this announcement. Many and dark are the glances cast upon the new-comer, who receives them all with his usual imperturbable smile. Rising, Arthur approaches one of the astonished group who is known to him, and says something upon the subject with a slight shrug of his shoulders. As he is Sir Adrian's cousin, every one feels that it will be impossible to offer any objection to his taking the much-coveted part.

"Well, I have sacrificed myself for you; I have renounced a very dear desire all to please you," says Sir Adrian softly, bending down to Florence. "Have I succeeded?"

"You have succeeded in displeasing me more than I can say," she returns coldly. Then, seeing his amazed expression, she goes on hastily, "Forgive me, but I had hoped for another Marlow."

She blushes prettily as she says this, and an expression arises in her dark eyes that moves him deeply. Stooping over her hand, he imprints a kiss upon it. Dora Talbot, whose head is turned aside, sees nothing of this, but Arthur Dynecourt has observed the silent caress, and a dark frown gathers on his brow.

## CHAPTER II.

Every day and all day long there is nothing but rehearsing. In every corner two or more may be seen studying together the parts they have to play. Florence Delmaine alone refuses to rehearse her part except in full company, though Mr. Dynecourt has made many attempts to induce her to favor him with a private reading of those scenes in which he and she must act together. He has even appealed to Dora Talbot to help him in this matter, which she is only too willing to do, as she is secretly desirous of flinging

the girl as much in his way as possible. Indeed anything that would keep Florence out of Sir Adrian's sight would be welcome to her; so that she listens kindly to Arthur Dynecourt when he solicits her assistance.

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"She evidently shuns me," he says in an aggrieved tone to her one evening, sinking into the seat beside hers. "Except a devotion to her that is singularly sincere, I know of nothing about me that can be regarded by her as an offense. Yet it appears to me that she dislikes me."

"There I am sure you are wrong," declares the widow, tapping his arm lightly with her fan. "She is but a girl—she hardly knows her own mind."

"She seems to know it pretty well when Adrian addresses her," he says, with a sullen glance.

At this Mrs. Talbot can not repress a start; she grows a little pale, and then tries to hide her confusion by a smile. But the smile is forced, and Arthur Dynecourt, watching her, reads her heart as easily as if it were an open book.

"I don't suppose Adrian cares for her," he goes on quietly. "At least"—here he drops his eyes—"I believe, with a little judicious management, his thoughts might be easily diverted into another channel."

"You think so?" asks Mrs. Talbot faintly, trifling with her fan. "I can not say I have noticed that his attentions to her have been in any way particular."

"Not as yet," agrees Dynecourt, studying her attentively; "and if I might be open with you," he adds, breaking off abruptly and assuming an air of anxiety—"we might perhaps mutually help each other."

"Help each other?"

"Dear Mrs. Talbot," says Dynecourt softly, "has it never occurred to you how safe a thing it would be for my cousin Sir Adrian to marry a sensible woman—a woman who understands the world and its ways—a woman young and beautiful certainly, but yet conversant with the *convenances* of society? Such a woman would rescue Adrian from the shoals and quicksands that surround him in the form of mercenary friends and scheming mothers. Such a woman might surely be found. Nay, I think I myself could put my hand upon her, if I dared, at this moment."

Mrs. Talbot trembles slightly, and blushes a good deal, but says nothing.

"He is my nearest of kin," goes on Dynecourt, in the same low impassive voice. "Naturally I am interested in him, and my interest on this point is surely without motive; as, were he never to marry, were he to leave no heir, were he to die some sudden death"—here a remarkable change overspreads his features—"I should inherit all the land you see around you, and the title besides."

Mrs. Talbot is still silent. She merely bows her head in assent.

“Then, you see, I mean kindly toward him when I suggest that he should marry some one calculated to sustain his rank in the world,” continues Dynecourt. “As I have said before, I know one who would fill the position charmingly, if she would deign to do so.”

“And who?” falters Dora Talbot nervously.

“May I say to whom I allude?” he murmurs. “Mrs. Talbot, pardon me if I have been impertinent in thinking of you as that woman.”

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A little flickering smile adorns Dora's lips for a moment, then, suddenly remembering that smiles do not become her, she relapses into her former calm.

"You flatter me," she says sweetly.

"I never flatter," he responds, with telling emphasis. "But, I can see you are not angry, and so I am emboldened to say plainly, I would gladly see you my cousin's wife. Is the idea not altogether abhorrent to you?"

"No. Oh, no!"

"It is perhaps—pardon me if I go too far—even agreeable to you?"

"Mr. Dynecourt," says Mrs. Talbot, suddenly glancing at him and laying her jeweled fingers lightly on his arm, "I will confess to you that I am tired of being alone—dependent on myself, as it were—thrown on my own judgment for the answering of every question that arises. I would gladly acknowledge a superior head. I would have some one to help me now and then with a word of advice; in short, I would have a husband. And,"—here she lays her fan against her lips and glances archly at him—"I confess too that I like Sir Adrian as—well—as well as any man I know."

"He is a very fortunate man"—gravely. "I would he knew his happiness."

"Not for worlds," says Mrs. Talbot, with well-feigned alarm. "You would not even hint to him such a thing as—as—" She stops, confused.

"I shall hint nothing—do nothing, except what you wish. Ah, Mrs. Talbot"—with a heavy sigh—"you are supremely happy! I envy you! With your fascinations and"—insinuatingly—"a word in season from me, I see no reason why you should not claim as your own the man whom you—well, let us say, like; while I—"

"If I can befriend you in any way," interrupts Dora quickly, "command me."

She is indeed quite dazzled by the picture he has painted before her eyes. Can it be—is it—possible, that Sir Adrian may some day be hers? Apart from his wealth, she regards him with very tender feelings, and of late she has been rendered at times absolutely miserable by the thought that he has fallen a victim to the charms of Florence.

Now if, by means of this man, her rival can be kept out of Adrian's way, all may yet be well, and her host may be brought to her feet before her visit comes to an end.

Of Arthur Dynecourt's infatuation for Florence she is fully aware, and is right in deeming that part of his admiration for the beautiful girl has grown out of his knowledge of her money-bags. Still, she argues to herself, his love is true and faithful, despite his



knowledge of her *dot*, and he will in all probability make her as good a husband as she is likely to find.

“May I command you?” asks Arthur, in his softest tones. “You know my secret, I believe. Ever since that last meeting at Brighton, when my heart overcame me and made me show my sentiments openly and in your presence, you have been aware of the hopeless passion that is consuming me. I may be mad, but I still think that, with opportunities and time, I might make myself at least tolerated by Miss Delmaine. Will you help me in this matter? Will you give me the chance of pleading my cause with her alone? By so doing”—with a meaning smile—“you will also give my cousin the happy chance of seeing you alone.”

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Dora only too well understands his insinuation. Latterly Sir Adrian and Florence have been almost inseparable. To now meet with one whose interest it is to keep them asunder is very pleasant to her.

"I will help you," she says in a low tone.

"Then try to induce Miss Delmaine to give me a private rehearsal to-morrow in the north gallery," he whispers hurriedly, seeing Captain Ringwood and Miss Villiers approaching. "Hush! Not another word! I rely upon you. Above all things, remember that what has occurred is only between you and me. It is our little plot," he says, with a curious smile that somehow strikes a chill to Mrs. Talbot's heart.

She is faithful to her word nevertheless, and late that night, when all have gone to their rooms, she puts on her dressing-gown, dismisses her maid, and crossing the corridor, taps lightly at the door of Florence's apartment.

Hearing some one cry "Come in," she opens the door, and, having fastened it again, goes over to where Florence is sitting while her maid is brushing her long soft hair that reaches almost to the ground as she sits.

"Let me brush your hair to-night, Flo," she says gayly. "Let me be your maid for once. Remember how I used to do it for you sometimes when we were in Switzerland last year."

"Very well—you may," acquiesces Florence, laughing. "Good-night, Parkins. Mrs. Talbot has won you your release."

Parkins having gladly withdrawn, Dora takes up the ivory-handled brush and gently begins to brush her cousin's hair.

After some preliminary conversation leading up to the subject she has in hand, she says carelessly—

"By the bye, Flo, you are rather uncivil to Arthur Dynecourt, don't you think?"

"Uncivil?"

"Well—yes. That is the word for your behavior toward him, I think. Do you know, I am afraid Sir Adrian has noticed it, and aren't you afraid he will think it rather odd of you—rude, I mean—considering he is his cousin?"

"Not a very favorite cousin, I fancy."

"For all that, people don't like seeing their relations slighted. I once knew a man who used to abuse his brother all day long, but, if any one else happened to say one

disparaging word of him in his presence, it put him in a pretty rage. And, after all, poor Arthur has done nothing to deserve actual ill-treatment at your hands."

"I detest him. And, besides, it is a distinct impertinence to follow any one about from place to place as he has followed me. I will not submit to it calmly. It is a positive persecution."

"My dear, you must not blame him if he has lost his head about you. That is rather a compliment, if anything."

"I shall always resent such compliments."

"He is certainly very gentlemanly in all other ways, and I must say devoted to you. He is handsome too, is he not; and has quite the air of one accustomed to command in society?"

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"Has he paid you to sing his praises?" asks Florence, with a little laugh; but her words so nearly hit the mark that Dora blushes painfully.

"I mean," she explains at last, in a rather hurried way, "that I do not think it is good form to single out any one in a household where one is a guest to show him pointed rudeness. You give all the others acting in this play ample opportunities of rehearsing alone with you. It has been remarked to me by two or three that you purposely slight and avoid Mr. Dynecourt."

"So I do," Florence admits calmly; adding, "Your two or three have great perspicacity."

"They even hinted to me," Dora goes on deliberately, "that your dislike to him arose from the fact that you were piqued at his being your stage lover, instead of—Sir Adrian!"

It costs her an effort to utter these words, but the effect produced by them is worth the effort.

Florence, growing deadly pale, releases her hair from her cousin's grasp, and rises quickly to her feet.

"I don't know who your gossips may be," she says slowly; "but they are wrong—quite wrong—do you hear? My dislike to Mr. Dynecourt arises from very different feelings. He is distasteful to me in many ways; but, as I am undesirous that my manner should give occasion for surmises such as you have just mentioned to me, I will give him an opportunity of reciting his part to me, alone, as soon as ever he wishes."

"I think you are right, dearest," responds Mrs. Talbot sweetly. She is a little afraid of her cousin, but still maintains her position bravely. "It is always a mark of folly to defy public opinion. Do not wait for him to ask you again to go through your play with him alone, but tell him yourself to-morrow that you will meet him for that purpose in the north gallery some time during the day."

"Very well," says Florence; but her face still betrays dislike and disinclination to the course recommended. "And, Dora, I don't think I want my hair brushed any more, thanks; my head is aching so dreadfully."

This is a hint that she will be glad of Mrs. Talbot's speedy departure; and, that lady taking the hint, Florence is soon left to her own thoughts.

The next morning, directly after breakfast, she finds an opportunity to tell Mr. Dynecourt that she will give him half an hour in the north gallery to try over his part with her, as she considers it will be better, and more conducive to the smoothness of the piece, to learn any little mannerisms that may belong to either of them.

To this speech Dynecourt makes a suitable reply, and names a particular hour for them to meet. Miss Delmaine, having given a grave assent to this arrangement, moves away, as though glad to be rid of her companion.

A few minutes afterward Dynecourt, meeting Mrs. Talbot in the hall, gives her an expressive glance, and tells her in a low voice that he considers himself deeply in her debt.

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### CHAPTER III.

"You are late," says Arthur Dynecourt in a low tone. There is no anger in it; there is indeed only a desire to show how tedious have been the moments spent apart from her.

"Have you brought your book, or do you mean to go through your part without it?" Florence asks, disdainingly to notice his words, or to betray interest in anything except the business that has brought them together.

"I know my part by heart," he responds, in a strange voice.

"Then begin," she commands somewhat imperiously; the very insolence of her air only gives an additional touch to her extreme beauty and fires his ardor.

"You desire me to begin?" he asks unsteadily.

"If you wish it."

"Do you wish it?"

"I desire nothing more intensely than to get this rehearsal over," she replies impatiently.

"You take no pains indeed to hide your scorn of me," says Dynecourt bitterly.

"I regret it, if I have at any time treated you with incivility," returns Florence, with averted eyes and with increasing coldness. "Yet I must always think that, for whatever has happened, you have only yourself to blame."

"Is it a crime to love you?" he demands boldly.

"Sir," she exclaims indignantly, and raising her beautiful eyes to his for a moment, "I must request you will never speak to me of love. There is neither sympathy nor common friendliness between us. You are well aware with what sentiments I regard you."

"But, why am I alone to be treated with contempt?" he asks, with sudden passion. "All other men of your acquaintance are graciously received by you, are met with smiles and kindly words. Upon me alone your eyes rest, when they deign to glance in my direction, with marked disfavor. All the world can see it. I am signaled out from the others as one to be slighted and spurned."

"Your forget yourself," says Florence contemptuously. "I have met you here to-day to rehearse our parts for next Tuesday evening, not to listen to any insolent words you

may wish to address to me. Let us begin”—opening her book. “If you know your part, go on.”

“I know my part only too well; it is to worship you madly, hopelessly. Your very cruelty only serves to heighten my passion. Florence, hear me!”

“I will not,” she says, her eyes flashing. She waves him back from her as he endeavors to take her hand. “Is it not enough that I have been persecuted by your attentions—attentions most hateful to me—for the past year, but you must now obtrude them upon me here? You compel me to tell you in plain words what my manner must have shown you only too clearly—that you are distasteful to me in every way, that your very presence troubles me, that your touch is abhorrent to me!”

“Ah,” he says, stepping back as she hurls these words at him, and regarding her with a face distorted by passion, “if I were the master here, instead of the poor cousin—if I were Sir Adrian—your treatment of me would be very different!”

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At the mention of Sir Adrian's name the color dies out of her face and she grows deadly pale. Her lips quiver, but her eyes do not droop.

"I do not understand you," she says proudly.

"Then you shall," responds Dynecourt. "Do you think I am blind, that I can not see how you have given your proud heart to my cousin, that he has conquered where other men have failed; that, even before he has declared any love for you, you have, in spite of your pride, given all your affection to him?"

"You insult me," cries Florence, with quivering lips. She looks faint, and is trembling visibly. If this man has read her heart aright, may not all the guests have read it too? May not even Adrian himself have discovered her secret passion, and perhaps despised her for it, as being unwomanly?

"And more," goes on Dynecourt, exulting in the torture he can see he is inflicting; "though you thrust from you an honorable love for one that lives only in your imagination, I will tell you that Sir Adrian has other views, other intentions. I have reason to know that, when he marries, the name of his bride will not be Florence Delmaine."

"Leave me, sir," cries Florence, rousing herself from her momentary weakness, and speaking with all her old fire, "and never presume to address me again. Go!"

She points with extended hand to the door at the lower end of the gallery. So standing, with her eyes strangely bright, and her perfect figure drawn up to its fullest height, she looks superb in her disdainful beauty.

Dynecourt, losing his self-possession as he gazes upon her, suddenly flings himself at her feet and catches her dress in his hands to detain her.

"Have pity on me," he cries imploringly; "it is my unhappy love for you that has driven me to speak thus! Why is Adrian to have all, and I nothing? He has title, lands, position—above and beyond everything, the priceless treasure of your love, whilst I am bankrupt in all. Show me some mercy—some kindness!"

They are both so agitated that they fail to hear the sound of approaching footsteps.

"Release me, sir," cries Florence imperiously.

"Nay; first answer me one question," entreats Dynecourt. "Do you love my cousin?"

"I care nothing for Sir Adrian!" replies Florence distinctly, and in a somewhat raised tone, her self-pride being touched to the quick.



Two figures who have entered the gallery by the second door at the upper end of it, hearing these words uttered in an emphatic tone, start and glance at the *tableau* presented to their view lower down. They hesitate, and, even as they do so, they can see Arthur Dynecourt seize Florence Delmaine's hand, and, apparently unrebuked, kiss it passionately.

"Then I shall hope still," he says in a low but impressive voice, at which the two who have just entered turn and beat a precipitate retreat, fearing that they may be seen. One is Sir Adrian, the other Mrs. Talbot.

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"Dear me," stammers Dora, in pretty confusion, "who would have thought it? I was never so amazed in my life."

Sir Adrian, who has turned very pale, and is looking greatly distressed, makes no reply. He is repeating over and over again to himself the words he has just heard, as though unable or unwilling to comprehend them. "I care nothing for Sir Adrian!" They strike like a knell upon his ears—a death-knell to all his dearest hopes. And that fellow on his knees before her, kissing her hand, and telling her he will still hope! Hope for what? Alas, he tells himself, he knows only too well—her love!

"I am so glad they have made it up," Dora goes on, looking up sympathetically at Sir Adrian.

"Made it up? I had no idea they were more than ordinary and very new acquaintances."

"It is quite a year since we first met Arthur in Switzerland," responds Dora demurely, calling Dynecourt by his Christian name, a thing she has never done before, because she knows it will give Sir Adrian the impression that they are on very intimate terms with his cousin. "He has been our shadow ever since. I wonder you did not notice his devotion in town."

"I noticed nothing," says Sir Adrian, miserably; "or, if I did, it was only to form wrong impressions. I firmly believed, seeing Miss Delmaine and Arthur together here, that she betrayed nothing but a rooted dislike to him."

"They had not been good friends of late," explains Dora hastily; "that we all could see. And Florence is very peculiar, you know; she is quite the dearest girl in the world, and I adore her; but I will confess to you"—with another upward and bewitching glance from the charming blue eyes—"that she has her little tempers. Not very naughty ones, you know"—shaking her head archly—"but just enough to make one a bit afraid of her at times; so I never ventured to ask her why she treated poor Arthur, who really is her slave, so cruelly."

"And you think now that—" Sir Adrian breaks off without finishing the sentence.

"That she has forgiven him whatever offense he committed? Yes, after what we have just seen—quite a sentimental little episode, was it not?—I can not help cherishing the hope that all is again right between them. It could not have been a very grave quarrel, as Arthur is incapable of a rudeness; but then dearest Florence is so capricious!"

"Ill-tempered and capricious!" Can the girl he loves so ardently be guilty of these faults? It seems incredible to Sir Adrian, as he remembers her sunny smile and gentle manner. But then, is it not her dearest friend who is speaking of her—tender-hearted little Dora

Talbot, who seems to think well of every one, and who murmurs such pretty speeches even about Arthur, who, if the truth be told, is not exactly “dear” in the sight of Sir Adrian.

“You think there is, or was, an engagement between Arthur and Miss Delmaine?” he begins, with his eyes fixed upon the ground.

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"I think nothing, you silly man," says the widow playfully, "until I am told it. But I am glad Florence is once more friendly with poor Arthur; he is positively wrapped up in her. Now, has that interesting *tableau* we so nearly interrupted given you a distaste for all other pictures? Shall we try the smaller gallery?"

"Just as you will."

"Of course"—with a girlish laugh—"it would be imprudent to venture again into the one we have just quitted. By this time, doubtless, they are quite reconciled—and—"

"Yes—yes," interrupts Sir Adrian hastily, trying in vain to blot out the picture she has raised before his eyes of Florence in her lover's arms. "What you have just told me has quite taken me by surprise," he goes on nervously. "I should never have guessed it from Miss Delmaine's manner; it quite misled me."

"Well, between you and me," says Dora, raising herself on tiptoe, as though to whisper in his ear, and so coming very close to him, "I am afraid my dearest Florence is a little sly! Yes, really; you wouldn't think it, would you? The dear girl has such a sweet ingenuous face—quite the loveliest face on earth, I think, though some pronounce it too cold. But she is very self-contained; and to-day, you see, she has given you an insight into this slight fault in her character. Now, has she not appeared to you to avoid Arthur almost pointedly?"

"She has indeed," agrees Sir Adrian, with a smothered groan.

"Well"—triumphantly—"and yet, here we find her granting him a private audience, when she believed we were all safely out of the way; and in the north gallery too, which, as a rule, is deserted."

"She didn't know we were thinking of driving to the hills," says Sir Adrian, making a feeble effort to find a flaw in his companion's statement.

"Oh, yes, she did!" declares the widow lightly. "I told her myself, about two hours ago, that I intended asking you to make a party to go there, as I dote on lovely scenery; and I dare say"—coquettishly—"she knew—I mean thought—you would not refuse so small a request of mine. But for poor Lady FitzAlmont's headache we should be there now."

"It is true," admits Sir Adrian, feeling that the last straw has descended.

"And now that I think of it," the widow goes on, even more vivaciously, "the reason she assigned for not coming with us must have been a feigned one. Ah, slyboots that she is!" laughs Mrs. Talbot merrily. "Of course, she wanted the course clear to have an explanation with Arthur. Well, after all, that was only natural. But she might have trusted me, whom she knows to be her true friend."



Ill-tempered—capricious—sly! And all these faults are attributed to Florence by “her true friend!” A quotation assigned to Marechal Villars when taking leave of Louis XIV. occurs to him—“Defend me from my friends.” The words return to him persistently; but then he looks down on Dora Talbot, and stares straight into her liquid blue eyes, so apparently guileless and pure, and tells himself that he wrongs her. Yes, it is a pity Florence had not put greater faith in this kind little woman, a pity for all of them, as then many heart-breaks might have been prevented.

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### CHAPTER IV.

It is the evening of the theatricals; and in one of the larger drawing-rooms at the castle, where the stage has been erected, and also in another room behind connected with it by folding-doors, everybody of note in the county is already assembled. Fans are fluttering—so are many hearts behind the scenes—and a low buzz of conversation is being carried on among the company.

Then the curtain rises; the fans stop rustling, the conversation ceases, and all faces turn curiously to the small but perfect stage that the London workmen have erected.

Every one is very anxious to see what his or her neighbor is going to do when brought before a critical audience. Nobody, of course, hopes openly for a break-down, but secretly there are a few who would be glad to see such-and-such a one's pride lowered.

No mischance, however, occurs. The insipid Tony speaks his lines perfectly, if he fails to grasp the idea that a little acting thrown in would be an improvement; a very charming Cousin Con is made out of Miss Villiers; a rather stilted but strictly correct old lady out of Lady Gertrude Vining. But Florence Delmaine, as Kate Hardcastle, leaves nothing to be desired, and many are the complimentary speeches uttered from time to time by the audience. Arthur Dynecourt too had not overpraised his own powers. It is palpable to every one that he has often trod the boards, and the pathos he throws into his performance astonishes the audience. Is it only acting in the final scene when he makes love to Miss Hardcastle, or is there some real sentiment in it?

This question arises in many breasts. They note how his color changes as he takes her hand, how his voice trembles; they notice too how she grows cold, in spite of her desire to carry out her part to the end, as he grows warmer, and how instinctively she shrinks from his touch. Then it is all over, and the curtain falls amidst loud applause. Florence comes before the curtain in response to frequent calls, gracefully, half reluctantly, with a soft warm blush upon her cheeks and a light in her eyes that renders her remarkable loveliness only more apparent. Sir Adrian, watching her with a heart faint and cold with grief and disappointment, acknowledges sadly to himself that never has he seen her look so beautiful. She advances and bows to the audience, and only loses her self-possession a very little when a bouquet directed at her feet by an enthusiastic young man alights upon her shoulder instead.

Arthur Dynecourt, who has accompanied her to the footlights, and who joins in her triumph, picks up the bouquet and presents it to her.

As he does so the audience again become aware that she receives it from him in a spirit that suggests detestation of the one that hands it, and that her smile withers as she does so, and her great eyes lose their happy light of a moment before.

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Sir Adrian sees all this too, but persuades himself that she is now acting another part—the part shown him by Mrs. Talbot. His eyes are blinded by jealousy; he can not see the purity and truth reflected in hers; he misconstrues the pained expression that of late has saddened her face.

For the last few days, ever since her momentous interview with Arthur Dynecourt in the gallery, she has been timid and reserved with Sir Adrian, and has endeavored to avoid his society. She is oppressed with the thought that he has read her secret love for him, and seeks, by an assumed coldness of demeanor and a studied avoidance of him, to induce him to believe himself mistaken.

But Sir Adrian is only rendered more miserable by this avoidance, in the thought that probably Mrs. Talbot has told Florence of his discovery of her attachment to Arthur, and that she dreads his taxing her with her duplicity, and so makes strenuous efforts to keep herself apart from him. They have already drifted so far apart that to-night, when the play has come to an end, and Florence has retired from the dressing-room, Sir Adrian does not dream of approaching her to offer the congratulations on her success that he would have showered upon her in a happier hour.

Florence, feeling lonely and depressed, having listlessly submitted to her maid's guidance and changed her stage gown for a pale blue ball-dress of satin and pearls—as dancing is to succeed the earlier amusement of the evening—goes silently down-stairs, but, instead of pursuing her way to the ball-room, where dancing has already commenced, she turns aside, and, entering a small, dimly lighted antechamber, sinks wearily upon a satin-covered lounge.

From a distance the sweet strains of a German waltz come softly to her ears. There is deep sadness and melancholy in the music that attunes itself to her own sorrowful reflections. Presently the tears steal down her cheeks. She feels lonely and neglected, and, burying her head in the cushions of the lounge, sobs aloud.

She does not hear the hasty approach of footsteps until they stop close beside her, and a voice that makes her pulses throb madly says, in deep agitation—

“Florence—Miss Delmaine—what has happened? What has occurred to distress you?”

Sir Adrian is bending over her, evidently in deep distress himself. As she starts, he places his arm round her and raises her to a sitting posture; this he does so gently that, as she remembers all she has heard, and his cousin's assurance that he has almost pledged himself to another, her tears flow afresh. By a supreme effort, however, she controls herself, and says, in a faint voice—

“I am very foolish; it was the heat, I suppose, or the nervousness of acting before so many strangers, that has upset me. It is over now. I beg you will not remember it, Sir Adrian, or speak of it to any one.”

All this time she has not allowed herself to glance even in his direction, so fearful is she of further betraying the mental agony she is enduring.



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"Is it likely I should speak of it!" returns Sir Adrian reproachfully. "No; anything connected with you shall be sacred to me. But—pardon me—I still think you are in grief, and, believe me, in spite of everything, I would deem it a privilege to be allowed to befriend you in any way."

"It is impossible," murmurs Florence, in a stifled tone.

"You mean you will not accept my help"—sadly. "So be it then. I have no right, I know, to establish myself as your champion. There are others, no doubt, whose happiness lies in the fact that they may render you a service when it is in their power. I do not complain, however. Nay, I would even ask you to look upon me at least as a friend."

"I shall always regard you as a friend," Florence responds in a low voice. "It would be impossible to me to look upon you in any other light."

"Thank you for that," says Adrian quickly. "Though our lives must of necessity be much apart, it will still be a comfort to me to know that at least, wherever you may be, you will think of me as a friend."

"Ah," thinks Florence, with a bitter pang, "he is now trying to let me know how absurd was my former idea that he might perhaps learn to love me!" This thought is almost insupportable. Her pride rising in arms, she subdues all remaining traces of her late emotion, and, turning suddenly, confronts him. Her face is quite colorless, but she can not altogether hide from him the sadness that still desolates her eyes.

"You are right," she agrees. "In the future our lives will indeed be far distant from each other, so far apart that the very tie of friendship will readily be forgotten by us both."

"Florence, do not say that!" he entreats, believing in his turn that she alludes to her coming marriage with his cousin. "And—and—do not be angry with me; but I would ask you to consider long and earnestly before taking the step you have in view. Remember it is a bond that once sealed can never be canceled."

"A bond! I do not follow you," exclaims Florence, bewildered.

"Ah, you will not trust me; you will not confide in me!"

"I have nothing to confide," persists Florence, still deeply puzzled.

"Well, let it rest so," returns Adrian, now greatly wounded at her determined reserve, as he deems it. He calls to mind all Mrs. Talbot had said about her slyness, and feels disheartened. At least he has not deserved distrust at her hands. "Promise me," he entreats at last, "that, if ever you are in danger, you will accept my help."



"I promise," she replies faintly. Then, trying to rally her drooping spirits, she continues, with an attempt at a smile, "Tell me that you too will accept mine should you be in any danger. Remember, the mouse once rescued the lion!"—and she smiles again, and glances at him with a touch of her old archness.

"It is a bargain. And now, will you rest here awhile until you feel quite restored to calmness?"

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"But you must not remain with me," Florence urges hurriedly. "Your guests are awaiting you. Probably"—with a faint smile—"your partner for this waltz is impatiently wondering what has become of you."

"I think not," says Adrian, returning her smile. "Fortunately I have no one's name on my card for this waltz. I say fortunately, because I think"—glancing at her tenderly—"I have been able to bring back the smiles to your face sooner than would have been the case had you been left here alone to brood over your trouble, whatever it may be."

"There is no trouble," declares Florence, in a somewhat distressed fashion, turning her head restlessly to one side. "I wish you would dispossess yourself of that idea. And, do not stay here, they—every one, will accuse you of discourtesy if you absent yourself from the ball-room any longer."

"Then, come with me," says Adrian. "See, this waltz is only just beginning: give it to me."

Carried away by his manner, she lays her hand upon his arm, and goes with him to the ball-room. There he passes his arm round her waist, and presently they are lost among the throng of whirling dancers, and both give themselves up for the time being to the mere delight of knowing that they are together.

Two people, seeing them enter thus together, on apparently friendly terms, regard them with hostile glances. Dora Talbot, who is coquetting sweetly with a gaunt man of middle age, who is evidently overpowered by her attentions, letting her eyes rest upon Florence as she waltzes past her with Sir Adrian, colors warmly, and, biting her lip, forgets the honeyed speech she was about to bestow upon her companion, who is the owner of a considerable property, and lapses into silence, for which the gaunt man is devoutly grateful, as it gives him a moment in which to reflect on the safest means of getting rid of her without delay.

Dora's fair brow grows darker and darker as she watches Florence, and notes the smile that lights her beautiful face as she makes some answer to one of Sir Adrian's sallies. Where is Dynecourt, that he has not been on the spot to prevent this dance, she wonders. She grows angry, and would have stamped her little foot with impatient wrath at this moment, but for the fear of displaying her vexation.

As she is inwardly anathematizing Arthur, he emerges from the throng, and, the dance being at an end, reminds Miss Delmaine that the next is his.

Florence unwillingly removes her hand from Sir Adrian's arm, and lays it upon Arthur's. Most disdainfully she moves away with him, and suffers him to lead her to another part of the room. And when she dances with him it is with evident reluctance, as he knows by the fact that she visibly shrinks from him when he encircles her waist with his arm.

Sir Adrian, who has noticed none of these symptoms, going up to Dora, solicits her hand for this dance.

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"You are not engaged, I hope?" he says anxiously. It is a kind of wretched comfort to him to be near Florence's true friend. If not the rose, she has at least some connection with it.

"I am afraid I am," Dora responds, raising her limpid eyes to his. "Naughty man, why did you not come sooner? I thought you had forgotten me altogether, and so got tired of keeping barren spots upon my card for you."

"I couldn't help it—I was engaged. A man in his own house has always a bad time of it looking after the impossible people," says Adrian evasively.

"Poor Florence! Is she so very impossible?" asks Dora, laughing, but pretending to reproach him.

"I was not speaking of Miss Delmaine," says Adrian, flushing hotly. "She is the least impossible person I ever met. It is a privilege to pass one's time with her."

"Yet it is with her you have passed the last hour that you hint has been devoted to bores," returns Dora quietly. This is a mere feeler, but she throws it out with such an air of certainty that Sir Adrian is completely deceived, and believes her acquainted with his *tete-a-tete* with Florence in the dimly lit anteroom.

"Well," he admits, coloring again, "your cousin was rather upset by the acting, I think, and I just stayed with her until she felt equal to joining us all again."

"Ah!" exclaims Dora, who now knows all she had wanted to know.

"But you must not tell me you have no dances left for me," says Adrian gayly. "Come, let me see your card." He looks at it, and finds it indeed full. "I am an unfortunate," he adds.

"I think," says Dora, with the prettiest hesitation, "if you are sure it would not be an unkind thing to do, I could scratch out this name"—pointing to her partner's for the coming dance.

"I am not sure at all," responds Sir Adrian, laughing. "I am positive it will be awfully unkind of you to deprive any fellow of your society; but be unkind, and scratch him out for my sake."

He speaks lightly, but her heart beats high with hope.

"For your sake," she repeats softly drawing her pencil across the name written on her programme and substituting his.

“But you will give me more than this one dance?” queries Adrian. “Is there nobody else you can condemn to misery out of all that list?”

“You are insatiable,” she returns, blushing, and growing confused. “But you shall have it all your own way. Here”—giving him her card—“take what waltzes you will.” She waltzes to perfection, and she knows it.

“Then this, and this, and this,” says Adrian, striking out three names on her card, after which they move away together and mingle with the other dancers.

In the meantime, Florence growing fatigued, or disinclined to dance longer with Dynecourt, stops abruptly near the door of a conservatory, and, leaning against the framework, gazes with listless interest at the busy scene around.

## Page 22

"You are tired. Will you rest for awhile?" asks Arthur politely; and, as she bends her head in cold consent, he leads her to a cushioned seat that is placed almost opposite to the door-way, and from which the ball-room and what is passing within it are distinctly visible.

Sinking down amongst the blue-satin cushions of the seat he has pointed out to her, Florence sighs softly, and lets her thoughts run, half sadly, half gladly, upon her late interview with Sir Adrian. At least, if he has guessed her secret, she knows now that he does not despise her. There was no trace of contempt in the gentleness, the tenderness of his manner. And how kindly he had told her of the intended change in his life! "Their paths would lie far asunder for the future," he had said, or something tantamount to that. He spoke no doubt of his coming marriage.

Then she begins to speculate dreamily upon the sort of woman who would be happy enough to be his wife. She is still idly ruminating on this point when her companion's voice brings her back to the present. She had so far forgotten his existence in her day-dreaming that his words come to her like a whisper from some other world, and occasion her an actual shock.

"Your thoughtfulness renders me sad," he is saying impressively. "It carries you to regions where I can not follow you."

To this she makes no reply, regarding him only with a calm questioning glance that might well have daunted a better man. It only nerves him however to even bolder words.

"The journey your thoughts have taken—has it been a pleasant one?" he asks, smiling.

"I have come here for rest, not for conversation." There is undisguised dislike in her tones. Still he is untouched by her scorn. He even grows more defiant, as though determined to let her see that even her avowed hatred can not subdue him.

"If you only knew," he goes on, with slow meaning, regarding her as he speaks with critical admiration, "how surpassingly beautiful you look to-night, you would perhaps understand in a degree the power you possess over your fellow-creatures. In that altitude, with that slight touch of scorn upon your lips, you seem a meet partner for a monarch."

She laughs a low contemptuous laugh, that even makes his blood run hotly in his veins.

"And yet you have the boldness to offer yourself as an aspirant to my favor?" she says. "In truth, sir, you value yourself highly!"

"Love will find the way!" he quotes quickly, though plainly disconcerted by her merriment. "And in time I trust I shall have my reward."

“In time, I trust you will,” she returns, in a tone impossible to misconstrue.

At this point he deems it wise to change the subject; and, as he halts rather lamely in his conversation, at a loss to find some topic that may interest her or advance his cause, Sir Adrian and Dora pass by the door of the conservatory.



## Page 23

Sir Adrian is smiling gayly at some little speech of Dora's, and Dora is looking up at him with a bright expression in her blue eyes that tells of the happiness she feels.

"Ah, I can not help thinking Adrian is doing very wisely," observes Arthur Dynecourt, some evil genius at his elbow urging him to lie.

"Doing—what?" asks his companion, roused suddenly into full life and interest.

"You pretend ignorance, no doubt"—smiling. "But one can see. Adrian's marriage with Mrs. Talbot has been talked about for some time amongst his intimates."

A clasp like ice seems to seize upon Miss Delmaine's heart as these words drop from his lips. She restrains her emotion bravely, but his lynx-eye reads her through and through.

"They seem to be more together to-night than is even usual with them," goes on Arthur blandly. "Before you honored the room with your presence, he had danced twice with her, and now again. It is very marked, his attention to-night."

As a matter of fact Adrian had not danced with Mrs. Talbot all the evening until now, but Florence, not having been present at the opening of the ball, is not in a position to refute this, as he well knows.

"If there were anything in her friendship with Sir Adrian, I feel sure Dora would tell me of it," she says slowly, and with difficulty.

"And she hasn't?" asks Arthur, with so much surprise and incredulity in his manner as goes far to convince her that there is some truth in his statement. "Well, well," he adds, "one can not blame her. She would doubtless be sure of his affection before speaking even to her dearest friend."

Florence winces, and sinks back upon the seat as though unable to sustain an upright position any longer. Every word of his is as gall and wormwood to her, each sentence a reminder—a reproach. Only the other day this man now beside her had accused her of making sure of Sir Adrian's affection before she had any right so to do. Her proud spirit shrinks beneath the cruel taunt he hurls at her.

"You look unusually 'done up,'" he goes on, in a tone of assumed commiseration. "This evening has been too much for you. Acting a part at any time is extremely trying and laborious."

She shrinks still further from him. Acting a part! Is not all her life becoming one dreary drama, in which she acts a part from morning until night? Is there to be no rest for her? Oh, to escape from this man at any price! She rises to her feet.



"Our dance is almost at an end," she says; "and the heat is terrible. I can remain here no longer."

"You are ill," he exclaims eagerly, going to her side. He would have supported her, but by a gesture she repels him.

"If I am, it is you who have made me so," she retorts, with quick passion, for which she despises herself an instant later.

"Nay, not I," he rejoins, "but what my words have unconsciously conveyed to you. Do not blame me. I thought you, as well as every one else here, knew of Adrian's sentiments with regard to Mrs. Talbot."

## Page 24

This is too much for her. Drawing herself up to her full height, Florence casts a glance of anger and defiance in his direction, and, sweeping past him in her most imperious fashion, appears no more that night.

It is an early party, all things considered, and Dora Talbot, going to her room about two o'clock, stops before Florence's door and knocks softly thereon.

"Come in," calls Florence gently.

"I have just stopped for a moment to express the hope that you are not ill, dearest," says smooth-tongued Dora, advancing toward her. "How early you left us! I shouldn't have known how early only that Mr. Dynecourt told me. Are you sure you are not ill?"

"Not in the least, only a little fatigued," replied Florence calmly.

"Ah, no wonder, with your exertions before the dancing commenced, and your unqualified success! You reigned over everybody, darling. Nobody could hope even to divide the honors of the evening with you. Your acting was simply superb."

"Thank you," says Florence, who is not in bed, but is sitting in a chair drawn near the window, through which the moonbeams are flinging their pale rays. She is clad in a clinging white dressing-gown that makes her beauty saint-like, and has all her long hair falling loosely round her shoulders.

"What a charming evening it has been!" exclaims Dora ecstatically, clasping her hands, and leaning her arms on the back of a chair. "I hardly know when I have felt so thoroughly happy." Florence shudders visibly. "You enjoyed yourself, of course?" continues Dora. "Everyone raved about you. You made at least a dozen conquests; one or half a one—" with a careful hesitation in her manner intended to impress her listener—"is as much as poor little insignificant me can expect."

Florence looks at her questioningly.

"I think one really honest lover is worth a dozen others," she says, her voice trembling. "Do you mean me to understand, Dora, that you have gained one to-night?"

Florence's whole soul seems to hang on her cousin's answer. Dora simpers, and tries to blush, but in reality grows a shade paler. She is playing for a high stake, and fears to risk a throw lest it may be ventured too soon.

"Oh, you must not ask too much!" she replies, shaking her blonde head. "A lover—no! How can you be so absurd! And yet I think—I hope—"

“I see!” interrupts Florence sadly. “Well, I will be as discreet as you wish; but at least, if what I imagine be true, I can congratulate you with all my heart, because I know—I know you will be happy.”

Going over to Mrs. Talbot, she lays her arms round her neck and kisses her softly. As she does so, a tear falls from her eyes upon Dora's cheek. There is so much sweetness and abandonment of self in this action that Dora for the moment is touched by it. She puts up her hand, and, wiping away the tear from her cheek as though it burns her, says lightly—

## Page 25

"But indeed, my dearest Flo, you must not imagine anything. All is vague. I myself hardly know what it is to which I am alluding. 'Trifles light as air' float through my brain, and gladden me in spite of my common sense, which whispers that they may mean nothing. Do not build castles for me that may have their existence only *en Espagne*."

"They seem very bright castles," observes Florence wistfully.

"A bad omen. 'All that's bright must fade,' sings the poet. And now to speak of yourself. You enjoyed yourself?"

"Of course—" mechanically.

"Ah, yes; I was glad to see you had made it up with poor Arthur Dynecourt!"

"How?" demands Florence, turning upon her quickly.

"I saw you dancing with him, dearest; I was with Sir Adrian at the time, and from something he said, I think he would be rather pleased if you could bring yourself to reward poor Arthur's long devotion."

"Sir Arthur said that? He discussed me with you?"

"Just in passing, you understand. He told me too that you were somewhat unhappy in the earlier part of the evening, and that he had to stay a considerable time with you to restore you to calmness. He is always so kind, dear Adrian!"

"He spoke of that?" demands Florence, in a tone of anguish. If he had made her emotion a subject of common talk with Mrs. Talbot, all indeed is at an end between them, even that sweet visionary offer of friendship he had made to her. No; she could not submit to be talked about by him, and the woman he loves! Oh, the bitter pang it costs her to say these words to herself! That he now loves Dora seems to her mind beyond dispute. Is she not his confidante, the one in whom he chooses to repose all his secret thoughts and surmises?

Dora regards her cousin keenly. Florence's evident agitation makes her fear that there was more in that *tete-a-tete* with Sir Adrian than she had at first imagined.

"Yes; why should he not speak of it?" Dora goes on coldly. "I think by his manner your want of self-control shocked him. You should have a greater command over yourself. It is not good form to betray one's feelings to every chance passer-by. Yes; I think Sir Adrian was both surprised and astonished."

"There was nothing to cause him either surprise or astonishment," says Florence haughtily; "and I could well have wished him out of the way!"



“Perhaps I misunderstood him,” rejoins Dora artfully. “But certainly he spoke to me of being unpleasantly delayed by—by impossible people—those were his very words; and really altogether—I may be wrong—I believed he alluded to you. Of course, I would not follow the matter up, because, much as I like Sir Adrian, I could not listen to him speaking lightly of you!”

“Of me—you forget yourself, Dora!” cries Florence, with pale lips, but head erect. “Speaking lightly of me!” she repeats.

## Page 26

"Young men are often careless in their language," explains Dora hurriedly, feeling that she has gone too far. "He meant nothing unkind, you may be sure!"

"I am quite sure"—firmly.

"Then no harm is done"—smiling brightly. "And now, good-night, dearest; go to bed instead of sitting there looking like a ghost in those mystical moonbeams."

"Good-night," says Florence icily.

There is something about her that causes Mrs. Talbot to feel almost afraid to approach and kiss her as usual.

"Want of rest will spoil your lovely eyes," adds the widow airily; "and your complexion, faultless as it always is, will not be up to the mark to-morrow. So sleep, foolish child, and gather roses from your slumbers."

So saying, she kisses her hand gayly to the unresponsive Florence, and trips lightly from the room.

## CHAPTER V.

Florence, after Dora has left her, sits motionless at her window. She has thrown open the casement, and now—the sleeves of her dressing-gown falling back from her bare rounded arms—leans out so that the descending night-dews fall like a benison upon her burning brow.

She is wrapped in melancholy; her whole soul is burdened with thoughts and regrets almost too heavy for her to support. She is harassed and perplexed on all sides, and her heart is sore for the loss of the love she once had deemed her own.

The moonbeams cling like a halo round her lovely head, her hair falls in a luxuriant shower about her shoulders; her plaintive face is raised from earth, her eyes look heavenward, as though seeking hope and comfort there.

The night is still, almost to oppressiveness. The birds have long since ceased their song; the wind hardly stirs the foliage of the stately trees. The perfume wafted upward from the sleeping garden floats past her and mingles with her scented tresses. No sound comes to mar the serenity of the night, all is calm and silent as the grave.

Yet, hark, what is this? A footstep on the gravel path below arouses her attention. For the first time since Dora's departure she moves, and, turning her head, glances in the direction of the sound.



Bareheaded, and walking with his hands clasped behind him as though absorbed in deep thought, Sir Adrian comes slowly over the sward until he stands beneath her window. Here he pauses, as though almost unconsciously his spirit has led him thither, and brought him to a standstill where he would most desire to be.

The moon, spreading its brilliance on all around, permits Florence to see that his face is grave and thoughtful, and—yes, as she gazes even closer, she can see that it is full of pain and vain longing.

What is rendering him unhappy on this night of all others, when the woman she believes he loves has been his willing companion for so many hours, when doubtless she has given him proofs of her preference for him above all men?



## Page 27

Suddenly lifting his head, Sir Adrian becomes conscious of the face in the window above, and a thrill rushes through him as he recognizes the form of the woman he loves.

The scene is so calm, so hallowed, so full of romance, that both their hearts beat madly for awhile. They are alone; any one still awake within the house is far distant.

Never has she appeared so spiritual, so true and tender; so full of sweetness that is almost unearthly. All pride seems gone from her, and in its place only a gentle melancholy reigns; she looks so far removed from him, sitting there in the purity of her white robes, that, at first, he hesitates to address her. To his excited imagination, she is like an angel resting on its way to the realms above.

At last, however, his heart compelling him, he speaks aloud.

"Florence, you still awake, when all the world is sleeping?"

Her name falling from his lips touches a chord in her breast, and wakes her to passionate life.

"You too," she says in a whisper that reaches his strained ears. There seems to her a subtle joy in the thought that they two of all the household are awake, are here talking together alone in the pale light of the moon.

Yet she is wrong in imagining that no others are up in the house, as his next words tell her.

"It is not a matter of wonder in my case," he responds; "a few fellows are still in the smoking-room. It is early, you know—not yet three. But you—why are you keeping a lonely vigil like this?"

"The moon tempted me to the window," answers Florence. "See how calm she looks riding majestically up there. See"—stretching out her bare white arm until the beams fall full upon it, and seem to change it to purest marble—"does it not make one feel as if all the world were being bathed in its subdued glow?"

A pale tremulous smile widens her lips. Sir Adrian, plucking a tall pale lily growing near him, flings it upward with such an eager aim that it alights upon her window-sill. She sees it. Her fingers close upon it.

"Fit emblem of its possessor," says Adrian softly, and rather unsteadily. "Do you know of what you remind me, sitting there in your white robes? A medieval saint cut in stone—a pure angel, too good, too far above all earthly passion to enter into it, or understand it, and the grief that must ever attend upon it."



He speaks bitterly. It seems to him that she is indeed cold not to have guessed before this the intensity of his love for her. However much she may have given her affection to another, it still seems to him inexpressibly hard that she can have no pity for his suffering. He gazes at her intently. Do the mystic moonbeams deceive him, or are there tears in her great dark eyes? His heart beats quickly. Once again he remembers her emotion of the past evening. He hears again her passionate sobs. Is she unhappy? Are there thorns in her path that are difficult to remove?

## Page 28

"Florence, once again I entreat you to confide in me," he says, after a pause.

"I can not," she returns, sadly but firmly. "But there is one thing I must say to you—think of me as you may for saying it—I am not cold as you seemed to imply a moment since; I am not made of stone; and, alas, the grief you think me incapable of understanding is mine already! You have wronged me in your thoughts. I have here," she exclaims with some vehemence, laying the hand in which she still holds the drooping lily upon her breast, "what I would gladly be without—a heart."

"Nay," says Adrian hastily; "you forget. It is no longer yours, you have given it away."

For an instant she glances at him keenly, while her breath comes and goes with painful quickness.

"You have no right to say so," she murmurs at last.

"No, of course not; I beg your pardon," he says apologetically. "It is your own secret."

"There is no secret," she declares nervously. "None."

"I have offended you. I should not have said that. You will forgive me?" he entreats, with agitation.

"You are quite forgiven;" and, as a token of the truth of her words, she leans a little further out of the window, and looks down at him with a face pale indeed, but full of an unutterable sweetness.

Her beauty conquers all his resolutions.

"Oh, Florence," he whispers in an impassioned tone, "if I only dare to tell you what—"

She starts and lays a finger on her lips, as though to enforce silence.

"Hush!" she says, in trembling accents. "You forget! The hour, the surroundings, have momentarily led you astray. I ought not to have spoken with you. Go! There is nothing you dare to tell me—there is nothing I would wish to hear. Remember your duty to another—and—good-night."

"Stay, I implore you, for one moment," he cries; but she is firm, and presently the curtains are drawn close and he is alone.

Slowly he walks back toward the smoking-room, her last words ringing in his ears—"Remember your duty to another." What other? He is puzzled, but, reaching the window of the room, he dismisses these thoughts from his mind, and determines to get

rid of his guests without delay, so as to be able to enjoy a little quiet and calm for reflection.

They are all noisily discussing a suicide that had recently taken place in a neighboring county, and which had, from its peculiar circumstances, caused more than usual interest.

One of the guests to-night is an army-surgeon, and he is giving them an explanation as to how the fatal wound had been inflicted. It appeared at the inquest that the unfortunate man had shot himself in such a peculiar manner as to cause considerable doubt as to whether he had been murdered or had died by his own hand. Evidence, however, of a most convincing nature had confirmed the latter theory.

Captain Ringwood, with a revolver in his hand, is endeavoring to show that the man could not have shot himself, just as Adrian re-enters.

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"Be careful with that revolver," he exclaims hastily; "it is loaded!"

"All right, old fellow, I know it," returns Ringwood. "Look here, doctor, if he held it so, how could he make a wound here?"

"Why not? Sir Adrian, take the revolver for a moment, will you?" says the surgeon, anxious to demonstrate his theory beyond the possibility of doubt. "I want to convince Ringwood. Now stand so, and hold the weapon so"—placing it with the muzzle presented in a rather awkward position almost over his heart.

"I thought fellows always put the muzzles of their revolvers in their mouths and blew their brains out when they committed suicide," Ringwood remarks lightly.

"This fellow evidently did not," says the surgeon calmly. "Now, Sir Adrian, you see, by holding it thus, you could quite easily blow yourself to—"

Before he can finish the sentence, there is a sudden confusion of bodies, a jostling as it were, for Arthur Dynecourt, who had been looking on attentively with one foot on a footstool close to Sir Adrian's elbow, had slipped from the stool at this inopportune moment, and had fallen heavily against his cousin.

There is a shout from somebody, and then a silence. The revolver in the scuffle had gone off! Through the house the sharp crack of a bullet rings loudly, rousing many from their slumbers.

Lights can be seen in the passages; terrified faces peep out from half-opened doors. Dora Talbot, coming into the corridor in a pale pink cashmere dressing-gown trimmed with swan's-down, in which she looks the very personification of innocence and youth, screams loudly, and demands hysterically to be informed as to the cause of the unusual noise.

The servants have rushed from their quarters in alarm. Ethel Villiers, with a pale scared face, runs to Florence Delmaine's room, and throws her arms round that young lady as she comes out, pale but composed, to ask in a clear tone what has happened.

As nobody knows, and as Florence in her heart is more frightened than she cares to confess, being aware through Adrian that some of the men are still up in the smoking-room, and fearing that a quarrel had arisen among them, she proposes that they should go to the smoking-room in a body and make inquiries.

Old Lady FitzAlmont, with Lady Gertrude sobbing on her arm, seconds this proposal, and, being a veteran of much distinction, takes the lead. Those following close behind, are glad of this, and hopeful because of it, her appearance being calculated to rout any enemy. The awful character of her dressing-gown and the severity of the nightcap that crowns her martial head would strike terror to the hearts of any midnight marauders.

They all move off in a body, and, guided unconsciously by Florence, approach the smoking-room.

Voices loud in conversation can be heard as they draw near; the door is slightly ajar. Florence drawing back as they come quite up to it, the old lady waves her aside, and advances boldly to the front. Flinging wide open the door, she bursts upon the astonished company within.

## Page 30

"Where is he?" she asks, with a dignity that only heightens the attractions of the cap and gown. "Have you secured him? Sir Adrian, where is the constable? Have you sent for him?"

Sir Adrian, whose gaze is fixed upon the fair vision in the trailing white gown standing timidly in the door-way, forgets to answer his interrogator, and the others, taken by surprise, maintain a solemn silence.

"Why this mystery?" demands Lady FitzAlmont sternly. "Where is the miscreant? Where is the man that fired that murderous shot?"

"Here, madame," replies the surgeon dryly, indicating Arthur Dynecourt by a motion of the hand.

"He—who? Mr. Dynecourt?" ejaculates her ladyship in a disappointed tone. "It was all a mistake, then? I must say, Mr. Dynecourt," continues the old lady in an indignant tone, "that I think you might find a more suitable time in which to play off your jokes, or to practice target-shooting, than in the middle of the night, when every respectable household ought to be wrapped in slumber."

"I assure you," begins Arthur Dynecourt, who is strangely pale and discomposed, "it was all an accident—an—"

"Accident! Nonsense, sir; I don't believe there was any accident whatsoever!"

As these words pass the lips of the irascible old lady, several men in the room exchange significant glances. Is it that old Lady FitzAlmont has just put their own thoughts into words?

"Let me explain to your ladyship," says Sir Adrian courteously. "We were just talking about that unfortunate affair of the Stewarts, and Maitland was showing us how it might have occurred. I had the revolver in my hand so"—pointing the weapon toward himself.

"Put down that abominable weapon at once, sir!" commands Lady FitzAlmont, in a menacing tone, largely mingled with abject fear. As she speaks she retreats precipitately behind Florence, thus pushing that young lady to the fore.

"When my cousin unhappily stumbled against me, and the revolver went off," goes on Sir Adrian. "I'm deeply grieved, Lady FitzAlmont, that this should have occurred to disturb the household; but, really, it was a pure accident."

"A pure accident," repeats Arthur, from between his colorless lips.

He looks far more distressed by this occurrence than Sir Adrian, who had narrowly escaped being wounded. This only showed his tenderness and proper feeling, as



almost all the women present mutually agreed. Almost all, but not quite. Dora Talbot, for example, grows deadly pale as she listens to the explanation and watches Arthur's ghastly face. What is it like? The face of a murderer?

"Oh, no, no," she gasps inwardly; "surely not that!"

"It was the purest accident, I assure you," protests Arthur again, as though anxious to impress this conviction upon his own mind.

"It might have been a very serious one," says the surgeon gravely, regarding him with a keen glance. "It might have meant death to Sir Adrian!"



## Page 31

Florence changes color and glances at her host with parted lips. Dora Talbot, pressing her way through the group in the door-way, goes straight up to him as if impulsively, and takes his hand in both hers.

"Dear Sir Adrian, how can we be thankful enough for your escape?" she says sweetly, tears standing in her bright blue eyes. She presses his hand warmly, and even raises it to her lips in a transport of emotion. Standing there in the pretty pink dressing-gown that shows off her complexion to perfection, Dora Talbot looks lovely.

"You are very good—very kind," returns Sir Adrian, really touched by her concern, but still with eyes only for the white vision in the door-way; "but you make too much of nothing. I am only sorry I have been the unhappy cause of rousing you from your rosy dreams; you will not thank me to-morrow when there will be only lilies in your cheeks."

The word lily brings back to him his last interview with Florence. He glances hurriedly at her right hand; yes, the same lily is clasped in her fingers. Has she sat ever since with his gift before her, in her silent chamber? Alone—in grief perhaps. But why has she kept his flower? What can it all mean?

"We shall mind nothing, now you are safe," Dora assures him tremulously.

"I think I might be shown some consideration," puts in Arthur, trying by a violent effort to assert himself, and to speak lightly. "Had anything happened, surely I should have been the one to be pitied. It would have been my fault, and, Mrs. Talbot, I think you might show some pity for me." He holds out his hand, and mechanically Dora lays her own in it.

But it is only for an instant, and she shudders violently as his touch meets hers. Her eyes are on the ground, and she can not bring herself to look at him. Drawing her fingers hurriedly from his, she goes to the door and disappears from view.

In the meantime, Sir Adrian, having made his way to Florence, points to the lily.

"You have held it ever since?" he asks, in a low tone. "I hardly hoped for so much. But you have not congratulated me, you alone have said nothing."

"Why need I speak? I have seen you with my own eyes. You are safe. Believe me, Sir Adrian, I congratulate you most sincerely upon your escape."

Her words are cold, her eyes downcast. She is deeply annoyed with herself for having carried the lily into his presence here. The very fact of his having noticed it and spoken to her about it has shown her how much importance he has attached to her doing so. What will he think of her. He will doubtless picture her to himself sitting weeping and brooding over a flower given to her by a man who loves her not, and to whom she has given her love unsolicited.

Her marked coldness so oppresses him that he steps back, and does not venture to address her again. It occurs to him that she is reserved because of Arthur's presence.

## Page 32

Presently, Lady FitzAlmont, marshaling her forces anew, carries them all away to their rooms, soundly rating the sobbing Lady Gertrude for her want of self-control.

The men too, shortly afterward disperse, and one by one drift away to their rooms. Captain Ringwood and Maitland the surgeon being the last to go.

"Who is the next heir to the castle?" asks the latter musingly, drumming his fingers idly on a table near him.

"Dynecourt, the fellow who nearly did for Sir Adrian this evening!" replies Ringwood quietly.

"Ah!"

"It would have meant a very good thing for Arthur if the shot had taken effect," says Ringwood, eying his companion curiously.

"It would have meant murder, sir!" rejoins the surgeon shortly.

## CHAPTER VI.

"Dear Sir Adrian," says Dora Talbot, laying down her bat upon a garden-chair, and forsaking the game of tennis then proceeding to go forward and greet her host, "where have you been? We have missed you so much. Florence"—turning to her cousin—"will you take my bat, dearest? I am quite tired of trying to defeat Lord Lisle."

Lord Lisle, a middle-aged gentleman of sunburned appearance, looks unmistakably delighted at the prospect of a change in the game. He is married; has a large family of promising young Lisles, and a fervent passion for tennis. Mrs. Talbot having proved a very contemptible adversary, he is charmed at this chance of getting rid of her.

So Florence, *vice* Dora retired, joins the game, and the play continues with unabated vigor. When however Lord Lisle has scored a grand victory, and all the players declare themselves thoroughly exhausted and in need of refreshment, Sir Adrian comes forward, and walks straight up to Miss Delmaine, to Dora's intense chagrin and the secret rage of Arthur Dynecourt.

"You have often asked to see the 'haunted chamber,'" he says; "why not come and visit it now? It isn't much to see, you know; but still, in a ghostly sense, it is, I suppose, interesting."

"Let us make a party and go together," suggests Dora, enthusiastically clasping her hands—her favorite method of showing false emotion of any kind. She is determined to

have her part in the programme, and is equally determined that Florence shall go nowhere alone with Sir Adrian.

“What a capital idea!” puts in Arthur Dynecourt, coming up to Miss Delmaine, and specially addressing her with all the air of a rightful owner.

“Charming,” murmurs a young lady standing by; and so the question is settled.

“It will be rather a fatiguing journey, you know,” says Captain Ringwood, confidentially, to Ethel Villiers. “It’s an awful lot of stairs; I’ve been there, so I know all about it—it’s worse than the treadmill.”

“Have you been there too?” demands Miss Ethel saucily, glancing at him from under her long lashes.

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"Not yet," answers the captain, with a little grin. "But, I say, don't go—will you?"

"I must; I'm dying to see it," replies Ethel. "You needn't come, you know; I dare say I shall be able to get on without you for half an hour or so."

"I dare say you could get on uncommonly well without me forever," retorts the captain rather gloomily. To himself he confesses moodily that this girl with the auburn hair and the blue eyes has the power of taking the "curl out of him" whensoever she wishes.

"I believe you are afraid of the bogies hidden in this secret chamber, and so don't care to come," says Miss Villiers tauntingly.

"I know something else I'm a great deal more afraid of," responds the gallant captain meaningly.

"Me?" she asks innocently, but certainly coquettishly. "Oh, Captain Ringwood"—in a tone of mock injury—"what an unkind speech! Now I know you look upon me in the light of an ogress, or a witch, or something equally dreadful. Well, as I have the name of it, I may as well have the gain of it, and so—I command you to attend me to the 'haunted chamber.'"

"You order—I obey," says the captain. "'Call and I follow—I follow, though I die!'" After which quotation he accompanies her toward the house in the wake of Dora and Sir Adrian, who has been pressed by the clever widow into her service.

Florence and Arthur Dynecourt follow them, Arthur talking gayly, as though determined to ignore the fact that he is thoroughly unwelcome to his companion; Florence, with head erect and haughty footsteps and eyes carefully averted.

Past the hall, through the corridor, up the staircase, through the galleries, along more corridors they go, laughing and talking eagerly, until they come at last to an old and apparently much disused part of the house.

Traversing more corridors, upon which dust lies thickly, they come at last to a small iron-bound door that blocks the end of one passage.

"Now we really begin to get near to it," says Sir Adrian encouragingly, turning, as he always does, when opportunity offers, to address himself solely to Florence.

"Don't you feel creepy-creepy?" asks Ethel Villiers, with a smothered laugh, looking up at Captain Ringwood.

Then Sir Adrian pushes open the door, revealing a steep flight of stone steps that leads upward to another door above. This door, like the lower one, is bound with iron.

"This is the tower," explains Sir Adrian, still acting as cicerone to the small party, who look with interest around them. Mrs. Talbot, affecting nervousness, clings closely to Sir Adrian's arm. Indeed she is debating in her own mind whether it would be effective or otherwise to subside into a graceful swoon within his arms. "Yonder is the door of the chamber," continues Sir Adrian. "Come, let us go up to it."

They all ascend the last flight of stone stairs; and presently their host opens the door, and reveals to them whatever mysteries may lie beyond. He enters first, and they all follow him, but, as if suddenly recollecting some important point, he turns, and calls loudly to Captain Ringwood not to let the door shut behind him.

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"There is a peculiar spring in the lock," he explains a moment later; "and, if the door slammed to, we should find it impossible to open it from the inside, and might remain here prisoners forever unless the household came to the rescue."

"Oh, Captain Ringwood, pray be careful!" cries Dora falteringly. "Our very lives depend upon your attention!"

"Miss Villiers, do come here and help me to remember my duty," says Captain Ringwood, planting his back against the open door lest by any means it should shut.

The chamber is round, and has, instead of windows, three narrow apertures in the walls, through which can be obtained a glimpse of the sky, but of nothing else. These apertures are just large enough to admit a man's hand. The room is without furniture of any description, and on the boards the dark stains of blood are distinctly visible.

"Dynecourt, tell them a story or two," calls out Ringwood to Sir Adrian. "They won't believe it is veritably haunted unless you call up a ghost to frighten them."

But they all protest in a body that they do not wish to hear any ghost stories, so Sir Adrian laughingly refuses to comply with Ringwood's request.

"Are we far from the other parts of the house?" asks Florence at length, who has been examining some writing on the walls.

"So far that, if you were immured here, no cry, however loud, could penetrate the distance," replies Sir Adrian. "You are as thoroughly removed from the habitable parts of the castle as if you were in the next county."

"How interesting!" observes Dora, with a little simper.

"The servants are so afraid of this room that they would not venture here even by daylight," Sir Adrian goes on. "You can see how the dust of years is on it. One might be slowly starved to death here without one's friends being a bit the wiser."

He laughs as he says this, but, long afterward, his words come back to his listeners' memories, filling their breasts with terror and despair.

"I wonder you don't have this dangerous lock removed," says Captain Ringwood. "It is a regular trap. Some day you'll be sorry for it."

Prophetic words!

"Yes; I wish it were removed," responds Florence, with a strange quick shiver.

Sir Adrian laughs.

“Why, that is one of the old tower’s greatest charms,” he says. “It belongs to the dark ages, and suggests all sorts of horrible possibilities. This room would be nothing without its mysterious lock.”

At this moment Dora’s eyes turn slowly toward Arthur Dynecourt. She herself hardly knows why, at this particular time, she should look at him, yet she feels that some unaccountable fascination is compelling her gaze to encounter his. Their eyes meet. As they do so, Dora shudders and turns deadly pale. There is that in Arthur Dynecourt’s dark and sullen eyes that strikes her cold with terror and



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vague forebodings of evil. It is a wicked look that overspreads the man's face—a cruel, implacable look that seems to freeze her as she gazes at him spell-bound. Slowly, even while she watches him, she sees him turn his glance from her to Sir Adrian in a meaning manner, as though to let her know that the vile thought that is working in his brain and is betraying itself on his face is intended for him, not her. And yet, with this too, he gives her silently to understand that, if she shows any treachery toward him, he will not leave it unrewarded.

Cowed, frightened, trembling at what she knows not, Dora staggers backward, and, laying a hand upon the wall beside her, tries to regain her self-possession. The others are all talking together, she is therefore unobserved. She stands, still panting and pallid, trying to collect her thoughts.

Only one thing comes clearly to her, filling her with loathing of herself and an unnamed dread—it is that, by her own double-dealing and falseness toward Florence, she has seemed to enter into a compact with this man to be a companion in whatever crime he may decide upon. His very look seems to implicate her, to drag her down with him to his level. She feels herself chained to him—his partner in a vile conspiracy. And what further adds to the horror of the situation is the knowledge that she knows herself to be blindly ignorant of whatever plans he may be forming.

After a few seconds she rouses herself, and wins back some degree of composure. It is of course a mere weakness to believe herself in the power of Arthur Dynecourt, she tries to convince herself. He is no more than any other ordinary acquaintance. If indeed she has helped him a little in his efforts to secure the love of Florence, there was no great harm in that, though of course it served her own purpose also.

“How pale you are, Mrs. Talbot?” remarks Sir Adrian suddenly, wheeling round to look at her more closely. “Has this damp old place really affected your nerves? Come, let us go down again, and forget in the sunshine that bloody deeds were ever committed here or elsewhere.”

“I am nervous, I confess,” responds Dora, in a low tone. “Yes, yes—let us leave this terrible room forever.”

“So be it,” says Sir Adrian gayly. “For my part, I feel no desire to ever re-enter it.”

“It is very high art, I suppose,” observes Ethel Villiers, glancing round the walls. “Uncomfortable places always are. It would be quite a treasure to Lady Betty Trefeld, who raves over the early Britons. It seems rather thrown away upon us. Captain Ringwood, you look as if you had been suddenly turned into stone. Let me pass, please.”

“It was uncommonly friendly of Ringwood not to have let the door slam, and so imprisoned us for life,” says Sir Adrian, with a laugh. “I am sure we owe him a debt of gratitude.”

“I hope you’ll all pay it,” laughs Ringwood. “It will be a nice new experience for you to give a creditor something for once. I never pay my own debts; but that doesn’t count. I feel sure you are all going to give me something for my services as door-keeper.”

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"What shall I give you?" asks Ethel coquettishly.

"I'll tell you by and by," he replies, with such an expressive look that for once the saucy girl has no answer ready, but, blushing crimson, hurries past him down the stone stairs, where she waits at the bottom for the others.

As Florence reaches the door she pauses and stoops to examine the lock.

"I wish," she says to Sir Adrian, a strange subdued excitement in her tone, "you would remove this lock. Do."

"But why?" he asks, impressed in spite of himself, by her manner.

"I hardly know myself; it is a fancy—an unaccountable one, perhaps—but still a powerful one. Do be guided by me, and have it removed."

"What—the fancy?" he asks, laughing.

"No—the lock. Humor me in this," she pleads earnestly, far more earnestly than the occasion seems to warrant. "Call it a silly presentiment, if you like, but I honestly think that lock will work you evil some day. Therefore it is that I ask you to do away with it."

"You ask me?" he queries.

"Yes, if only to please me—for my sake."

She has evidently forgotten her late distrust of him, for she speaks now in the old sweet tone, and with tears in her eyes. Sir Adrian flushes warmly.

"For your sake," he whispers. "What is there I would not do, if thus requested?"

A bitter sneer contracts Arthur Dynecourt's lips as he listens to the first part of this conversation and guesses at the latter half. He notes correctly the kindling of their eyes, the quick breath that comes and goes like happy sighs from the breast of Florence. He hears the whisper, sees the warm blush, and glances expressively at Dora. Meeting her eyes he says his finger on his lips to caution her to silence, and then, when passing by her, whispers:

"Meet me in half an hour in the lower gallery."

Bowing her acquiescence in this arrangement, fearing indeed to refuse, Dora follows the others from the haunted chamber.

At the foot of the small stone staircase—before they go through the first iron-bound door that leads to the corridor without—they find Ethel Villiers awaiting them. She had been

looking round her in the dimly lighted stone passage, and has discovered another door fixed mysteriously in a corner, that had excited her curiosity.

“Where does this lead to, Sir Adrian?” she asks now, pointing to it.

“Oh, that is an old door connected with another passage that leads by a dark and wearying staircase to the servants’ corridor beneath! I am afraid you won’t be able to open it, as it is rusty with age and disuse. The servants would as soon think of coming up here as they would of making an appointment with the Evil One; so it has not been opened for years.”

“Perhaps I can manage it,” says Arthur Dynecourt, trying with all his might to force the ancient lock to yield to him. At length his efforts are crowned with success; the door flies creakingly open, and a cloud of dust uprising covers them like a mist.

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"Ah!" exclaims Ethel, recoiling; but Arthur, stooping forward, carefully examines the dark staircase that lies before him wrapped in impenetrable gloom. Spider-nets have been drawn from wall to wall and hang in dusky clouds from the low ceiling; a faint, stale, stifling smell greets his nostrils, yet he lingers there and looks carefully around him.

"You'll fall into it, if you don't mind," remarks Captain Ringwood. "One would think uncanny spots had an unwholesome attraction for you."

Ringwood, ever since the memorable night in the smoking-room, when Sir Adrian was so near being killed, has looked askance at Arthur Dynecourt, and, when taking the trouble to address him at all, has been either sharp or pointed in his remarks. Arthur, contenting himself with a scowl at him, closes the little door again, and turns away from it.

"At night," says Sir Adrian, in an amused tone, "the servants, passing by the door below that leads up to this one, run by it as though they fear some ghostly ancestors of mine, descending from the haunted chamber, will pounce out upon them with their heads under their arms, or in some equally unpleasant position. You know the door, don't you, Arthur—the second from the turning?"

"No," replies Arthur, with his false smile, "I do not; nor, indeed, do I care to know it. I firmly believe I should run past it too after nightfall, unless well protected."

"That looks as if you had an evil conscience," says Ringwood carelessly, but none the less purposely.

"It looks more as if I were a coward, I think," retorts Arthur, laughing, but shooting an angry glance at the gallant captain as he speaks.

"Well, what does the immortal William say?" returns Ringwood coolly. "'Conscience doth make cowards of us all!'"

"You have a sharp wit, sir," says Arthur, with apparent lightness, but pale with passion.

"I say, look here," breaks in Sir Adrian hastily, pulling out his watch; "it must be nearly time for tea. By Jove, quite half past four, and we know what Lady FitzAlmont will say to us if we keep her deprived of her favorite beverage for even five minutes. Come, let us run, or destruction will light upon our heads."

So saying, he leads the way, and soon they leave the haunted chamber and all its gloomy associations far behind them.

## CHAPTER VII.

Reluctantly, yet with a certain amount of curiosity to know what it is he may wish to say to her, Dora wends her way to the gallery to keep her appointment with Arthur. Pacing to and fro beneath the searching eyes of the gaunt cavaliers and haughty dames that gleam down upon him from their canvases upon the walls, Dynecourt impatiently awaits her coming.

“Ah, you are late!” he exclaims as she approaches. There is a tone of authority about him that dismays her.

“Not very, I think,” she responds pleasantly, deeming conciliatory measures the best. “Why did you not come to the library? We all missed you so much at tea!”

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"No doubt," he replies sarcastically. "I can well fancy the disappointment my absence caused; the blank looks and regretful speeches that marked my defection. Pshaw—let you and me at least be honest to each other! Did Florence, think you, shed tears because of my non-coming?"

This mood of his is so strange to her that, in spite of the natural false smoothness that belongs to her, it renders her dumb.

"Look here," he goes on savagely, "I have seen enough to-day up in that accursed room above—that haunted chamber—to show me our game is not yet won."

"Our game—what game?" asks Dora, with a foolish attempt at misconception.

He laughs aloud—a wild, unpleasant, scornful laugh, that makes her cheek turn pale. Its mirth, she tells herself, is demoniacal.

"You would get out of it now, would you?" he says. "It is too late, I tell you. You have gone some way with me, you must go the rest. I want your help, and you want mine. Will you draw back now, when the prize is half won, when a little more labor will place it within your grasp?"

"But there must be no violence," she gasps; "no attempt at—"

"What is it you would say?" he interrupts stonily. "Collect yourself; you surely do not know what you are hinting at. Violence! what do you mean by that?"

"I hardly know," she returns, trembling. "It was your look, your tone, I think, that frightened me."

"Put your nerves in your pocket for the future," he exclaims coarsely; "they are not wanted where I am. Now to business. You want to marry Sir Adrian, as I understand, whether his desire lies in the same direction or not?"

At this plain speaking the dainty little lady winces openly.

"My own opinion is that his desire does not run in your direction," continues Arthur remorselessly. "We both know where his heart would gladly find its home, where he would seek a bride to place here in this grand old castle, but I will frustrate that hope if I die for it."

He grinds his teeth as he says this, and looks with fierce defiant eyes at the long rows of his ancestors that line the walls.

“She would gladly see her proud fair face looking down upon me from amidst this goodly company,” he goes on, apostrophizing the absent Florence. “But that shall never be. I have sworn it; unless—I am her husband—unless—I am her husband!”

More slowly, more thoughtfully he repeats this last phrase, until Dora, affrighted by the sudden change that has disfigured his face, speaks to him to distract his attention.

“You have brought me here to—” she ventures timidly.

“Ay, to tell you what is on my mind. I have said you want to marry Adrian; I mean to marry Florence Delmaine. To-day I disliked certain symptoms I saw, that led me to believe that my own machinations have not been as successful as I could have wished. Before going in for stronger measures, there is one more card that I will play. I have written you a note. Here it is, take it”—handing her a letter folded in the cocked-hat fashion.



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"What am I to do with this?" asks Dora nervously.

"Read it. It is addressed to yourself. You will see I have copied Adrian's handwriting as closely as possible, and have put his initials A.D. at the end. And yet"—with a diabolical smile—"it is no forgery either, as A.D. are my initials also."

Opening the note with trembling fingers, Dora reads aloud as follows:

"Can you—will you meet me to-morrow at four o'clock in the lime-walk? I have been cold to you perhaps, but have I not had cause? You think my slight attentions to another betoken a decrease in my love for you, but in this, dearest, you are mistaken. I am yours heart and soul. For the present I dare not declare myself, for the reasons you already know, and for the same reasons am bound to keep up a seeming friendliness with some I would gladly break with altogether. But I am happy only with you, and happy too in the thought that our hearts beat as one. Yours forever, A.D."

Dora, having finished reading the letter, glances at him uneasily.

"And—what is the meaning of this letter? What is it written for? What am I to do with it?" she stammers, beating the precious missive against the palm of her hand, as though in loathing of it.

"You will show it to her. You will speak of it as a love-letter written to you by Adrian. You will consult her as to whether it be wise or prudent to accede to his proposal to meet you alone in the lime-walk. You will, in fact, put out all your powers of deception, which"—with a sneering smile—"are great, and so compel her to believe the letter is from him to you."

"But—" falters Dora.

"There shall be no 'but' in the matter. You have entered into this affair with me, and you shall pursue it to the end. If you fail me, I shall betray your share in it—more than your share—and paint you in such colors as will shut the doors of society to you. You understand now, do you?"

"Go on," says Dora, with colorless lips.

"Ah, I have touched the right chord at last, have I? Society, your idol, you dare not brave! Well, to continue, you will also tell her, in your own sweet innocent way"—with another sneer that makes her quiver with fear and rage—"to account for Adrian's decided and almost lover-like attentions to her in the room we visited, that you had had a lovers' quarrel with him some time before, earlier in the day; that, in his fit of pique, he had sought to be revenged upon you, and soothe his slighted feelings by feigning a sudden interest in her. You follow me?"

“Yes,” replies the submissive Dora. Alas, how sincerely she now wishes she had never entered into this hateful intrigue!

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"Then, when you have carefully sown these lies in her heart, and seen her proud face darken and quiver with pain beneath your words"—oh, how his own evil face glows with unholy satisfaction as he sees the picture he has just drawn stand out clear before his eyes!—"you will affect to be driven by compunction into granting Sir Adrian a supposed request, you will don your hat and cloak, and go down to the lime-walk to encounter—me. If I am any judge of character, that girl, so haughty to all the world, will lower her pride for her crushed love's sake, and will follow you, to madden herself with your meeting with the man she loves. To her, I shall on this occasion represent Sir Adrian. Are you listening?"

She is indeed—listening with all her might to the master mind that has her in thrall.

"You will remember not to start when you meet me," he continues, issuing his commands with insolent assumption of authority over the dainty Dora, who, up to this, has been accustomed to rule it over others in her particular sphere, and who now chafes and writhes beneath the sense of slavery that is oppressing her. "You will meet me calmly, oblivious of the fact that I shall be clad in my cousin's light overcoat, the one of which Miss Delmaine was graciously pleased to say she approved yesterday morning."

His eyes light again with a revengeful fire as he calls to mind the slight praise Florence had bestowed in a very casual fashion on this coat. Every smile, every kindly word addressed by this girl to his cousin, is treasured up by him and dwelt upon in secret, to the terrible strengthening of the purpose he has in view.

"But if you should be seen—be marked," hesitates Dora faintly.

"Pshaw—am I one to lay my plans so clumsily as to court discovery on even the minutest point?" he interrupts impatiently. "When you meet me you will—but enough of this; I shall be there to meet you in the lime-walk, and after that you will take your cue from me."

"That is all you have to say?" asks Dora, anxious to quit his hated presence.

"For the present—yes. Follow my instructions to the letter, or dread the consequences. Any blunder in the performance of this arrangement I shall lay to your charge."

"You threaten, sir!" she exclaims angrily, though she trembles.

"Let it be your care to see that I do not carry out my threats," he retorts, with an insolent shrug.

The next day, directly after luncheon, as Florence is sitting in her own room, touching up an unfinished water-color sketch of part of the grounds round the castle—which have, alas, grown only too dear to her!—Dora enters her room. It is an embarrassed and

significantly smiling Dora that trips up to her, and says with pretty hesitation in her tone  
—

“Dearest Florence, I want your advice about something.”

“Mine?” exclaims Florence, laying down her brush, and looking, as she feels, astonished. As a rule, the gentle Dora does not seek for wisdom from her friends.

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"Yes, dear, if you can spare me the time. Just five minutes will do, and then you can return to your charming sketch. Oh"—glancing at it—"how exactly like it is—so perfect; what a sunset, and what firs! One could imagine one's self in the Fairies' Glen by just looking at it."

"It is not the Fairies' Glen at all; it is that bit down by Gough's farm," says Florence coldly. Of late she has not been so blind to Dora's artificialness as she used to be.

"Ah, so it is!" agrees Dora airily, not in the least discomposed at her mistake. "And so like it too. You are a genius, dearest, you are really, and might make your fortune, only that you have one made already for you, fortunate girl!"

"You want my advice," suggests Florence quietly.

"Ah, true; and about something important too!" She throws into her whole air so much coquetry mingled with assumed bashfulness that Florence knows by instinct that the "something" has Sir Adrian for its theme, and she grows pale and miserable accordingly.

"Let me hear it then," she urges, leaning back with a weary sigh.

"I have just received this letter," says Mrs. Talbot, taking from her pocket the letter Arthur had given her, and holding it out to Florence, "and I want to know how I shall answer it. Would you—would you honestly advise me, Flo, to go and meet him as he desires?"

"As who desires?"

"Ah, true; you do not know, of course! I am so selfishly full of myself and my own concerns, that I seem to think every one else must be full of them too. Forgive me, dearest, and read his sweet little letter, will you?"

"Of whom are you speaking—to whose letter do you refer?" asks Florence, a little sharply, in the agony of her heart.

"Florence! Whose letter would I call 'sweet' except Sir Adrian's?" answers her cousin, with gentle reproach.

"But it is meant for you, not for me," says Miss Delmaine, holding the letter in her hand, and glancing at it with great distaste. "He probably intended no other eyes but yours to look upon it."

"But I must obtain advice from some one, and who so natural to expect it from as you, my nearest relative? If, however"—putting her handkerchief to her eyes—"you object to help me, Florence, or if it distresses you to read—"

“Distresses me?” interrupts Florence haughtily. “Why should it distress me? If you have no objection to my reading your—lover’s—letter, why should I hesitate about doing so? Pray sit down while I run through it.”

Dora having seated herself, Florence hastily reads the false note from beginning to end. Her heart beats furiously as she does so, and her color comes and goes; but her voice is quite steady when she speaks again.

“Well,” she says, putting the paper from her as though heartily glad to be rid of it, “it seems that Sir Adrian wishes to speak to you on some subject interesting to you and him alone, and that he has chosen the privacy of the lime-walk as the spot in which to hold your *tete-a-tete*. It is quite a simple affair, is it not? Though really, why he could not arrange to talk privately to you in some room in the castle, which is surely large enough for the purpose, I can not understand.”

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"Dear Sir Adrian is so romantic," says Dora coyly.

"Is he?" responds her cousin dryly. "He has always seemed to me the sanest of men. Well, on what matter do you wish to consult me?"

"Dear Florence, how terribly prosaic and unsympathetic you are to-day," says Dora reproachfully; "and I came to you so sure of offers of love and friendship! I want you to tell me if you think I ought to meet him or not."

"Why not?"

"I don't know"—with a little simper. "Is it perhaps humoring him too much? I have always dreaded letting a man imagine I cared for him, unless fully, utterly, assured of his affection for me."

Florence colors again, and then grows deadly pale, as this poisoned barb pierces her bosom.

"I should think," she says slowly, "after reading the letter you have just shown me, you ought to feel assured."

"You believe I ought, really?"—with a fine show of eagerness. "Now, you are not saying this to please me—to gratify me?"

"I should not please or gratify any one at the expense of truth."

"No, of course not. You are such a high-principled girl, so different from many others. Then you think I might go and meet him this evening without sacrificing my dignity in any way?"

"Certainly."

"Oh, I'm so glad," exclaimed little Mrs. Talbot rapturously, nodding her "honorable" head with a beaming smile, "because I do so want to meet him, dear fellow! And I value your opinion, Flo, more highly than that of any other friend I possess. You are so solid, so thoughtful—such a dear thing altogether."

Florence takes no heed of this rodomontade, but sits quite still, with downcast eyes, tapping the small table near her with the tips of her slender fingers in a meditative fashion.

"The fact is," continues Dora, who is watching her closely, "I may as well let you into a little secret. Yesterday Sir Adrian and I had a tiny, oh, such a tiny little dispute, all about nothing, I assure you"—with a gay laugh—"but to us it seemed quite important. He said he was jealous of me. Now just fancy that, Flo; jealous of poor little me!"



"It is quite possible; you are pretty—most men admire you," Florence remarks coldly, still without raising her eyes.

"Ah, you flatter me, naughty girl! Well, silly as it sounds, he actually was jealous, and really gave me quite a scolding. It brought tears to my eyes, it upset me so. So, to tell the truth, we parted rather bad friends; and, to be revenged on me, I suppose, he rather neglected me for the remainder of the day."

Again Florence is silent, though her tormentor plainly waits for a lead from her before going on.

"You must have remarked," she continues presently, "how cold and reserved he was toward me when we were all together in that dreadful haunted chamber." Here she really shudders, in spite of herself. The cruel eyes of Arthur Dynecourt seem to be on her again, as they were in that ghostly room.



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"I remarked nothing," responds Florence icily.

"No—really? Well, he was. Why, my dear Florence, you must have seen how he singled you out to be attentive to you, just to show me how offended he was."

"He did not seem offended with any one, and I thought him in particularly good spirits," replies Florence calmly.

Dora turns a delicate pink.

"Dear Adrian is such an excellent actor," she says sweetly, "and so proud; he will disguise his feelings, however keen they may be, from the knowledge of any one, no matter what the effort may cost him. Well, dearest, and so you positively advise me to keep this appointment with him?"

"I advise nothing. I merely say that I see nothing objectionable in your walking up and down the lime-walk with your host."

"How clearly you put it! Well, adieu, darling, for the present, and thank you a thousand times for all the time you have wasted on me. I assure you I am not worth it"—kissing her hand brightly.

For once she speaks the truth; she is not indeed worth one moment of the time Florence has been compelled to expend upon her; yet, when she has tripped out of the room, seemingly as free from guile as a light-hearted child, Miss Delmaine's thoughts still follow her, even against her inclination.

She has gone to meet him; no doubt to interchange tender words and vows with him; to forgive, to be forgiven, about some sweet bit of lover's folly, the dearer for its very foolishness. She listens for her footsteps as she returns along the corridor, dressed no doubt in her prettiest gown, decked out to make herself fair in his eyes.

An overwhelming desire to see how she has robed herself on this particular occasion induces Florence to go to the door and look after her as she descends the stairs. She just catches a glimpse of Dora as she turns the corner, and sees, to her surprise, that she is by no means daintily attired, but has thrown a plain dark water-proof over her dress, as though to hide it. Slightly surprised at this, Florence ponders it, and finally comes to the bitter conclusion that Dora is so sure of his devotion that she knows it is not necessary for her to bedeck herself in finery to please him. In his eyes of course she is lovely in any toilet.

Soon, soon she will be with him. How will they greet each other? Will he look into Dora's eyes as he used to look into hers not so very long ago? Arthur Dynecourt read her aright when he foresaw that she would be unable to repress the desire to follow Dora, and see for herself the meeting between her and Sir Adrian.



Hastily putting on a large Rubens hat, and twisting a soft piece of black lace round her neck, she runs down-stairs and, taking a different direction from that she knows Dora most likely pursued, she arrives by a side path at the lime-walk almost as soon as her cousin.

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Afraid to venture too near, she obtains a view of the walk from a high position framed in by rhododendrons. Yes, now she can see Dora, and now she can see too, the man who comes eagerly to meet her. His face is slightly turned away from her, but the tall figure clad in the loose light overcoat is not to be mistaken. He advances quickly, and meets Dora with both hands outstretched. She appears to draw back a little, and then he seizes her hands, and, stooping, covers them with kisses.

A film seems to creep over Florence's eyes. With a stifled groan, she turns and flies homeward. Again in the privacy of her own room, and having turned the key securely in the lock to keep out all intruders, she flings herself upon her bed and cries as if her heart would break.

\* \* \* \* \*

Not until her return to her room does Dora remember that she did not get back the false letter from her cousin. In the heat of the conversation she had forgotten it, but now, a fear possessing her lest Florence should show it to any one, she runs upstairs and knocks at Miss Delmaine's door.

"Come in," calls Florence slowly.

It is three hours since she went for her unhappy walk to the lime-grove, and now she is composed again, and is waiting for the gong to sound before descending to the drawing-room, where she almost dreads the thought that she will be face to face with Sir Adrian. She is dressed for dinner, has indeed taken most particular pains with her toilet, if only to hide the ravages that these past three hours of bitter weeping have traced upon her beautiful face. She looks sad still, but calm and dignified.

Dora is dressed too, but is looking flurried and flushed.

"I beg your pardon," she says; "but my letter—the letter I showed you to-day—have you it?"

"No," replies Florence simply; "I thought I gave it back to you; but, if not, it must be here on this table"—lifting a book or two from the small gypsy-table near which she had been sitting when Dora came to her room early in the day.

Dora looks for it everywhere, in a somewhat nervous, frightened manner, Florence helping her the while; but nothing comes of their search, and they are fain to go downstairs without it, as the gong sounding loudly tells them they are already late.

"Never mind," says Dora, afraid of having betrayed too much concern. "It is really of no consequence. I only wanted it, because—well, because"—with the simper that drives Florence nearly mad—"he wrote it."



"I shall tell my maid to look for it, and, if she finds it, you shall have it this evening," responds Florence, with a slight contraction of her brows that passes unnoticed.

To Florence's mortification, Arthur Dynecourt takes her in to dinner. On their way across the hall from the drawing-room to the dining-room, he presses the hand that rests so reluctantly upon his arm, and says, with an affectation of the sincerest concern—

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"You are not well; you are looking pale and troubled, and—pardon me if I am wrong, but I think you have been crying."

"I must beg, sir," she retorts, with excessive *hauteur*, removing her hand from his arm, as though his pressure had burned her—"I must beg, you will not trouble yourself to study my countenance. Your doing so is most offensive to me."

"To see you in trouble, and not long to help or comfort you is impossible to me," goes on Dynecourt, unmoved by her scorn. "Are you still dwelling on the past—on what is irrevocable? Have you had fresh cause to remember it to-day?"

There is a gleam of malice in his eyes, but Florence, whose gaze is turned disdainfully away from him, fails to see it. She changes color indeed beneath his words, but makes him no reply, and, when they reach the dining-room, in a very marked manner she takes a seat far removed from his.

There is a sinister expression in his eyes and round his mouth as he notes this studied avoidance.

## CHAPTER VIII.

It is now "golden September," and a few days later. For the last fortnight Florence has been making strenuous efforts to leave the castle, but Dora would not hear of their departure, and Florence, feeling it will be selfish of her to cut short Dora's happy hours with her supposed lover, sighs, and gives in, and sacrifices her own wishes on the altar of friendship.

It is five o'clock, and all the men, gun in hand, have been out since early dawn. Now they are coming straggling home, in ones or twos. Amongst the first to return are Sir Adrian and his cousin Arthur Dynecourt, who, having met accidentally about a mile from home, have trudged the remainder of the way together.

On the previous night at dinner, Miss Delmaine had spoken of a small gold bangle, a favorite of hers, she was greatly in the habit of wearing. She said she had lost it—when or where she could not tell; and she expressed herself as being very grieved for its loss, and had laughingly declared she would give any reward claimed by any one who should restore it to her. Two or three men had, on the instant, pledged themselves to devote their lives to the search; but Adrian had said nothing. Nevertheless, the bangle and the reward remained in his mind all that night and all to-day. Now he can not refrain from speaking about it to the man he considers his rival.

"Odd thing about Miss Delmaine's bangle," he remarks carelessly.

"Very odd. I dare say her maid has put it somewhere and forgotten it."



"Hardly. One would not put a bracelet anywhere but in a jewel-case, or in a special drawer. She must have dropped it somewhere."

"I dare say; those Indian bangles are very liable to be rubbed off the wrist."

"But where? I have had the place searched high and low, and still no tidings of it can be found."

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"There may have been since we left home this morning."

Just at this moment they come within full view of the old tower, and its strange rounded ivy-grown walls, and the little narrow holes in the sides they show at its highest point that indicate the position of the haunted chamber.

What is there at this moment in a mere glimpse of this old tower to make Arthur Dynecourt grow pale and to start so strangely? His eyes grow brighter, his lips tighten and grow hard.

"Do you remember," he says, turning to his cousin with all the air of one to whom a sudden inspiration has come, "that day on which we visited the haunted chamber? Miss Delmaine accompanied us, did she not?"

"Yes"—looking at him expectantly.

"Could she have dropped it there?" asks Arthur lightly. "By Jove, it would be odd if she had—eh? Uncanny sort of place to drop one's trinkets."

"It is strange I didn't think of it before," responds Adrian, evidently struck by the suggestion. "Why, it must have been just about that time when she lost it. The more I think of it the more convinced I feel that it must be there."

"Nonsense, my dear fellow; don't jump at conclusions so hastily! It is highly improbable. I should say that she dropped it anywhere else in the world."

"Well, I'll go and see, at all events," declares Adrian, unconvinced.

Is it some lingering remnant of grace, some vague human shrinking from the crime that has begun to form itself within his busy brain, that now induces Dynecourt to try to dissuade Sir Adrian from his declared intention to search the haunted chamber for the lost bangle? With all his eloquence he seeks to convince him that there the bangle could not have been left, but to no effect. His suggestion has taken firm root in Sir Adrian's mind, and at least, as he frankly says, though it may be useless to hunt for it in that uncanny chamber, it is worth a try. It may be there. This dim possibility drives him on to his fate.

"Well, if you go alone and unprotected, your blood be on your own head," says Dynecourt lightly, at last surrendering his position. "Remember, whatever happens, I advised you not to go!"

As Arthur finishes his speech a sinister smile overspreads his pale features, and a quick light, as evil as it is piercing, comes into his eyes. But Sir Adrian sees nothing of this. He is looking at his home, as it stands grand and majestic in the red light of the dying sun. He is looking, too, at the old tower, and at the upper portion of it, where the

haunted chamber stands, and where he can see the long narrow holes that serve for windows. How little could a man imprisoned there see of the great busy world without!

“Yes, I’ll remember,” he says jestingly. “When the ghosts of my ancestors claim me as their victim, and incarcerate me in some fiendish dungeon, I shall remember your words and your advice.”



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"You don't mean to go there, of course?" asks Arthur carelessly, whilst watching the other with eager scrutiny. "It is quite a journey to that dismal hole, and it will be useless."

"Well, if it distresses you, consider I haven't gone," says Sir Adrian lightly.

"That is right," rejoins Arthur, still with his keen eyes fixed upon his cousin. "I knew you would abandon that foolish intention. I certainly shall consider you haven't gone."

They are at the hall door as these words pass Arthur's lips, and there they separate, Sir Adrian leaving him with a smile, and going away up the large hall whistling gayly.

When he has turned one corner, Arthur goes quickly after him, not with the intention of overtaking him, but of keeping him in view. Stealthily he follows, as though fearful of being seen.

There is no servant within sight. No friend comes across Sir Adrian's path. All is silent. The old house seems wrapped in slumber. Above, the pretty guests in their dainty tea-gowns are sipping Bohea and prattling scandal; below, the domestics are occupied in their household affairs.

Arthur, watching carefully, sees Sir Adrian go quickly up the broad front staircase, after which he turns aside, and, as though filled with guilty fear, rushes through one passage and another, until he arrives in the corridor that belongs to the servants' quarters.

Coming to a certain door, he opens it, not without some difficulty, and, moving into the dark landing that lies beyond it, looks around. To any casual observer it might seem strange that some of the cobwebs in this apparently long-forgotten place have lately been brushed away, as by a figure ascending or descending the gloomy staircase. To Arthur these signs bring no surprise, which proves that he, perhaps, has the best right to know whose figure brushed them aside.

Hurrying up the stairs, after closing the door carefully and noiselessly behind him, he reaches, after considerable mountings of what seem to be interminable steps, the upper door he had opened on the day they had visited the haunted chamber, when Ringwood and he had had a passage-at-arms about his curiosity.

Now he stands breathing heavily outside this door, wrapped in the dismal darkness of the staircase, listening intently, as it were, for the coming of a footstep.

In the meantime, Sir Adrian, not dissuaded from his determination to search the tower for the missing bangle, runs gayly up the grand staircase, traverses the corridors and galleries, and finally comes to the first of the iron-bound doors. Opening it, he stands upon the landing that leads to the other door by means of the small stone staircase. Here he pauses.

Is it some vague shadowy sense of danger that makes him stand now as though hesitating? A quick shiver runs through his veins.

“How cold it is,” he says to himself, “even on this hot day, up in this melancholy place!” Yet, he is quite unconscious of the ears that are listening for his lightest movement, of the wicked eyes that are watching him through a chink in the opposite door!

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Now he steps forward again, and, mounting the last flight of stairs, opens the fatal door and looks into the room. Even now it occurs to him how unpleasant might be the consequences should the door close and the secret lock fasten him in against his will. He pushes the door well open, and holds it so, and then tries whether it can fall to again of its own accord, and so make a prisoner of him.

No; it stands quite open, immovable apparently, and so, convinced that he is safe enough, he commences his search. Then, swift as lightning, a form darts from its concealed position, rushes up the stone staircase, and, stealthily creeping still nearer, glances into the room.

Sir Adrian's back is turned; he is stooping, looking in every corner for the missing prize. He sees nothing, hears nothing, though a treacherous form crouching on the threshold is making ready to seal his doom.

Arthur Dynecourt, putting forth his hand, which neither trembles nor falters on its deadly mission, silently lays hold of the door, and, drawing it toward him, the secret lock clicks sharply, and separates his victim from the world!

Stealthily even now—his evil deed accomplished—Arthur Dynecourt retreats down the stairs, and never indeed relaxes his speed until at length he stands panting, but relentless, in the servants' corridor again.

Remorse he knows not. But a certain sense of fear holds him irresolute, making his limbs tremble and bringing out cold dew upon his brow. His rival is safely secured, out of all harm's way as far as he is concerned. No human being saw him go to the ill-fated tower; no human voice heard him declare his intention of searching it for the missing trinket. He—Arthur—had been careful before parting from him to express his settled belief that Sir Adrian would not go to the haunted chamber, and therefore he feels prepared to defend his case successfully, even should the baronet be lucky enough to find a deliverer.

Yet he is not quite easy in his mind. Fear of discovery, fear of Sir Adrian's displeasure, fear of the world, fear of the rope that already seems to dangle in red lines before his eyes render him the veriest coward that walks the earth. Shall he return and release his prisoner, and treat the whole thing as a joke, and so leave Adrian free to dispense his bounty at the castle, to entertain in his lavish fashion, to secure the woman upon whom he—Arthur—has set his heart for his bride?

No; a thousand times no! A few short days, and all will belong to Arthur Dynecourt. He will be "Sir Arthur" then, and the bride he covets will be unable to resist the temptations of a title, and the chance of being mistress of the stately old pile that will call him master. Let Sir Adrian die then in his distant garret alone, despairing, undiscoverable! For who will think of going to the haunted room in search of him? Who will even guess

that any mission, however important, would lead him to it, without having first mentioned it to some one? It is a grewsome spot, seldom visited and gladly forgotten; and, indeed, what possibly could there be in its bare walls and its blood-stained floor to attract any one? No; surely it is the last place to suspect any one would go to without a definite purpose; and what purpose could Sir Adrian have for going there?

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So far Arthur feels himself safe. He turns away, and joins the women and the returned sportsmen in the upper drawing-room.

"Where is Dynecourt?" asks somebody a little later. Arthur, though he hears the question, does not even change color, but calmly, with a steady hand, gives Florence her tea.

"Yes; where is Sir Adrian?" asks Mrs. Talbot, glancing up at the speaker.

"He left us about an hour ago," Captain Ringwood answers. "He said he'd prefer walking home, and he shoveled his birds into our cart, and left us without another word. He'll turn up presently, no doubt."

"Dear me, I hope nothing has happened to him!" says Ethel Villiers, who is sitting in a window through which the rays of the evening sun are stealing, turning her auburn locks to threads of rich red gold.

"I hope not, I'm sure," interposes Arthur, quite feelingly. "It does seem odd he hasn't come in before this." Then, true to his determination to so arrange matters that, if discovery ensues upon his scheme, he may still find for himself a path out of his difficulties, he says quietly, "I met him about a mile from home, and walked here with him. We parted at the hall-door; I dare say he is in the library or the stables."

"Good gracious, why didn't you say so before?" exclaims old Lady FitzAlmont in a querulous tone. "I quite began to believe the poor boy had blown out his brains through disappointed love, or something equally objectionable."

Both Dora and Florence color warmly at this. The old lady herself is free to speak as she thinks of Sir Adrian, having no designs upon him for Lady Gertrude, that young lady being engaged to a very distinguished and titled botanist, now hunting for ferns in the West Indies.

"Markham," says Mrs. Talbot to a footman who enters at this moment, "go to the library and tell Sir Adrian his tea is waiting for him."

"Yes, ma'am."

But presently Markham returns and says Sir Adrian is not in the library.

"Then try the stables, try everywhere," says Dora somewhat impatiently.

Markham, having tried everywhere, brings back the same answer; Sir Adrian apparently is not to be found!

“Most extraordinary,” remarks Lady FitzAlmont, fanning herself. “As a rule I have noticed that Adrian is most punctual. I do hope my first impression was not the right one, and that we sha’n’t find him presently with his throat cut and wallowing in his blood on account of some silly young woman!”

“Dear mamma,” interposes Lady Gertrude, laughing, “what a terribly old-fashioned surmise! No man nowadays kills himself for a false love; he only goes and gets another.”

But, when the dinner-hour arrives, and no host presents himself to lead Lady FitzAlmont into dinner, a great fear falls upon all the guests save one, and confusion and dismay, and anxious conjecture reign supreme.

## **CHAPTER IX.**

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The night passes; the next day dawns, deepens, grows into noon, and still nothing happens to relieve the terrible anxiety that is felt by all within the castle as to the fate of its missing master. They weary themselves out wondering, idly but incessantly, what can have become of him.

The second day comes and goes, so does the third and the fourth, the fifth and the sixth, and then the seventh dawns.

Florence Delmaine, who has been half-distracted with conflicting fears and emotions, and who has been sitting in her room apart from the others, with her head bent down and resting on her hands, suddenly raising her eyes, sees Dora standing before her.

The widow is looking haggard and hollow-eyed. All her dainty freshness has gone, and she now looks in years what in reality she is, close on thirty-five. Her lips are pale and drooping, her cheeks colorless; her whole air is suggestive of deep depression, the result of sleepless nights and days filled with grief and suspense of the most poignant nature.

“Alas, how well she loves him too!” thinks Florence, contemplating her in silence. Dora, advancing, lays her hand upon the table near Florence, and says, in a hurried impassioned tone—

“Oh, Florence, what has become of him? What has been done to him? I have tried to hide my terrible anxiety for the past two miserable days, but now I feel I must speak to some one or go mad!”

She smites her hands together, and, sinking into a chair, looks as if she is going to faint. Florence, greatly alarmed, rises from her chair, and, running to her, places her arm around her as though to support her. But Dora repulses her almost roughly and motions her away.

“Do not touch me!” she cries hoarsely. “Do not come near me; you, of all people, should be the last to come to my assistance! Besides, I am not here to talk about myself, but of him. Florence, have you any suspicion?”

Dora leans forward and looks scrutinizingly at her cousin, as though fearing, yet hoping to get an answer in the affirmative. But Florence shakes her head.

“I have no suspicion—none,” she answers sadly. “If I had should I not act upon it, whatever it might cost me?”

“Would you,” asks Dora eagerly, as though impressed by her companion’s words—  
“whatever it might cost you?”

Her manner is so strange that Florence pauses before replying.



“Yes,” she says at last. “No earthly consideration should keep me from using any knowledge I might by accident or otherwise become possessed of to lay bare this mystery. Dora,” she cries suddenly, “if you know anything, I implore, I entreat you to say so.”

“What should I know?” responds the widow, recoiling.

“You loved him too,” says Florence piteously, now more than ever convinced that Dora is keeping something hidden from her. “For the sake of that love, disclose anything you may know about this awful matter.”



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"I dare not speak openly," replies the widow, growing even a shade paler, "because my suspicion is of the barest character, and may be altogether wrong. Yet there are moments when some hidden instinct within my breast whispers to me that I am on the right track."

"If so," murmurs Florence, falling upon her knees before her, "do not hesitate; follow up this instinctive feeling, and who knows but something may come of it! Dora, do not delay. Soon, soon—if not already—it may be too late. Alas," she cries, bursting into bitter tears, "what do I say? Is it not too late even now? What hope can there be after six long days, and no tidings?"

"I will do what I can, I am resolved," declares Dora, rising abruptly to her feet. "If too late to do any good, it may not be too late to wring the truth from him, and bring the murderer to justice."

"From him? From whom—what murderer?" exclaims Florence, in a voice of horror. "Dora, what are you saying?"

"Never mind. Let me go now; and to-night—this evening let me come to you here again, and tell you the result of what I am now about to do."

She quits the room as silently as she entered it, and Florence, sinking back in her chair, gives herself up to the excitement and amazement that are overpowering her. There is something else, too, in her thoughts that is puzzling and perplexing her; in all Dora's manner there was nothing that would lead her to think she loved Sir Adrian: there was fear, and a desire for revenge in it, but none of the despair of a loving woman who has lost the man to whom she has given her heart.

Florence is still pondering these things, while Dora, going swiftly down-stairs, turns into the side hall, glancing into library and rooms as she goes along, plainly in search of something or some one.

At last her search is successful; in a small room she finds Arthur Dynecourt apparently reading, as he sits in a large arm-chair, with his eyes fixed intently upon the book in his hand. Seeing her, he closes the volume, and, throwing it from him, says carelessly:

"Pshaw—what contemptible trash they write nowadays!"

"How can you sit here calmly reading," exclaims Dora vehemently, "when we are all so distressed in mind! But I forgot"—with a meaning glance—"you gain by his death; we do not."

"No, you lose," he retorts coolly. "Though, after all, even had things been different, I can't say I think you had much chance at any time."

He smiles insolently at her as he says this. But she pays no heed either to his words or his smile. Her whole soul seems wrapped in one thought, and at last she gives expression to it.

“What have you done with him?” she breaks forth, advancing toward him, as though to compel him to give her an answer to the question that has been torturing her for days past.

“With whom?” he asks coldly. Yet there is a forbidding gleam in his eyes that should have warned her to forbear.

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"With Sir Adrian—with your rival, with the man you hate," she cries, her breath coming in little irrepressible gasps. "Dynecourt, I adjure you to speak the truth, and say what has become of him."

"You rave," he says calmly, lifting his eyebrows just a shade, as though in pity for her foolish excitement. "I confess the man was no favorite of mine, and that I can not help being glad of this chance that has presented itself in his extraordinary disappearance of my inheriting his place and title; but really, my dear creature, I know as little of what has become of him, as—I presume—you do yourself."

"You lie!" cries Dora, losing all control over herself. "You have murdered him, to get him out of your path. His death lies at your door."

She points her finger at him as though in condemnation as she utters these words, but still he does not flinch.

"They will take you for a Bedlamite," he says, with a sneering laugh, "if you conduct yourself like this. Where are your proofs that I am the cold-blooded ruffian you think me?"

"I have none"—in a despairing tone. "But I shall make it the business of my life to find them."

"You had better devote your time to some other purpose," he exclaims savagely, laying his hand upon her wrist with an amount of force that leaves a red mark upon the delicate flesh. "Do you hear me? You must be mad to go on like this to me. I know nothing of Adrian, but I know a good deal of your designing conduct, and your wild jealousy of Florence Delmaine. All the world saw how devoted he was to her, and—mark what I say—there have been instances of a jealous woman killing the man she loved, rather than see him in the arms of another."

"Demon!" shrieks Dora, recoiling from him. "You would fix the crime on me?"

"Why not? I think the whole case tells terribly against you. Hitherto I have spared you, I have refrained from hinting even at the fact that your jealousy had been aroused of late; but your conduct of to-day, and the wily manner in which you have sought to accuse me of being implicated in this unfortunate mystery connected with my unhappy cousin, have made me regret my forbearance. Be warned in time, cease to persecute me about this matter, or—wretched woman that you are—I shall certainly make it my business to investigate the entire matter, and bring you to justice!"

He speaks with such an air of truth, of thorough belief in her guilt, that Dora is dazed, bewildered, and, falling back from him, covers her face with her hands. The fear of publicity, of having her late intrigue brought into the glare of day, fills her with

consternation. And then, what will she gain by it? Nothing; she has no evidence on which to convict this man; all is mere supposition. She bitterly feels the weakness of her position, and her inability to follow up her accusation.

“Ah, how like a guilty creature you stand there!” exclaims Dynecourt, regarding her bowed and trembling figure. “I see plainly that this must be looked into. Miserable woman! If you know aught of my cousin, you had better declare it now.”



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"Traitor!" cries Dora, raising her pale face and looking at him with horror and defiance. "You triumph now, because, as yet, I have no evidence to support my belief, but"—she hesitates.

"Ah, brazen it out to the last!" says Dynecourt insolently. "Defy me while you can. To-day I shall set the blood-hounds of the law upon your track, so beware—beware!"

"You refuse to tell me anything?" exclaims Dora, ignoring his words, and treating them as though they are unheard. "So much the worse for you."

She turns from him, and leaves the room as she finishes speaking; but, though her words have been defiant there is no kindred feeling in her heart to bear her up.

When the door closes between them, the flush dies out of her face, and she looks even more wan and hopeless than she did before seeking his presence. She can not deny to herself that her mission has been a failure. He has openly scoffed at her threats, and she is aware that she has not a shred of actual evidence wherewith to support her suspicion; the bravado with which he has sought to turn the tables upon herself both frightens and disheartens her, and now she confesses to herself that she knows not where to turn for counsel.

## CHAPTER X.

In the meantime the daylight dwindles, and twilight descends. Even that too departs, and now darkness falls upon the distressed household, and still there is no news of Sir Adrian.

Arthur Dynecourt, who is already beginning to be treated with due respect as the next heir to the baronetcy, has quietly hinted to old Lady FitzAlmont that perhaps it will be as well, in the extraordinary circumstances, if they all take their departure. This the old lady, though strongly disinclined to quit the castle, is debating in her own mind, and, being swayed by Lady Gertrude, who is secretly rather bored by the dullness that has ensued on the strange absence of their host, decides to leave on the morrow, to the great distress of both Dora and Florence Delmaine, who shrink from deserting the castle while its master's fate is undecided. But they are also sensible that, to remain the only female guests, would be to outrage the conventionalities.

Henry Villiers, Ethel's father, is also of opinion that they should all quit the castle without delay. He is a hunting man, an M.F.H. in his own county, and is naturally anxious to get back to his own quarters some time before the hunting-season commences. Some others have already gone, and altogether it seems to Florence that there is no other course open to her but to pack up and desert him, whom she loves, in the hour of his

direst need. For there are moments even now when she tells herself that he is still living, and only waiting for a saving hand to drag him into smooth waters once again!

A silence has fallen upon the house more melancholy than the loudest expression of grief. The servants are conversing over their supper in frightened whispers, and conjecturing moodily as to the fate of their late master. To them Sir Adrian is indeed dead, if not buried.

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In the servants' corridor a strange dull light is being flung upon the polished boards by a hanging-lamp that is burning dimly, as though oppressed by the dire evil that has fallen upon the old castle. No sound is to be heard here in this spot, remote from the rest of the house, where the servants seldom come except to go to bed, and never indeed without an inward shudder as they pass the door that leads to the haunted chamber.

Just now, being at their supper, there is no fear that any of them will be about, and so the dimly lighted corridor is wrapped in an unbroken silence. Not quite unbroken, however. What is this that strikes upon the ear? What sound comes to break the unearthly stillness? A creeping footstep, a cautious tread, a slinking, halting, uncertain motion, belonging surely to some one who sees an enemy, a spy in every flitting shadow. Nearer and nearer it comes now into the fuller glare of the lamp-light, and stops short at the door so dreaded by the castle servants.

Looking uneasily around him, Arthur Dynecourt—for it is he—unfastens this door, and, entering hastily, closes it firmly behind him, and ascends the staircase within. There is no halting in his footsteps now, no uncertainty, no caution, only a haste that betokens a desire to get his errand over as quickly as possible.

Having gained the first landing, he walks slowly and on tiptoe again, and, creeping up the stone stairs, crouches down so as to bring his ear on a level with the lower chink of the door.

Alas, all is still; no faintest groan can be heard! The silence of Death is on all around. In spite of his hardihood, the cold sweat of fear breaks out upon Dynecourt's brow; and yet he tells himself that now he is satisfied, all is well, his victim is secure, is beyond the power of words or kindly search to recall him to life. He may be discovered now as soon as they like. Who can fix the fact of his death upon him? There is no blow, no mark of violence to criminate any one. He is safe, and all the wealth he had so coveted is at last his own!

There is something fiendish in the look of exultation that lights Arthur Dynecourt's face. He has a small dull lantern with him, and now it reveals the vile glance of triumph that fires his eyes. He would fain have entered to gaze upon his victim, to assure himself of his victory, but he refrains. A deadly fear that he may not yet be quite dead keeps him back, and, with a frown, he prepares to descend once more.

Again he listens, but the sullen roar of the rising night wind is all that can be heard. His hand shakes, his face assumes a livid hue, yet he tells himself that surely this deadly silence is better than what he listened to last night. Then a ghostly moaning, almost incessant and unearthly in its sound, had pierced his brain. It was more like the cry of a dying brute than that of a man. Sir Adrian slowly starved to death! In his own mind Arthur can see him now, worn, emaciated, lost to all likeness of anything fair or comely. Have the rats attacked him yet? As this grewsome thought presents itself, Dynecourt

rises quickly from his crouching position, and, flying down the steps, does not stop running until he arrives in the corridor below again.



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He dashes into this like one possessed; but, finding himself in the light of the hanging lamp, collects himself by a violent effort, and looks around.

Yes, all is still. No living form but his is near. The corridor, as he glances affrightedly up and down, is empty. He can see nothing but his own shadow, at sight of which he starts and turns pale and shudders.

The next moment he recovers himself, and, muttering an anathema upon his cowardice, he moves noiselessly toward his room and the brandy-bottle that has been his constant companion of late.

Yet, here in his own room, he can not rest. The hours go by with laggard steps. Midnight has struck, and still he paces his floor from wall to wall, half-maddened by his thoughts. Not that he relents. No feelings of repentance stir him, there is only a nervous dread of the hour when it will be necessary to produce the dead body, if only to prove his claim to the title so dearly and so infamously purchased.

Is he indeed dead—gone past recall? Is this house, this place, the old title, the chance of winning the woman he would have, all his own? Is his hated rival—hateful to him only because of his fair face and genial manners and lovable disposition, and the esteem with which he filled the hearts of all who knew him—actually swept out of his path?

Again the lurking morbid longing to view the body with his own eyes, the longing that had been his some hours ago when listening at the fatal door, seizes hold of him, and grows in intensity with every passing moment.

At last it conquers him. Lighting a candle, he opens his door and peers out. No one is astir. In all probability every one is abed, and now sleeping the sleep of the just—all except him. Will there ever be any rest or dreamless sleep for him again?

He goes softly down-stairs, and makes his way to the lower door. Meeting no one, he ascends the stairs like one only half conscious, until he finds himself again before the door of the haunted chamber.

Then he wakes into sudden life. An awful terror takes possession of him. He struggles with himself, and presently so far succeeds in regaining some degree of composure that he can lean against the wall and wipe his forehead, and vow to himself that he will never descend until he has accomplished the object of his visit. But the result of this terrible fight with fear and conscience shows itself in the increasing pallor of his brow and the cold perspiration that stands thick upon his forehead.

Nerving himself for a final effort, he lays his hand upon the door and pushes it open. This he does with bowed head and eyes averted, afraid to look upon his terrible work. A

silence, more horrible to his guilty conscience than the most appalling noises, follows this act; and, again the nameless terror seizing him, he shudders and draws back, until, finding the wall behind him, he leans against it gladly, as if for support.

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And now at last he raises his eyes. Slowly at first and cringingly, as if dreading what they might see. Upon the board at his feet they rest for a moment, and then glide to the next board, and so on, until his coward eyes have covered a considerable portion of the floor.

And now, grown bolder, he lifts his gaze to the wall opposite and searches it carefully. Then his eyes turn again to the floor. His face ghastly, and with his eyes almost darting from their sockets, he compels himself to bring his awful investigation to an end. Avoiding the corners at first, as though there he expects his vile deed will cry aloud to him demanding vengeance, he gazes in a dazed way at the center of the apartment, and dwells upon it stupidly, until he knows he must look further still; and then his dull eyes turn to the corners where the dusky shadows lie, brought thither by the glare of his small lantern. Reluctantly, but carefully, he scans the apartment, no remotest spot escapes his roused attention. But no object, dead or living, attracts his notice! The room is empty!

He staggers. His hold upon the door relaxes. His lamp falls to the ground; the door closes with a soft but deadly thud behind him, and—he is a prisoner in the haunted chamber! As the darkness closes in upon him, and he finds himself alone with what he hardly dares to contemplate, his senses grow confused, his brain reels; a fearful scream issues from his lips, and he falls to the floor insensible.

## CHAPTER XI.

Dora, after her interview with Arthur Dynecourt, feels indeed that all is lost. Hope is abandoned—nothing remains but despair; and in this instance despair gains in poignancy by the knowledge that she believes she knows the man who could help them to a solution of their troubles if he would or dared. No; clearly he dare not! Therefore, no assistance can be looked for from him.

Dinner at the castle has been a promiscuous sort of entertainment for the past three or four days, so Dora feels no compunction in declining to go to it. In her own room she sits brooding miserably over her inability to be of any use in the present crisis, when she suddenly remembers that she had promised in the afternoon when with Florence to give her, later on, an account of her effort to obtain the truth about this mystery which is harrowing them.

It is now eleven o'clock, and Dora decides that she must see Florence at once. Rising, wearily, she is about to cross the corridor to her cousin's room, when, the door opening, she sees Florence, with a face pale and agitated, coming toward her.

"You, Florence!" she exclaims. "I was just going to you, to tell you that my hopes of this afternoon are all—"

“Let me speak,” interrupts Florence breathlessly. “I must, or—” She sinks into a chair, her eyes close, and involuntarily she lays her hand upon her heart as if to allay its tumultuous beating.

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Dora, really alarmed, rushing to her dressing-case, seizes upon a flask of eau-de-Cologne, and flings some of its contents freely over the fainting girl. Florence, with a sigh, rouses herself, and sits upright.

"There is no time to lose," she says confusedly. "Oh, Dora!" Here she breaks down and bursts into tears.

"Try to compose yourself," entreats Dora, seeing the girl has some important news to impart, but is so nervous and unstrung as to be almost incapable of speaking with any coherence. But presently Florence grows calmer, and then, her voice becoming clear and full, she is able to unburden her heart.

"All this day I have been oppressed by a curious restlessness," she says to Dora; "and, when you left me this afternoon, your vague promises of being able to elucidate the terrible secret that is weighing us down made me even more unsettled. I did not go down to dinner—"

"Neither did I," puts in Mrs. Talbot sympathetically.

"I wandered up and down my room for at least two hours, thinking always, and waiting for the moment when you would return, according to promise, and tell me the success of your hidden enterprise. You did not come, and at half past nine, unable to stay any longer in my own room with only my own thoughts for company, I opened my door, and, listening intently, found by the deep silence that reigned throughout the house that almost every one was gone, if not to bed, at least to their own rooms."

"Lady FitzAlmont and Gertrude passed to their rooms about an hour ago," says Dora. "But some of the men, I think, are still in the smoking-room."

"I did not think of them. I stole from my room, and roamed idly through the halls. Suddenly a great—I can not help thinking now a supernaturally strong—desire to go into the servants' corridor took possession of me. Without allowing myself an instant's hesitation, I turned in its direction, and walked on until I reached it."

She pauses here, and draws her breath rapidly.

"Go on," entreats Dora impatiently.

"The lamp was burning very dimly. The servants were all down-stairs—at their supper, I suppose—because there was no trace of them anywhere. Not a sound could be heard. The whole place looked melancholy and deserted, and filled me with a sense of awe I could not overcome. Still it attracted me. I lingered there, walking up and down until its very monotony wearied me; even then I was loath to leave it, and, turning into a small sitting-room, I stood staring idly around me. At last, somewhere in the distance I heard a clock strike ten, and, turning, I decided on going back once more to my room."

Again, emotion overcoming her, Florence pauses, and leans back in her chair.

“Well, but what is there in all this to terrify you so much?” demands her cousin, somewhat bewildered.

“Ah, give me time! Now I am coming to it,” replies Florence quickly. “You know the large screen that stands in the corridor just outside the sitting-room I have mentioned—put there, I imagined to break the draught? Well, I had come out of the room and was standing half-hidden by this screen, when I saw something that paralyzed me with fear.”

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She rises to her feet and grows deadly pale as she says this, as though the sensation of fear she has been describing has come to her again.

“You saw—?” prompts Dora, rising too, and trembling violently, as though in expectation of some fatal tidings.

“I saw the door of the room that leads to the haunted chamber slowly move. It opened; the door that has been locked for nearly fifty years, and that has filled the breasts of all the servants here with terror and dismay, was cautiously thrown open! A scream rose to my lips, but I was either too terrified to give utterance to it, or else some strong determination to know what would follow restrained me, and I stood silent, like one turned into stone. I had instinctively moved back a step or two, and was now completely hidden from sight, though I could see all that was passing in the corridor through a hole in the framework of the screen. At last a figure came with hesitating footsteps from behind the door into the full glare of the flickering lamp. I could see him distinctly. It was—”

“Arthur Dynecourt!” cries the widow, covering her ghastly face with her hands.

Florence regards her with surprise.

“It was,” she says at last. “But how did you guess it?”

“I knew it,” cries Dora frantically. “He has murdered him, he has hidden his body away in that forgotten chamber. He was gloating over his victim, no doubt, just before you saw him, stealing down from a secret visit to the scene of his crime.”

“Dora,” exclaims Florence, grasping her arm, “if he should not have murdered him after all, if he should only have secured him there, holding him prisoner until he should see his way more clearly to getting rid of him! If this idea be the correct one, we may yet be in time to save, to rescue him!”

The agitation of the past hours proving now too much for her, Florence bursts into tears and sobs wildly.

“Alas, I dare not believe in any such hope!” says Dora. “I know that man too well to think him capable of showing any mercy.”

“And yet ‘that man,’ as you call him, you would once have earnestly recommended to me as a husband!” returns Florence, sternly.

“Do not reproach me now,” exclaims Dora; “later on you shall say to me all that you wish, but now moments are precious.”

“You are right. Something must be done. Shall I—shall I speak to Mr. Villiers?”

“I hardly know what to advise”—distractedly. “If we give our suspicions publicity, Arthur Dynecourt may even yet find time and opportunity to baffle and disappoint us. Besides which, we may be wrong. He may have had nothing to do with it, and—”

“At that rate, if secrecy is to be our first thought, let you and me go alone in search of Sir Adrian.”

“Alone, and at this hour, to that awful room!” exclaims Dora, recoiling from her.

“Yes, at once”—firmly—“without another moment’s delay.”



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"Oh, I can not!" declares Dora, shuddering violently.

"Then I shall go alone!"

As Florence says this, she takes up her candlestick and moves quickly toward the door.

"Stay, I will go," cries Dora, trembling. But a slight interruption occurring at this instant, they are compelled to wait for awhile.

Ethel Villiers, coming into the room to make her parting adieus to Mrs. Talbot, as she and her father intend leaving next morning, gazes anxiously from Florence to Dora, seeing plainly that there is something amiss.

"What is it?" she asks kindly, going up to Florence.

Miss Delmaine, after a little hesitation, encouraged by a glance at Dora's terrified countenance, determines on taking the new-comer into their confidence.

In a few words she explains all that has taken place, and their suspicions. Ethel, though paling beneath the horror and surprise occasioned by the recital, does not lose her self-possession.

"I will go with you," she volunteers. "But, let me say," she adds, "that I think you are wrong in making this search without a man. If—if indeed we are still in time to be of any use to poor Sir Adrian—always supposing he really is secreted in that terrible room—I do not think any of us would be strong enough to help him down the stairs, and, if he has been slowly starving all this time, think how weak he will be!"

"Oh, what a wretched picture you conjure up!" exclaims Florence, nervously clasping her hands. "But you are right, and now tell me who you think can best be depended upon in this crisis."

"I am sure," says Ethel, blushing slightly, but speaking with intense earnestness, "that, if you would not mind trusting Captain Ringwood, he would be both safe and useful."

As this suggestion meets with approval, they manage to convey a message to the captain, and in a very few minutes he is with them, and is made acquainted with their hopes and fears.

Silently, cautiously, without any light, but carrying two small lamps ready for ignition, they go down to the corridor where is the door that leads to the secret staircase.

Turning the handle of this door, Captain Ringwood discovers that it is locked, but, nothing daunted, he pulls it so violently backward and forward that the lock, rusty with age, gives way, and leaves the passage beyond open to them.

Going into the small landing at the foot of the staircase, they close the door carefully behind them, and then, Captain Ringwood producing some matches, they light the two lamps and go swiftly, with anxiously beating hearts, up the stairs.

The second door is reached, and now nothing remains but to mount the last flight of steps and open the fatal door.

Their hearts at this trying moment almost fail them. They look into one another's blanched faces, and look there in vain for hope. At last Ringwood, touching Ethel's arm, says, in a whisper—

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"Come, have courage—all may yet be well!"

He moves toward the stone steps, and they follow him. Quickly mounting them, he lays his hand upon the door, and, afraid to give them any more time for reflection or dread of what may yet be in store for them, throws it open.

At first the feeble light from their lamps fails to penetrate the darkness of the gloomy apartment. At the cursory glance, such as they at first cast round the room, it appears to be empty. Their hearts sink within them. Have they indeed hoped in vain!

Dora is crying bitterly; Ethel, with her eyes fixed upon Ringwood, is reading her own disappointment in his face, when suddenly a piercing cry from Florence wakes the echoes round them.

She has darted forward, and is kneeling over something that even now is only barely discernible to the others as they come nearer to it. It looks like a bundle of clothes, but, as they stoop over it, they, too, can see that it is in reality a human body, and apparently rigid in death.

But the shriek that has sprung from the very soul of Florence has reached some still living fibers in the brain of this forlorn creature. Slowly and with difficulty he raises his head, and opens a pair of fast-glazing eyes. Mechanically his glance falls upon Florence. His lips move; a melancholy smile struggles to show itself upon his parched and blackened lips.

"Florence," he rather sighs than says, and falls back, to all appearance, dead.

"He is not dead!" cries Florence passionately. "He can not be! Oh, save him, save him! Adrian, look up—speak to me! Oh, Adrian, make some sign that you can hear me!"

But he makes no sign. His very breath seems to have left him. Gathering him tenderly in her arms, Florence presses his worn and wasted face against her bosom, and pushes back the hair from his forehead. He is so completely altered, so thorough a wreck has he become, that it is indeed only the eyes of love that could recognize him. His cheeks have fallen in, and deep hollows show themselves. His beard has grown, and is now rough and stubbly; his hair is uncombed, the lines of want, despair, and cruel starvation have blotted out all the old fairness of his features. His clothes are hanging loosely about him; his hands, limp and nerveless, are lying by his side. Who shall tell what agony he suffered during these past lonely days with death—an awful, creeping, gnawing death staring him in the face?

A deadly silence has fallen upon the little group now gazing solemnly down upon his quiet form. Florence, holding him closely to her heart, is gently rocking him to and fro, as though she will not be dissuaded that he still lives.

At length Captain Ringwood, stooping pitifully over her, loosens her hold so far as to enable him to lay his hand upon Adrian's heart. After a moment, during which they all watch him closely, he starts, and, looking still closer into the face that a second ago he believed dead, he says, with subdued but deep excitement—

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"There may yet be time! He breathes—his heart beats! Who will help me to carry him out of this dungeon?"

He shudders as he glances round him.

"I will," replies Florence calmly.

These words of hope have steadied her and braced her nerves. Ethel and Mrs. Talbot, carrying the lamps, go on before, while Ringwood and Florence, having lifted the senseless body of Adrian, now indeed sufficiently light to be an easy burden, follow them.

Reaching the corridor, they cross it hurriedly, and carrying Adrian up a back staircase that leads to Captain Ringwood's room by a circuitous route, they gain it without encountering a single soul, and lay him gently down on Ringwood's bed, almost at the very moment that midnight chimes from the old tower, and only a few minutes before Arthur Dynecourt steals from his chamber to make that last visit to his supposed victim.

## CHAPTER XII.

Slowly and with difficulty they coax Sir Adrian back to life. Ringwood had insisted upon telling the old housekeeper at the castle, who had been in the family for years, the whole story of her master's rescue, and she, with tears dropping down her withered cheeks, had helped Ringwood to remove his clothes and make him comfortable. She had also sat beside him while the captain, stealing out of the house like a thief, had galloped down to the village for the doctor, whom he had smuggled into the house without awaking any of the servants.

This caution and secrecy had been decided upon for one powerful reason. If Arthur Dynecourt should prove guilty of being the author of his cousin's incarceration, they were quite determined he should not escape whatever punishment the law allowed. But the mystery could not be quite cleared up until Sir Adrian's return to consciousness, when they hoped to have some light thrown upon the matter from his own lips.

In the meantime, should Arthur hear of his cousin's rescue, and know himself to be guilty of this dastardly attempt to murder, would he not take steps to escape before the law should lay its iron grasp upon him? All four conspirators are too ignorant of the power of the law to know whether it would be justifiable in the present circumstances to place him under arrest, or decide on waiting until Sir Adrian himself shall be able to pronounce either his doom or his exculpation.

The doctor stays all night, and administers to the exhausted man, as often as he dares, the nourishment and good things provided by the old housekeeper.



When the morning is far advanced, Adrian, waking from a short but refreshing slumber, looks anxiously around him. Florence, seeing this, steps aside, as though to make way for Dora to go closer to him. But Mrs. Talbot, covering her face with her hands, turns aside and sinks into a chair.

Florence, much bewildered by this strange conduct, stands irresolute beside the bed, hardly knowing what to do. Again she glances at the prostrate man, and sees his eyes resting upon her with an expression in them that makes her heart beat rapidly with sweet but sad recollections.

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Then a faint voice falls upon her ear. It is so weak that she is obliged to stoop over him to catch what he is trying to say.

“Darling, I owe you my life!”

With great feebleness he utters these words, accompanying them with a glance of utter devotion. How can she mistake this glance, so full of love and rapture? Perplexed in the extreme, she turns from him, as though to leave him, but by a gesture he detains her.

“Do not leave me! Stay with me!” he entreats.

Once again, deeply distressed, she looks at Dora. Mrs. Talbot, rising, says distinctly, but with a shamefaced expression—

“Do as he asks you. Believe me, by his side is your proper place, not mine.”

Saying this, she glides quickly from the room, and does not appear again for several hours.

By luncheon-time it occurs to the guests that Arthur Dynecourt has not been seen since last evening.

Ringwood, carrying this news to the sick-room, the little rescuing party and their auxiliaries, the nurse and doctor, lay their heads together, and decide that, doubtless, having discovered the escape of his prisoner, and, dreading arrest, Arthur has quietly taken himself off, and so avoided the trial and punishment which would otherwise have fallen upon him.

Ringwood is now of opinion that they have acted unwisely in concealing the discovery of Sir Adrian in the haunted chamber. By not speaking to the others, they have given Dynecourt the opportunity of getting away safely, and without causing suspicion.

“Is it not an almost conclusive proof of his guilt, his running away in this cowardly fashion?” says Ethel Villiers. “I think papa and Lady FitzAlmont and everybody should now be told.”

So Ringwood, undertaking the office of tale-bearer, goes down-stairs, and, bringing together all the people still remaining in the house, astounds them by his revelation of the discovery and release of Sir Adrian.

The nearest magistrate is sent for, and the case being laid before him, together with the still further evidence given by Sir Adrian himself, who has told them in a weak whisper of Arthur’s being privy to his intention of searching the haunted chamber for Florence’s

bangle on that memorable day of his disappearance, the magistrate issues a warrant for the arrest of Arthur Dynecourt.

But it is all in vain; even though two of the cleverest detectives from Scotland Yard are pressed into the service, no tidings of Arthur Dynecourt come to light. A man answering to his description, but wearing spectacles, had been traced as having gone on board a vessel bound for New York the very day after Sir Adrian was restored to the world, and, when search in other quarters fails, every one falls into the ready belief that this spectacled man was in reality the would-be murderer.

So the days pass on, and it is now quite a month since Ringwood and Florence carried Sir Adrian's senseless form from the haunted chamber, and still Florence holds herself aloof from the man she loves, and, though quite as assiduous as the others in her attentions to him, seems always eager to get away from him, and glad to escape any chance of a *tete-a-tete* with him. This she does in defiance of the fact that Mrs. Talbot never approaches him except when absolutely compelled.



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Sir Adrian is still a great invalid. The shock to his nervous system, the dragging out of those interminable hours in the lonely chamber, and the strain upon his physical powers by the absence of nutriment for seven long days and nights, had all combined to shatter a constitution once robust. He is now greatly improved in health, and has been recommended by his doctors to try a winter in the south of France or Algiers.

He shows himself, however, strangely reluctant to quit his home, and, whenever the subject is mentioned, he first turns his eyes questioningly upon Florence, if she is present, and then, receiving no returning glance from her downcast eyes, sighs, and puts the matter from him.

He has so earnestly entreated both Dora and Miss Delmaine not to desert him, that they have not had the heart to refuse, and as Ringwood is also staying at the castle, and Ethel Villiers has gained her father's consent to remain, Mrs. Talbot acting as chaperon, they are by no means a dull party.

To-day, the first time for over a month, Florence, going to her easel, draws its cover away from the sketch thereon, and gazes at her work. How long ago it seems since she sat thus, happy in her thoughts, glad in the belief that the one she loved loved her! yet all that time his heart had been given to her cousin. And though now, at odd moments, she has felt herself compelled to imagine that his every glance and word speaks of tenderness for her, and not for Dora—still this very knowledge only hardens her heart toward him, and renders her cold and unsympathetic in his presence.

No, she will have no fickle lover. And yet, how kind he is—how earnest, how honest is his glance! Oh, that she could believe all the past to be an evil dream, and think of him again as her very own, as in the dear old days gone by!

Even while thinking this she idly opens a book lying on the table near her, where some brushes and paints are scattered. A piece of paper drops from between its leaves and flutters to the ground. Lifting it, she sees it is the letter written by him to Dora, which the latter had brought to her, here to this very room, when asking her advice as to whether she should or should not meet him by appointment in the lime-walk.

She drops the letter hurriedly, as though its very touch stings her, and, rousing herself with bitter self-contempt from her sentimental regrets, works vigorously at her painting for about an hour, then, growing wearied, she flings her brushes aside, and goes to the morning-room, where she knows she will find all the others assembled.

There is nobody here just now however, except Sir Adrian, who is looking rather tired and bored, and Ethel Villiers. The latter, seeing Florence enter, gladly gathers up her work and runs away to have a turn in the garden with Captain Ringwood.

Florence, though sorry for this *tete-a-tete* that has been forced upon her, sits down calmly enough, and, taking up a book, prepares to read aloud to Sir Adrian.

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But he stops her. Putting out his hand, he quietly but firmly closes the book, and then says:

“Not to-day, Florence; I want to speak to you instead.”

“Anything you wish,” responds Florence steadily, though her heart is beating somewhat hastily.

“Are you sorry that—that my unhappy cousin proved so unworthy?” he asks at last, touching upon this subject with a good deal of nervousness. He can not forget that once she had loved this miserable man.

“One must naturally feel sorry that anything human could be guilty of such an awful intention,” she returns gently, but with the utmost unconcern.

Sir Adrian stares. Was he mistaken then? Did she never really care for the fellow, or is this some of what Mrs. Talbot had designated as Florence’s “slyness”? No, once for all he would not believe that the pure, sweet, true face looking so steadily into his could be guilty of anything underhand or base.

“It was false that you loved him then?” he questions, following out the train of his own thoughts rather than the meaning of her last words.

“That I loved Mr. Dynecourt!” she repeats in amazement, her color rising. “What an extraordinary idea to come into your head! No; if anything, I confess I felt for your cousin nothing but contempt and dislike.”

“Then, Florence, what has come between us?” he exclaims, seizing her hand. “You must have known that I loved you many weeks ago. Nay, long before last season came to a close; and then I believe—forgive my presumption—that you too loved me.”

“Your belief was a true one,” she returns calmly, tears standing in her beautiful eyes.

“But you, by your own act, severed us.”

“I did?”

“Yes. Nay, Sir Adrian, be as honest in your dealings with me as I am with you, and confess the truth.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” declares Adrian, in utter bewilderment; “you would tell me that you think it was some act of mine that—that ruined my chance with you?”

“You know it was”—reproachfully.

"I know nothing of the kind"—hotly. "I only know that I have always loved you and only you, and that I shall never love another."

"You forget—Dora Talbot!" says Florence, in a very low tone. "I think, Sir Adrian, your late coldness to her has been neither kind nor just."

"I have never been either colder or warmer to Dora Talbot than I have been to any other ordinary acquaintance of mine," returns Sir Adrian, with considerable excitement.

"There is surely a terrible mistake somewhere."

"Do you mean to tell me," says Florence, rising in her agitation, "that you never spoke of love to Dora?"

"Certainly I spoke of love—of my love for you," he declares vehemently. "That you should suppose I ever felt anything for Mrs. Talbot but the most ordinary friendship seems incredible to me. To you, and you alone, my heart has been given for many a day. Not the vaguest tenderness for any other woman has come between my thoughts and your image since first we met."

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"Yet there was your love-letter to her—I read it with my own eyes!" declares Florence faintly.

"I never wrote Mrs. Talbot a line in my life," says Sir Adrian, more and more puzzled.

"You will tell me next I did not see you kissing her hand in the lime-walk last September?" pursues Florence, flushing hotly with shame and indignation.

"You did not," he declares vehemently. "I swear it. Of what else are you going to accuse me? I never wrote to her, and I never kissed her hand."

"It is better for us to discuss this matter no longer," says Miss Delmaine, rising from her seat. "And for the future I can not—will not—read to you here in the morning. Let us make an end of this false friendship now at once and forever."

She moves toward the door as she speaks, but he, closely following, overtakes her, and, putting his back against the door, so bars her egress.

He has been forbidden exertion of any kind, and now this unusual excitement has brought a color to his wan cheeks and a brilliancy to his eyes. Both these changes in his appearance however only serve to betray the actual weakness to which, ever since his cruel imprisonment, he has been a victim.

Miss Delmaine's heart smites her. She would have reasoned with him, and entreated him to go back again to his lounge, but he interrupts her.

"Florence, do not leave me like this," he pleads in an impassioned tone. "You are laboring under a delusion. Awake from this dream, I implore you, and see things as they really are."

"I am awake, and I do see things as they are," she replies sadly.

"My darling, who can have poisoned your mind against me?" he asks, in deep agitation.

At this moment, as if in answer to his question, the door leading into the conservatory at the other side of the room is pushed open, and Dora Talbot enters.

"Ah, here is Mrs. Talbot," exclaims Sir Adrian eagerly; "she will exonerate me!"

He speaks with such full assurance of being able to bring Dora forward as a witness in his defense that Florence, for the first time, feels a strong doubt thrown upon the belief she has formed of his being a monster of fickleness.

"What is it I can do for you?" asks Dora, in some confusion. Of late she has grown very shy of being alone with either him or Florence.



“You will tell Miss Delmaine,” replies Adrian quickly, “that I never wrote you a letter, and that I certainly did not—you will forgive my even mentioning this extraordinary supposition, I hope, Mrs. Talbot—kiss your hand one day in September in the lime-walk.”

Dora turns first hot and then cold, first crimson and then deadly pale. So it is all out now, and she is on her trial. She feels like the veriest criminal brought to the bar of justice. Shall she promptly deny everything, or—No. She has had enough of deceit and intrigue. Whatever it costs her, she will now be brave and true, and confess all.

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"I do tell her so," she says, in a low tone, but yet firmly. "I never received a letter from you, and you never kissed my hand."

"Dora!" cries Florence. "What are you saying! Have you forgotten all that is past?"

"Spare me!" entreats Dora hoarsely. "In an hour, if you will come to my room, I will explain all, and you can then spurn me, and put me outside the pale of your friendship if you will, and as I well deserve. But, for the present, accept my assurance that no love passages ever occurred between me and Sir Adrian, and that I am fully persuaded his heart has been given to you alone ever since your first meeting."

"Florence, you believe her?" questions Sir Adrian beseechingly. "It is all true what she has said. I love you devotedly. If you will not marry me, no other woman shall ever be my wife. My beloved, take pity on me!"

"Trust in him, give yourself freely to him without fear," urges Dora, with a sob. "He is altogether worthy of you." So saying, she escapes from the room, and goes up the stairs to her own apartment weeping bitterly.

"Is there any hope for me?" asks Sir Adrian of Florence when they are again alone. "Darling, answer me, do, you—can you love me?"

"I have loved you always—always," replies Florence in a broken voice. "But I thought—I feared—oh, how much I have suffered!"

"Never mind that now," rejoins Sir Adrian very tenderly. He has placed his arm round her, and her head is resting in happy contentment upon his breast. "For the future, my dearest, you shall know neither fear nor suffering if I can prevent it."

\* \* \* \* \*

They are still murmuring tender words of love to each other, though a good half hour has gone by, when a noise as of coming footsteps in the conservatory attracts their attention, and presently Captain Ringwood, with his arm round Ethel Villiers's waist, comes slowly into view.

Totally unaware that any one is in the room besides themselves, they advance, until, happening to lift their eyes, they suddenly become aware that their host and Miss Delmaine are regarding them with mingled glances of surprise and amusement. Instantly they start asunder.

"It is—that is—you see—Ethel, *you* explain," stammers Captain Ringwood confusedly.

At this both Sir Adrian and Florence burst out laughing so merrily and so heartily that all constraint comes to an end, and finally Ethel and Ringwood, joining in the merriment that has been raised at their expense, volunteer a full explanation.

"I think," says Ethel, after awhile, looking keenly at Florence and her host, "you two look just as guilty as we do. Don't they, George?"

"They seem very nearly as happy, at all events," agrees Ringwood, who, now that he has confessed to his having just been accepted by Ethel Villiers "for better for worse," is again in his usual gay spirits.



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"Nearly? you might say quite," says Sir Adrian, laughing. "Florence, as we have discovered their secret, I think it will be only honest of us to tell them ours."

Florence blushes and glances rather shyly at Ethel.

"I know it," cries that young lady, clapping her hands. "You are going to marry Sir Adrian, Florence, and he is going to marry you!"

At this they all laugh.

"Well, one of those surmises could hardly come off without the other," observes Ringwood, with a smile. "So your second guess was a pretty safe one. If she is right, old man"—turning to Sir Adrian—"I congratulate you both with all my heart."

"Yes, she is quite right," responds Sir Adrian, directing a glance full of ardent love upon Florence. "What should I do with the life she restored to me unless I devoted it to her service?"

"You see, he is marrying me only out of gratitude," says Florence, smiling archly, but large tears of joy and gladness sparkle in her lovely eyes.

## CHAPTER XIII.

When Florence finds her way, at the expiration of the hour, to Dora's room, she discovers that fair little widow dissolved in tears, and indeed sorely perplexed and shamed. The sight of Florence only seems to render her grief more poignant, and when her cousin, putting her arm round her, tries to console her, she only responds to the caress by flinging herself upon her knees, and praying her to forgive her.

And then the whole truth comes out. All the petty, mean, underhand actions, all the cruel lies, all the carefully spoken innuendoes, all the false reports are brought into the light and laid bare to the horrified eyes of Florence.

Dora's confession is thorough and complete in every sense. Not in any way does she seek to shield herself, or palliate her own share in the deception practiced upon the unconscious girl now regarding her with looks of amazement and deep sorrow, but in bitter silence.

When the wretched story is at an end, and Dora, rising to her feet, declares her intention of leaving England forever, Miss Delmaine stands like one turned into stone, and says no word either of censure or regret.

Dora, weeping violently, goes to the door, but, as her hand is raised to open it, the pressure upon the gentle heart of Florence is suddenly removed, and in a little gasping voice she bids her stay.

Dora remains quite still, her eyes bent upon the floor, waiting to hear her cousin's words of just condemnation; expecting only to hear the scathing words of scorn with which her cousin will bid her begone from her sight for evermore. But suddenly she feels two soft arms close around her, and Florence, bursting into tears, lays her head upon her shoulder.

"Oh, Dora, how could you do it!" she falters, and that is all. Never, either then or afterward, does another sentence of reproach pass her lips; and Dora, forgiven and taken back to her cousin's friendship, endeavors earnestly for the future to avoid such untruthful paths as had so nearly led her to her ruin.

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Sir Adrian, from the hour in which his dearest hopes were realized, recovers rapidly both his health and spirits; and soon a double wedding takes place, that makes pretty Ethel Villiers Ethel Ringwood and beautiful Florence Lady Dynecourt.

A winter spent abroad with his charming bride completely restores Sir Adrian to his former vigorous state, and, when spring is crowning all the land with her fair flowers, he returns to the castle with the intention of remaining there until the coming season demands their presence in town.

And now once again there is almost the same party brought together at Dynecourt. Old Lady FitzAlmont and Lady Gertrude are here again, and so are Captain and Mrs. Ringwood, both the gayest of the gay. Dora Talbot is here too, somewhat chastened and subdued both in manner and expression, a change so much for the better that she finds her list of lovers to be longer now than in the days of yore.

It is an exquisite, balmy day in early April. The sun is shining hotly without, drinking up greedily the gentle shower that fell half an hour ago. The guests, who with their host and hostess have been wandering idly through the grounds, decide to go in-doors.

"It was on a day like this, though in the autumn, that we first missed Sir Adrian," remarks some one in a half tone confidentially to some one else, but not so low that the baronet can not hear it.

"Yes," he says quickly, "and it was just over there"—pointing to a clump of shrubs near the hall door—"that I parted with that unfortunate cousin of mine."

Lady Dynecourt shudders, and draws closer to her husband.

"It was such a marvelous story," observes a pretty woman who was not at the castle last autumn, when what so nearly proved to be a tragedy was being enacted; "quite like a legend or a medieval romance. Dear Lady Dynecourt's finding him was such a happy finish to it. I must say I have always had the greatest veneration for those haunted chambers, so seldom to be found now in any house. Perhaps my regard for them is the stronger because I never saw one."

"No?" questioningly. "Will you come and see ours now?" says Sir Adrian readily.

His wife clasps his arm, and a pang contracts her brow.

"You are not frightened now, surely?" says Adrian, smiling at her very tenderly.

"Yes, I am," she responds promptly. "The very name of that awful room unnerves me. There is something evil in it, I believe. Do not go there."

“I’ll block it up forever if you wish it,” declares Sir Adrian; “but, for the last time, let me go and show its ghostly beauties to Lady Laughton. I confess, even after all that has happened, it possesses no terrors for me; it only reminds me of my unpleasant kinsman.”

“I wonder what became of him,” remarks Ringwood. “He’s at the other side of the world, I should imagine.”

“Out of our world, at all events,” says Ethel, indifferently.

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"Well, let us go," agrees Florence resignedly.

So together they all start once more for the old tower. As they reach the stone steps Sir Adrian says laughingly to Lady Laughton:

"Now, what do you expect to see? A ghost—a phantom? And in what shape, what guise?"

"A skeleton," answers Lady Laughton, returning his laugh; and with the words the door is pushed open, and they enter the room *en masse*.

The sunlight is stealing in through the narrow window holes and faintly lighting up the dismal room.

What is that in yonder corner, the very corner where Sir Adrian's almost lifeless body had been found? Is this a trick, a delusion of the brain? What is this thing huddled together, lying in a heap—a ghastly, ragged, filthy heap, before their terrified eyes? And why does this charnel-house smell infect their nostrils? They stagger. Even the strong men grow pale and faint, for there, before them, gaunt, awful, unmistakable, lies a skeleton!

Lady Laughton's jesting words have come true—a fleshless corpse indeed meets their stricken gaze!

Sir Adrian, having hurriedly asked one of the men of the party to remove Lady Dynecourt and her friends, he and Captain Ringwood proceed to examine the grewsome body that lies upon the floor; yet, though they profess to each other total ignorance of what it can be, there is in their hearts a miserable certainty that appalls them. Is this to be the end of the mystery? Truly had spoken Ethel Ringwood when she had alluded to Arthur Dynecourt as being "out of their world," for it is his remains they are bending over, as a few letters lying scattered about testify only too plainly.

Caught in the living grave he had destined for his cousin was Arthur Dynecourt on the night of Sir Adrian's release. The lamp had dropped from his hand in the first horror of his discovery that his victim had escaped him. Then followed the closing of the fatal lock and his insensibility.

On recovering from his swoon, he had no doubt endured a hundred-fold more tortures than had the innocent Sir Adrian, as his conscience must have been unceasingly racking and tearing him.

And not too soon either could the miserable end have come. Every pang he had designed for his victim was his. Not one was spared! Cold and hunger and the raging fever of thirst were his, and withal a hopelessness more intolerable than aught else—a hopelessness that must have grown in strength as the interminable days went by.



And then came death—an awful lingering death, whilst the loathsome rats had finished the work which starvation and death had begun, and now all that remained of Arthur Dynecourt was a heap of bones!

They hush the matter up well as they can, but it is many days before Florence or her husband, or any of their guests, forget the dreadful hour in which they discovered the unsightly remains of him who had been overtaken by a just and stern retribution.

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**THE END.**