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HEART TO HEART



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Heart To Heart

BY Ida Reade Allen

[Pg 1]

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HEART TO HEART;

OR,

A Race for Love

By IDA READE ALLEN

Author of "At Another's Bidding," "Beyond His Reach," "No Man's Wife," "Put to the Test," "Without Name or Wealth," and others.



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Heart to Heart

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HEART TO HEART.

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CHAPTER I.

A STARTLING ANNOUNCEMENT.

There was nothing in the appearance of that wedding day to indicate the tragedy so close at hand.

It was early springtime, with the glad sunshine filling the air, a warm breeze blowing, the sky without a cloud, and the birds singing merrily as they flitted among the trees before the door of the old, ivy-covered church—in short, a perfect day, and one calculated to expand the heart with good nature and hope.

All Lakeview was astir, that part especially which resolved itself into the social element, for at ten o'clock the church was to be the scene of the grandest wedding the neighborhood had ever witnessed—at least so whispered those who had the affair in charge. By half past nine the roadway about the church, which stood on a slight hill, became crowded with people, girls, and young ladies, especially, eager to note the arrival of guests, their costumes, their actions, and, in fact, everything relating to the great event.

In rapid succession four motor cars dashed up the gravel way and deposited six young men at [Pg 6]the church doors. They were the ushers—Ned Degroot, Ralph Gramercy, and four others, all well-known society fellows. They lost no time in hurrying inside of the edifice, for already was it time to look for the first arrivals.

"By Jove, Allen Chesterbrook is a lucky dog," was Degroot's remark to Gramercy. "I wouldn't mind being in his shoes myself."

"I've heard before that you were somewhat enamored of the belle of the set," laughed Gramercy. "Well, certainly, Maud Willowby is a fine catch," he added meditatively. "A beauty in a thousand, as the novelists might say. Yet she would not suit me."

"And why?" questioned Degroot, in brusque tones. He did not fancy this statement, coupled with the first his friend had made.

"Ah! that's a hard one to answer, Ned. Briefly, let me say, I have found her warmth rather artificial and her apparent interest in what was afoot far from real. To me she appears to lead a double life—her real self and the one she assumes for the occasion."

"Oh, bosh!" retorted Degroot. "Really, Ralph, you are getting too cynical altogether of late."

"Perhaps I am," returned Gramercy, without losing his composure. "But you asked for an explanation, and that is the best I can give you."

"Well, if what you say has any truth in it," went on Degroot, as if to change the subject, "certainly the man she is about to marry is even less free from faults—in a way."

"You do well to say 'in a way,' Ned. Taken [Pg 7]as a whole, there is not a more kind, generous-hearted fellow than Allen Chesterbrook in the whole neighborhood of the lake."

"And no fellow who is so given to moods, who changes his mind so often, who moves in so many strata of society at once, who is so unstudied in his actions, or, I might rather say, indifferent to what people may say or think of his doings."

"I take it he lives on the principle that as long as he does right, he can do as he pleases. I prefer his openness to the style Maud adopts, which I have just mentioned."

"I differ with you; and, let me add, privately, that I cannot understand how it is that Maud has accepted him."

"Humph! Let me say, just as privately, Ned, I believe Maud is responsible for the present state of affairs. She wanted him more than he wanted her—or any one. Allen Chesterbrook is not altogether the kind of man that marries and settles down."

"Oh, pshaw, what nonsense! Why should she run after him, when she could have the pick of the set? There is Langdon and Sivater and Henry Cross, and—"

"Yourself," finished Gramercy, and slapped his friend on the shoulder. "But you are not Allen Chesterbrook, with his hundreds of thousands and brilliant prospects."

"I don't believe she's marrying for money!" and now Degroot was more than half angry.
"Colonel Willowby is well fixed."

"To all outward appearances," finished Gramercy, [Pg 8]in a manner that suggested he could say a good deal more on the subject if he chose.

"He is well fixed; I found that out over a year ago," insisted Degroot. "And he can place Maud as high as he pleases, and himself, too, as full of pride as he is."

There was no time to say more, even had they wished to do so. Several automobiles had driven up a few seconds before, and now a dozen or more people appeared, and all of the ushers hurried off to escort the ladies to their seats. Gradually at first, and then faster, as the time grew shorter, the church began to fill up.

The sunshine, stealing through the tall, many-colored windows, never lit up a brighter scene. The fairest and best of Lakeview's society, with a sprinkling from New York, Philadelphia, and Boston, were there; rich dresses of silk and velvet and satin rustled everywhere, and diamonds and other precious stones sparkled over all. Never had the old house of worship gazed upon a grander picture—never had nature and art so belied themselves in putting on this garb of joy, which was destined to be drawn aside only to reveal a mocking tragedy full of bitterness and long-lasting woe.

Presently an extra stir at the vestry door announced the arrival of Stella Barry, the bridesmaid, and Walter Gardener, the best man. They hurried into the room, and in a moment were ready for their momentous, yet delightful, task of leading the procession up the main aisle of the church.

"Five minutes to ten," remarked Gardener. "I wonder if Allen has arrived?"

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"Ask Ned Degroot or Harry Longley," requested Stella, who was more nervous than she cared to acknowledge. "He ought to be here by this time."

Word was sent out by the sexton's son. No, Allen Chesterbrook had not arrived, but he would be there on time, never fear.

The two in the vestry peeped out slyly at the large assemblage in the church. Stella made several remarks about this person and that, and then another machine dashed up, and out came, first Colonel Willowby, and then his only daughter, Maud.

True to his martial training, the colonel was exactly on time—not one minute too early or one minute too late. He was tall, slim, stately; evidently a gentleman of the old school. His hair was white, also his beard, yet he carried himself as if he were but thirty years of age instead of sixty-five.

The daughter, also tall and stately, looked much like her father. But while his eyes were gray, hers were of the deepest blue, and her hair was of fluffy gold. Her chin, too, was rounder than his, and her lips fuller and more lovable, although just now they were drawn tighter than usual.

"What a crowd, papa!" she whispered, as though she had but just noticed it, although they had been driving for fully a minute through a sea of upturned faces.

"Yes, Maud—all gathered to do us honor," smiled the proud father. "My arm, my dear," and, leaning upon him, she walked up the steps.

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It was Harry Longley who motioned them into the vestry room.

"We must wait a moment; the minister is not yet here," he whispered. "He went to call on old Mrs. Bidwell, who is seriously sick."

"And Allen, is he here?" questioned the colonel, as he nodded pleasantly to Stella Barry and Walter Gardener.

"Allen will be on time," was Longley's reply.

"It is time now," returned the colonel curtly. Nothing provoked him so much as a delay.

Maud listened to the brief conversation, but said not a word. Indeed, when Longley attempted to utter some words of friendly assurance that all would go well, she turned away and looked out of a window.

The long clock on the wall struck the hour in slow, measured tones; struck it so sedately that she shivered, and pressed her lips together more tightly than ever to control her feelings.

Ten o'clock—the hour set for the ceremony—and neither the minister nor the bridegroom at hand. Surely something had gone wrong. But now a gentleman, in clerical black with a light top-coat, came rushing in, all out of breath. It was Doctor Parlington, the minister.

"So sorry for the delay, but I really couldn't get away from poor Mrs. Bidwell, who, I fear, is dying!" he exclaimed, as he rushed up to the colonel and grasped his hand. "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. What a delightful day for the marriage! I will be ready in half a minute," and he started for his private room.

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"There is no need to hurry, doctor," returned the colonel, a trifle sharply. "Mr. Chesterbrook has not yet arrived."

"Ah!" Doctor Parlington was about to say more, but suddenly stopped. "No doubt he will be here by the time I am prepared," he went on, after an awkward pause.

He disappeared, closing a little door behind him. Hardly had he done so when Ned Degroot rushed from the main church into the vestry room. His face was ashen, and it was with difficulty that he brought himself to speak.

"Maud—Colonel—Allen has been—that is—" He stopped short and gazed helplessly at the crowd before him, then caught Walter Gardener by the arm. "You tell them, Walter; I cannot!" he whispered hoarsely. "Tell them Allen can't come—he—he has been murdered!"

"Murdered!"

Who uttered the cry none of the others could afterward tell. In a moment intense excitement prevailed, as the news spread like wildfire throughout the vast assemblage of people. Men and women started from their seats, and ran hither and thither to ascertain if such a horrible calamity could be true.

And in the vestry room, like a marble statue, so set and grim, stood Colonel Willowby, with Maud folded to his breast. Not a sound escaped the young woman's lips, nor did she move hand or foot. To those standing around it was as if the seal of death had set itself on her heart.

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CHAPTER II.

A DAGGER WOUND.

In the lower hallway of the Rosemore, as the house in which Allen Chesterbrook had his bachelor apartments was called, stood Jimmie Neirney, the young man's faithful valet, but a brief half hour before. Jimmie had just returned from a trip to the post office, where he had deposited several letters, all for his master, saving one, which he himself had written to his sweetheart in Saratoga Springs.

Jimmie's face was not very cheerful just then, in spite of the fact that his master had given him notice of a two weeks' vacation, with no pay to be lost; said vacation to take place while Allen and his bride were off on their honeymoon.

"Locked out of his room fer th' first time in me life!" he murmured to himself. "An' me that willin' to do me best fer him, a-cleanin' up his boots an' a-brushin' of his clothes! Well, if he don't look his very best on this, his weddin' day, divil a bit is it my fault. Says he to me, says he: 'Jimmie, I want to be entirely alone this mornin'; don't disturb me unless it's very important.' An' when I axed about the juries to be done, he says, says he, he would do them all himself. Now, what do he be a-wantin' to keep me for if not to do th' work?"

There was no consolation in remaining in the [Pg 13]wide, empty hall, with no one to console with, so, with a heavy sigh, Jimmie turned to the back stairs to go down into the janitor's half-public sitting room, to talk it over with Jackson. He had just reached the stairs, when a slight rustle beside him caused him to turn, and he caught a brief view of a veiled lady as she passed hurriedly out the back door and down into the yard among the clothes hung up to dry.

Being filled with his grievances Jimmie gave no thought to the woman he had seen; indeed, he had almost forgotten her by the time he reached the sitting room below. He found Jackson there looking over a number of bills to be sent to the owner of the premises for payment.

"Hello, Jimmie! Why ain't you upstairs helping Mr. Chesterbrook?" cried Jackson cheerily; and Jimmie at once began his tale of woe, cut short in the middle by the sound of an automobile engine, as the finest turn-out in Lakeview drove up to the curb.

"Humph! Only twenty minutes to ten!" sniffed Jimmie, as he consulted his big silver watch. "Larkins will have to wait ten minutes. Mr. Chesterbrook said he would not leave till ten minutes of ten, an' I can tell you he is particular this mornin', so he is!" and again Jimmie sighed.

The valet went outside, and a short discussion took place between him and the chauffeur. Then Jimmie entered the house again, by the hallway, and walked slowly upstairs, looking at his watch once more as he went. It was twelve minutes to ten.

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Allen Chesterbrook occupied two rooms on the second floor, one room facing the street and the other directly behind it. The second room was that in which Chesterbrook slept, and it was upon the door of this that Jimmie knocked. He waited for a summons to enter, but none came. Then he rapped again. Still the silence continued. Thinking his master might be in the front room, he walked to the other door and knocked. As the silence continued he grew alarmed.

"Mr. Chesterbrook, the car is waiting!"

No reply was vouchsafed to this announcement, and now the man began to bang on the door with all the strength of his big knuckles.

While he was knocking, a gentleman came down from the floor above. He was rather young in appearance, faultlessly dressed, and wore a bright buttonhole bouquet.

"Locked out, Jimmie?" he queried, with a smile.

"I can't git no reply from Mr. Chesterbrook, sir. I've been a-thumpin' like mad for siveral minutes, too."

"I heard you. I suppose he has already gone. It is time. I am late, too."

"Gone, sir! Why, his automobile is waitin' below, sir, an' has been these tin minutes!"

"And you are certain he has not gone?"

"Sure, sir. Isn't Jackson watchin' downstairs for him, to give him his best wishes?"

"Then something must be wrong. Have you a key to either door?"

"Yes, sir; here it is."

The man of all work produced the key as he [Pg 15]spoke. But it could not be used, for both doors already held keys on the inner side.

"We can't use them, Mr. Cross."

"Perhaps we had better force open one of the doors," replied Henry Cross, with quick decision.
"He must be inside, or how could the doors be locked in this way?"

Pocketing the gloves he had started to put on, the young man put his broad shoulders to the rear door. It creaked several times, and then burst open with a crash that brought Jackson and several others to the scene in quick order.

The little party paused on the threshold. By the bright light which streamed in from the room in front they saw that everything was in disorder—chairs overturned, bureau drawers drawn out, and their contents scattered, and that numerous articles of bric-a-brac from the stand in the corner had been knocked down and crushed under foot.

"There he is! Merciful saints preserve us!"

It was Jimmie who uttered the shrill cry of horror, as with trembling finger he pointed to a spot between the bed and a closet. All eyes followed the direction indicated by the man's pointing finger, and there beheld a sight that was enough to make the stoutest heart quail.

Allen Chesterbrook lay there, flat on his back, with a dagger thrust through his heart.

The face of the handsome, gifted young man was distorted with pain, and his hands were clenched so tightly that the nails were imbedded in the flesh. He was dressed in his favorite morning suit, a mixed brown, and this was saturated with his life's blood, [Pg 16]which had run down the side and soaked into the carpet and the white fleece rug partly under his back.

Nevermore would his friends hear his happy, cheery voice; nevermore would those he had helped in a hundred ways receive his aid. There he lay, stone dead, at the time he should have been on his way to his wedding.

It was Henry Cross who first sprang forward and caught hold of that cold, stiffening hand. One touch was enough.

"He is dead," was all he said, and his voice sounded strangely unnatural.

"Dead, dead!" wailed Jimmie Neirney. "Stabbed with a dagger, too! Oh, who could have done this devil's own work! Who do you think did it, Mr. Cross?"

"I can't say. I am too astounded to think. Run for a doctor—but, no; that is useless. It is the coroner who is wanted here."

"An' the weddin' to come off!" cried Jackson. "What will Maud Willowby say to this?"

Henry Cross gasped at the last words. His face paled and he staggered back.

"Somebody must hasten to the church with the news," he faltered. "I—cannot go. Quick! I will remain here till the coroner or the police come."

"I'll go!" said a man in the crowd, and disappeared on a run. He spread the news as he went, and soon all of the residents of Lakeview knew of the mysterious tragedy which had been enacted within their very midst.

"Open all of the windows wide, Jimmie," said [Pg 17]Henry Cross, a second later. "And Jackson, keep out the crowd; the coroner and the detectives must have full sway here first. It looks like robbery as well as murder."

Almost beside himself with grief and terror, Jimmie stumbled into the front room to do as he was bidden. Jackson, who had come up and placed his hand on the dead man's chest, only to snatch it away when it came in contact with blood, stalked over to the door and closed it in the face of the gathering crowd.

"The authorities must come in here first!" he exclaimed, with a sudden show of command, for the situation made him feel his importance even at that chilling time.

As Henry Cross knelt by the side of the corpse, his eyes fell upon the bouquet in the buttonhole of his coat. A sudden feeling of the unfitness of the decoration at such a time seized him, and, wrenching the bouquet loose, he cast it on the floor. It fell into a pool of blood, and the white carnations became red. Made sick by the sight, he sprang up and stepped into the front room, where Jimmie was still at the window, parting the curtains and pulling the sashes down from the top.

At one side of the front room stood a flat-top writing desk, where Allen Chesterbrook had been wont to write his letters and occasionally to transact business, for he was erratic in his habits and had seldom spent a whole day at his office.

On the top of the desk lay several sheets of paper, unmarked in any way. But on the leather seat of the chair before it rested half a sheet filled with [Pg 18]writing. Almost mechanically, Henry Cross picked up this part of a sheet and began to peruse it.

Hardly had he read three lines when he became deeply interested. He read on to the end, and then looked about for the remainder of the sheet, but it could not be found. Into his pocket he thrust the slip he held, and turned once more toward the body, and now his face bore a mingled look of sorrow and contempt.

"The coward!" he half whispered to himself. "And to think she loved him!"

For fully ten seconds he stood gazing at the corpse before him. Then he pressed his hand to his forehead and a look of deep perplexity came over his features. He walked again toward the desk, took from his pocket the slip he had picked up, and thrust it under the loose sheets of paper.

"The world ought to know the truth. If it does not, some innocent person may suffer," he went on, almost inaudibly.

"Did you speak, Mr. Cross?" questioned Jimmie, and Henry Cross started as though a gun had gone off beside his ear.

"Me? I—why, no, Jimmie," he stammered. "Look out of one of the windows and see if the coroner is coming yet," he went on.

"Here comes Mr. Granby, sir, with a policeman."

"Mr. Granby is the coroner."

"Sure an' what will he do wid poor Mr. Chesterbrook?"

"I do not know—I never saw anything like this before," returned Henry Cross. "Poor Maud!" he murmured as he turned away.

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CHAPTER III.

THE CORONER'S INQUEST.

A moment later the coroner came in, accompanied by the policeman and another gentleman, who afterward proved to be a detective. The coroner was about to admit into the room half a dozen friends, but the detective stopped him.

"Too many here already," he whispered. "Wait until we have made an examination of the premises, otherwise valuable clews may be destroyed."

"It shall be as you say, Mr. Hull," returned Granby. "You have had great experience in this sort of work, while this is only the second murder case I have had, although I have been coroner eight years."

"I will show you how to proceed, Mr. Granby," returned Jack Hull. "You may virtually leave matters entirely in my hands."

James Granby nodded and looked relieved. He was a short, stout man, accustomed to take life easy, and he had a perfect horror of the duty before him.

"The man is dead, beyond a doubt," went on Jack Hull. "Who found him so?" he asked, turning to the others.

"I saw him first," replied Jimmie. "Mr. Cross broke down the dure and we came in—him an' Jackson an' meself—and I saw him just where he is now."

"And he was dead?"

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"Quite dead," returned Henry Cross quietly.

"You felt his pulse?"

"Yes, I made a close examination. But his body is not yet cold. I do not believe he has been dead long."

Jack Hull stepped forward at once and made an examination. Then he whispered to the coroner, after which he drew from the dead man's breast the dagger and laid it on a newspaper, so that the blood might not soil another spot.

"It looks like robbery and murder," observed the coroner, feeling it his duty to say something.

Jack Hull nodded. Then he glanced about the apartment, observing every detail with a keen, professional eye. Henry Cross watched him curiously, and Jimmie and Jackson looked on with mouths wide open, as if half expecting him to announce the solution of the mystery then and there.

"If we had some one here who knew something of the dead man's possessions, we might ascertain if a robbery has been really committed," said Hull, after several minutes of oppressive silence.

"Jimmie is his man, sir," said Jackson, eager to have the chance of speaking. "He ought to know."

The detective bent his coal-black eyes on the valet. The look was so sharp and aggressive that Jimmie shivered, and for the instant was in danger of mental collapse, through fear of being thought the murderer.

"You are Mr. Chesterbrook's valet?"

"Yis, sir."

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"Then you know something about his personal property—jewelry and the like?"

"Sure, sir, I know all he had, for it was meself had to put th' things away many a time when he was so careless as to leave 'em around."

"He was careless, was he? Left his valuables lying in sight of outsiders?"

"Often, sir. More than once he left the room dures open, wid his diamond studs an' other things right out on the table an' bureau."

"Ah!" Jack Hull looked suddenly wise.

"Then some one must have come in here to rob him, been seen, and the thief, to prevent capture, killed poor Chesterbrook," interrupted James Granby, with a look on his round face as if he had suddenly solved the problem.

"Not so fast, my dear sir," replied Jack Hull. "We must not jump at conclusions. Let us take account of the property first, and see if anything is missing. Will you name the principal things?" he added, turning to Jimmie.

The valet ran his hand through his thick, red hair and down the side of his smoothly shaven face, and drew up his under lip.

"He had two gold watches, sir, an' a silver one—an old one from his grandfather, so he told me. Then he had three diamond studs, a ruby an' a diamond ring, three badges, four gold watch chains an' a silver one to go with the silver watch, a gold pen, a silver inkstand, a silver cigar set Miss Willowby, poor soul! gave him, an'—an'—"

"That will do for the present. Just look about [Pg 22]and show me if all the articles are still here," said Hull.

With a long sigh Jimmie stepped up to the bureau and opened a case which was lying on the top, behind a large pincushion. The detective's face fell, for he saw at a glance that the majority of articles just mentioned were there. A watch, chain, and ring were missing, but these were on the corpse. The silver inkstand and cigar set were on the desk in the front room, and so was the gold pen.

"Humph!" was all Hull said. Then he turned to the coroner, and a brief conversation in a whisper was carried on.

In the meantime, Henry Cross walked slowly to the front room, and here stood gazing out of the window. Evidently he was carefully deliberating upon some serious matter. Twice he started to turn back, and each time hesitated. At last he walked toward the desk.

Here he again paused. Then, casting a hurried look over his shoulder, to make certain he was not observed, he slid his hand under the loose sheets before mentioned. His fingers came in

contact with the slip of paper which had before attracted his attention. He crushed the slip in his hand, withdrew his arm, and placed the closed hand in his side pocket.

"I will take another look around," Cross heard Hull say to the coroner, and he breathed a long sigh, but whether of relief or not it would be hard to state.

The detective began to search everywhere—the bedroom, the front room, the closet, the alcove. [Pg 23]He looked into the drawers of the desk, under the luxurious rugs scattered about, and shook the hanging curtains between the rooms. Then he turned his attention to the corpse, examined the position of the body, and calculated with his eyes how Chesterbrook must have stood when the dagger was thrust into his heart. Then he turned the dead man over on his side, to see if anything of importance lay under him.

"Ah!" he murmured, and his hand closed over a small object before any one else in the apartment saw it. He looked farther, but nothing else came to light.

The finding of the object seemed to put Jack Hull on a new train of reasoning. He left the body, and, dropping on his hands and knees, began to search along the carpet.

"Looking for footsteps?" asked the coroner.

"Yes," promptly returned the detective. He hunted around for a moment more, brushed his hand over several spots, and then arose to his feet.

"How did you come to burst in the door?" he suddenly asked, addressing Henry Cross.

"Jimmie was somewhat alarmed, because the doors were locked on the inside, and he could not arouse Chesterbrook."

"And he called you in?"

"No, I was coming downstairs. My rooms are just above these. I was on my way to poor Allen's wedding."

"Oh! And your rooms are just above?"

"Yes."

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"You had been in them the greater part of the morning?"

"No. I was down at my office early this morning and did not come home to dress for the occasion until about nine o'clock."

"While you were dressing, did you hear anything unusual going on down here?"

"I have been thinking that over. I believe I did hear the murmur of voices and a shock of some kind, but I am not sure, for I was paying no special attention."

"Was the shock like that of the fall of a body?"

"It might have been. Try my best, I really cannot remember."

Jack Hull was about to ask more questions; but he stopped in the middle of the first word, and turned to the coroner.

"Mr. Granby, I am ready for the inquest, if you are."

"Well—ah—all right," returned the official, rather lamely. "I presume we can hold it here—in the front room?"

Jack Hull nodded, and he smiled to himself. He was a personal friend of Granby, and he wondered why in the world the fellow wanted to remain coroner, seeing that he was little better than a figure-head.

The door of the front room was opened by the detective, and a score of respectable-looking men were admitted, including the coroner's clerk, another detective, and a doctor. The doctor, after consulting the coroner, at once proceeded to make an examination of the corpse; the clerk prepared [Pg 25]to take notes at the desk; and in a moment more the large front chamber took on something of the appearance of a courtroom.

The valet was the first witness to be questioned. He gave his full name readily, and said he had been in Allen Chesterbrook's employ for nearly six years.

"You are his personal servant," said the coroner. "Do you take care of his clothes?"

"Indeed I do, sir. Divil a bit of care would they git if I didn't!"

"Did you occasionally help him dress?"

"Most always, sir."

"Why were you not on hand this morning to help him—it being his wedding day?"

"He said he wanted no help, sir. He wanted to be left alone until tin minutes of tin. Then I was to call him—if the machine was there. He sent me off to the post office."

"To post some letters for him?"

"Yes, sir."

"To whom were those letters addressed?" put in Jack Hull, catching the coroner by the arm.

"I didn't look, sir," Jimmie drew himself up proudly. "It's not me business, sir."

"And when you came back from the post office, what did you do?" went on Coroner Granby.

"I went downstairs and talked to Jackson—the janitor there—till the car came. Then I came upstairs to call Mr. Chesterbrook. I thumped on the dure, but could git no answer. Then Mr. Cross came down, and he suggested we smash the dure in, an' we did it."

"And what did you find?"

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"Sure an' we found the rooms pretty much as they are now, sir, an' poor Mr. Chesterbrook a-lyin' there, dead, in his own precious blood." And Jimmie began to sob, while two big tears coursed down his honest face.

"You could not get in, because the doors were both locked on the inside?"

"They wur, sir," and Jimmie wiped the tears away with the back of his hand.

"The windows," whispered Jack Hull to the coroner.

"Yes. How did you find the windows when you came in?" questioned James Granby.

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Were they closed?"

"No, sir; one of them, that one, was open a bit. I opened it meself early this mornin'. Mr. Chesterbrook always liked the fresh air, even if it was a bit chilly."

"And the other was closed and locked?"

"It was closed, an' I think it was locked."

Jack Hull walked over to the window Jimmie had pointed out. It opened upon the roof of a broad piazza, which extended along the front of the house, and back to an addition on one side.

"Humph!" he said to himself. "Any one could easily get out of this window, and walk into one of the others—even a woman!"

The coroner was about to dismiss the valet, when Hull again whispered to him.

"Ah, yes. As far as you know, Neirney, did Mr. Chesterbrook expect any one to call on him this morning?"

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"No, sir. He was to meet all of his friends, an' them as was to take part in the weddin', at the church."

"Did he have any friends here last night?"

"Yes, sir. There was Mr. Longley an' Mr. Gardener. They came to talk over a few little points about the weddin' service."

"No other gentleman—or lady—called?"

"No other gentlemen, sir; an' as fer ladies, nary a one iver came near the rooms."

"Excepting the maid to clean up," laughed Hull shortly.

"No, sir; there isn't a girl in the house. It's men as does the work entirely. It's a bachelor's hall, out an' out."

"Ah!" said Jack Hull, but he said no more. He nodded to Granby, and Jimmie was allowed to retire.

Jackson was then asked to step up. He said he had been janitor of the building ever since Chesterbrook had occupied apartments there.

"Did you see any one visit him this morning?"

"No, sir."

"Did you see any strangers in the building?"

The janitor thought for a moment, and then replied in the negative.

"Who occupies the room next to this one—I mean the room next to that window?"

"No one, sir. It has been vacant for two months."

While the coroner had been asking the question Jack Hull had slipped out of the room. He now came back, smiling to himself. He had found the door of the room unlocked and the window partly [Pg 28]open. He whispered the fact to the coroner; and after a few more questions, which brought forth nothing of value, Jackson was dismissed.

"Henry Cross."

"Yes, sir."

"I believe you told me you occupy the rooms above these?"

"I do."

"You have occupied them for some time?"

"For eight months."

"Then you must know something about Mr. Chesterbrook. Perhaps you were friends?"

The face of Henry Cross paled a trifle, and then flushed up.

"We were well acquainted," he said quietly.

"You have already told me that you came home about nine o'clock, to dress for the wedding. Did you see any strangers about the building at that time?"

"Not to my recollection."

"You came home and went directly to your rooms?"

"I did."

"Do they extend over both of these rooms?"

"I think they do. They are exactly similar to these."

"Will you please state, so far as you are able, just what you heard in these rooms between nine o'clock and the time you burst open the door?"

"As I said before, I believe I heard the murmur of voices and some sort of shock, something like the falling of a heavy book."

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"You were on your way to church when you came downstairs?"

"Yes."

"This murder does not seem to have been committed for the purpose of robbery. Can you offer any suggestion concerning it?"

Henry Cross paused before replying. There was a faint tremor in his voice when he replied, a tremor Jack Hull noted.

"I cannot."

"You say you were well acquainted with Mr. Chesterbrook. Can you think of any private motive— —"

"No, sir."

"But you must have known something of his affairs?"

"I paid no attention to them," returned the young man, so sharply that the coroner started, and Jack Hull leaned forward with renewed interest.

"Do you mean to imply by that that you were not very friendly?"

"We were not friends at all, sir."

It was a surprise to all how calmly and deliberately Henry Cross uttered the words. He stood erect, his arms folded, gazing vacantly at a paper in the coroner's hands.

"And yet you were going to the wedding," went on Granby, after Jack Hull had whispered in his ear.

"I was. I had received an invitation from Colonel Willowby, and had promised his daughter I would be there."

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"Then you are on friendly terms with the Willowbys?"

"I am; we have been warm friends for years."

"But you did not—er—fancy Chesterbrook, and therefore paid but scant attention to his goings and comings," went on Coroner Granby, after considerable hesitation.

"We were not friendly. He was not a congenial companion, to my way of thinking. He went his way and I went mine, that was all. I feel sorry to speak thus of one who is now dead, but I feel bound to tell the truth."

Henry Cross cast down his eyes. But even as he did so, he felt that the penetrating optics of Jack Hull were on him, those eyes which were well calculated to frighten criminals into confessions of guilt.

The detective scribbled down a few words on a pad, and held them so that the coroner might read them.

"You never quarreled with him—had any high words with him?"

Henry Cross straightened up.

"We had some words once—at a ball last winter. But that matter was patched up soon after."

"What caused the quarrel?"

For one brief instant the young man's eyes flashed fire. Then they dropped, and when they were raised they looked as mild as before.

"I must decline to answer that question. It cannot possibly have any connection with the matter in hand," he said.

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CHAPTER IV.

"V. H."

Whatever sensation might have been produced by the refusal of Henry Cross to go into the particulars of his quarrel with Allen Chesterbrook was cut short by the entrance of Colonel Willowby, who came staggering into the apartment, looking years older than he had earlier in the morning.

"It is true, then!" he cried, gazing around at the assemblage. "Allen is really dead."

Before he could say more, Henry Cross sprang forward and caught him by the arm. He appeared to forget entirely that which had just been on his mind.

"Calm yourself, Colonel Willowby," he said, in tones of deepest sympathy. "Yes, it is true."

"Where is he? Where did they take his life?—the scoundrels!"

"He is lying in the back room. But you had better not see him, sir. It is a fearful sight, and the doctor is just making an examination."

"I must see the poor boy! They tell me he was stabbed through the heart. Who committed the atrocious deed?"

"They are trying now to discover the assassin," returned Henry Cross, as he turned his face away. "The coroner is now holding an inquest."

"An inquest! Are there no clews? Have they not set the police on the track?"

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"There are no clews for the police to follow," was the young man's reply, and he still kept his face averted.

But the colonel had already broken away from him and was advancing toward the back room, where Doctor Rathmore was on his knees, concluding the examination.

"Allen, poor Allen!" The colonel bent down beside the corpse and pressed the now stone-cold hand within his own. "Poor boy, and on his wedding day! My everlasting curse on the one who committed this foul deed!"

The disengaged hand of the colonel went up as he uttered the malediction, and all present shuddered at its intensity. Henry Cross caught his breath, then his eyes filled with pity for that noble man who seemed so utterly broken.

"You had better go away," he whispered. "You can do no good here and—and perhaps Maud needs you."

"Yes, yes! Poor Maud! I took her home, and she has locked herself in her room, refusing admittance to every one. I must get a doctor for her, or the strain may result in brain fever or worse."

"Yes, I would secure a doctor. He must give her an opiate, or something to quiet her nerves. I can well imagine what a fearful shock it was."

"She did not seem to realize it at all; that is the worst of it," returned the colonel brokenly. "Yes, I will go for the doctor, now that I know her affianced is dead. I had a faint hope it was not so—that he might be only wounded or hurt." Colonel Willowby, with haggard face and bent form, [Pg 33]moved in an uncertain way out of the room and was assisted down the stairs by Jackson, lest he fall and add another tragedy to that on hand.

As soon as the colonel had disappeared, Coroner Granby called up the doctor.

"You have examined the dead body, doctor?"

"I have made a thorough examination, and the cause of death is evident enough."

"What is your finding?"

"Mr. Chesterbrook was stabbed in the heart with some sharp-pointed instrument, which entered the left lower chamber, close to the aorta, the principal artery. That is why the flow of blood is so abundant."

"Then death was instantaneous?"

"Practically so. I find also a severe contusion on the back of the head, which tends to show that Mr. Chesterbrook, when stabbed, fell backward at full length."

"Was the blow a direct one?"

"No, it was slanting, and the instrument, which I am told was that dagger beside you, slipped slightly over the bony structure covering the spot."

"What is your opinion of the manner in which Mr. Chesterbrook was attacked?"

"To my mind, the person who struck the fatal blow must have stood a little to the left of his victim and thrust the dagger either over or under Mr. Chesterbrook's left arm."

"There are no other marks on the body?"

"None whatever."

"Do you think Mr. Chesterbrook was in good health when he died?"

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"I do. There is not the slightest trace of disease about the corpse."

"That is all for the present."

Coroner Granby looked up at the crowd, which now filled both the front room and the hallway beyond.

"Is there any one else present who would like to testify in this matter?" he called out loudly.

A deathlike silence followed. Many knew Chesterbrook, some were his personal friends; yet not one had a word to say that might tend toward a solution of the fearful mystery which surrounded his death.

"Inquest closed for the present," called out the clerk, a moment later; and then a buzz of conversation followed.

When the clerk had made his announcement, Henry Cross forced his way through the crowd and up the stairs to his own apartment. Many gazed after him curiously, and more than one murmured comment was made over the way he had concluded his testimony.

The doors to his rooms were locked, but he quickly unlocked the nearest and entered the apartment. He drew a long and deep sigh when alone, and flung himself wearily into an easy-chair.

Below he could hear the crowd moving about. He knew that Chesterbrook had a number of relatives at hand who would act with the coroner in taking charge of the body and the dead man's effects.

For a long time Henry Cross sat still, not moving a muscle, his gaze resting fixedly upon the wall [Pg 35]paper on the opposite side of the room. Had he done right or wrong in appropriating that bit of paper which would reveal the ghastly truth of the mystery of the room below?

"How could she bear it," he murmured at last, "she and her proud father, if the world knew the truth—knew his unworthiness, his cowardice?"

He sprang up. The mental vision of that thing lying below oppressed him. He could not remain in the rooms. He tore off his wedding garments, donned more suitable attire, and set out for a walk; whither he knew not, nor did he care.

He met Jack Hull in the lower hallway, but neither spoke or looked at the other. Yet Hull did not let the young man escape unnoticed.

"He knows more than he cares to tell," he muttered. "But he is not my game, for all that."

In an inside pocket of his coat, still wrapped in the newspaper, Jack Hull carried the slender, sharp-pointed dagger which had so suddenly ended Allen Chesterbrook's career. Because of his friendship and knowing he could trust Hull, the coroner had allowed him to take it away for examination.

"A dagger and a hairpin!" murmured Jack Hull, as he walked thoughtfully toward the hotel at which he was stopping for the summer. "A dagger and a hairpin, and a case tumbling into my hands when I anticipated a holiday. I wonder what I can make of them?"

The hotel reached, the detective, who in his career had unraveled so many mysteries of half a dozen large cities, went directly to his room. The door was locked, off came his coat—for it was now [Pg 36]two o'clock in the afternoon, and quite warm—and he lighted one of his favorite imported cigars. Then up and down he strode, from the door to the farthest window, his hands clasped behind him, and great clouds of smoke filling the upper portion of the room. The thicker the clouds the clearer became his thoughts.

"A woman—a woman with reddish-gold hair, by the specimens I raked from the carpet," he murmured; "a golden-haired woman who uses crinkled hairpins. Now, who is she?"

He stopped short and placed his hand in his vest pocket. They were still there—the half dozen threads of long hair and the hairpin he had picked up directly under the dead man's body. He took them to the light, turned them over, smelled them, and finally submitted them to a microscopic test. He looked disappointed.

"Humph! Nothing unusual about them, saving that both have some sweet scent on them. Perhaps a druggist could name the perfume, but it's doubtful. Now the dagger."

He put the hairs and the hairpin away and unrolled the newspaper, covered in blotches with Allen Chesterbrook's lifeblood. He carefully wiped the shining blade, but did not wash it. Water might obliterate a clew which would be priceless.

At the inquest the coroner had looked at the blade with some care, but had found nothing about it to distinguish its owner. The blade was long, sharp, of polished steel, the handle slightly thicker, and covered with a curious sort of basket work, done in silver and bronze.

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He closely examined the dagger from end to end, going over every inch of the surface as an engraver goes over a steel plate when giving it the finishing touches. The blade revealed nothing saving a slight dent and several scratches. Then came the hilt.

A few seconds later Jack Hull's eyes brightened, and his mouth took on the semblance of a smile. He rubbed a portion of the basket work over the palm of his hand and looked again. There was no mistake; there were the initials—"V. H."

"V. H." He made a record of the letters in a notebook. Then he continued his examination. But there was nothing further to be learned.

"If I am right this ought to be plain sailing," he said to himself. "A golden-haired woman, who wears crinkled hairpins, and whose initials are V. H. If there is such a person, it ought not to take long to discover her and her relation to Allen Chesterbrook. I'll take a walk and make a few passing inquiries."

Jack Hull never lost time. It was a matter of record that he had once worked for sixty-eight consecutive hours on a murder case in New York, and at the conclusion brought the criminal to the station house himself. He had slept for sixteen hours afterward, and awakened to find himself famous.

He put the dagger out of sight, donned a different suit of clothes and a different hat, and sallied forth. Only those who had noticed him very particularly remembered him as the man who had sat by Coroner Granby's side during the hearing. Excepting [Pg 38]those searching black eyes, he was an individual whose general appearance would attract scant attention.

In the barroom of the hotel Jack Hull fancied he might gain what he called a pointer. He walked in, called for a pony of brandy, and stood at the end of the long, polished bar while he looked at the beverage critically before tossing it off and lighting another cigar.

Besides the barkeeper, four men were present. One, a short, stout fellow, dressed in a checkered suit, and with a heavy watch chain dangling over his distended vest, was talking to the barkeeper about the merits of several race horses and their chances at the coming meet at the park. The three other men were lounging around a table in a corner, discussing the murder. The men were Ned Degroot, Ralph Gramercy, and Harry Longley. They had hastened from the church in time to hear the conclusion of the inquest, and, after viewing the body, had sauntered over to the hotel, at Degroot's invitation, to have something and discuss the sad event.

"Yes, it knocked me endways," Longley was saying. "That whole church full of people, and to have such news as that bawled out at the door! It knocked any stage business I ever witnessed."

"It's deucedly tough on poor Maud," remarked Degroot. "They say she was struck dumb. I wanted to go to her, but I had to look out for some other women who went into hysterics—Alice Tombley and Lil Keith."

"It was wonderful how Colonel Willowby stood [Pg 39]it, with poor Maud at his side," put in Gramercy. "Somehow, I really believe he felt it more than she did."

"Oh, nonsense. Maud doesn't carry her heart on her sleeve, that's all," retorted Degroot, still her champion. "But you may be sure she felt it just the same; that is, if her heart wasn't completely stunned so she couldn't feel anything."

"I wonder what they'll do next?" asked Longley. "So far the authorities have been unable to shed the least light upon the mystery."

"Coroner Granby adjourned the inquest for the present, to give the detectives and the police a chance to investigate," said Degroot. "But I doubt their ability to solve the perplexing problem. It is my opinion that that murder was the work of a cunning hand. Why, think of it; the authorities haven't the first clew."

"They have a dagger."

"And that's a common weapon, with, perhaps, a thousand just like it in the world."

There was a brief silence, and Gramercy summoned the barkeeper. He took a cigar, and his two companions did likewise. Longley was just about to accept a light from Degroot when he paused, and pointed out of the window, through the open slats of the shutter.

"Who is that girl, Ned?" he asked. "I often see her on the street."

"Fascinated by the golden hair, are you?" laughed Degroot. "She is the stenographer and typewriter down in the Lakeview Land Improvement office."

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"She's a daisy, isn't she? What's her name, do you know?"

"No. But you can easily find out, if you're smitten, Harry," and Degroot winked his eye expressively.

"Her name is Violet Harding," answered Gramercy, as he followed Longley to a spot where both might get a better look at the person who was passing. "She has a very neat figure, I must say. I wonder how she takes the news?"

"Why, did she know Chesterbrook?" asked Longley, in surprise.

"In a way, I believe. It was Chesterbrook who got her the situation at the Land Improvement office when she came to Lakeview a couple of months ago."

The detective had disappeared. He had left the barroom, and was cautiously following the young lady with the golden hair.

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CHAPTER V.

THE TORN LETTER.

Henry Cross walked on until the edge of the lake was reached and the greater number of private cottages and hotels were left behind. He was in a turmoil of conflicting emotions, and it appeared to ease him somewhat to move along rapidly in the open air. He traversed a long stretch of sandy beach, gazed vacantly out upon the clear waters, which sparkled in the bright sunlight, and then suddenly seated himself upon a flat rock.

"I wouldn't do it out of regard for him," he muttered. "Why should I? He was no friend of mine; I believe he actually hated me as much as a man of his easy-going nature could hate anybody. But for Maud's sake, poor girl! It's a shame."

He arose, as if unable to bear his thoughts just then, and continued on his way. A hundred steps farther, and he came to a deep gully, where a mountain brook had cut its way down through brush and stones to the lake.

There was a bridge across the gully, but a man stood leaning on the hand rail; a sporty-looking city chap. Henry Cross at that moment was in no mood to encounter him, and he turned up the gully, and along a well-worn footpath which led to a country road, where there was a second bridge. He did not know that the eyes of the sporty-looking chap were on him until he was out of sight.

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By the time Cross reached the second bridge his thoughts had taken a new turn. He wondered how Maud Willowby was faring, how she would get along in the future, and what the outcome of the whole miserable affair would be.

"I will stop at the door, send in my message of sympathy, and ask for news. Perhaps old Aunty Motley can tell me something. The old colored woman has the whole run of the house, and she is very friendly to me."

He turned away from the gully, and now hurried along the road in the direction of the town. He passed several farmhouses, then half a dozen newly built country mansions, and finally came to a halt before the tall iron gate leading into the spacious grounds of the Willowby estate.

As if afraid to make a noise that might disturb the repose of the young lady who had but a few short hours before been so sorely afflicted, Henry Cross did not attempt to open the creaky iron gate. Instead he passed around to the drive-way, which stood open, and hurried up the gravel path to the side door of the great house, every blind of which was now tightly closed.

"Cross!"

The young man started slightly at being so unexpectedly addressed. He had hesitated at the side door, debating if he had not better, after all, go around to the front entrance, and make the call a formal one. He turned and beheld the colonel standing behind him. He had come up from the heart of the town by a short cut, which led to the rear garden.

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"Colonel Willowby!" The young man took his hand. "I trust you have somewhat recovered from the fearful shock you have sustained. I called to make inquiries concerning Miss Maud. If I can be of any assistance in this matter—"

The colonel uttered a groan, and followed it with a long, deep breath. He looked more bent and haggard than ever. Turning suddenly, he clutched Henry Cross' arm convulsively.

"Come into the library, Cross. Perhaps you can do something for me, if you will. I am fearfully upset. Come!"

The colonel staggered up the steps, unlocked a door, and led the way through a richly furnished hallway into his library. He motioned the young man to a chair and dropped wearily into another. He rang a bell, and presently an old colored woman appeared.

"Has the doctor come, Nancy?" he asked.

"Yes, sah. He's upstairs wid Miss Maud now."

"Thank Heaven. He understands her condition, and ought to be able to do something. I am helpless—I can do nothing. You may go."

The colored woman had glanced toward Henry Cross in some surprise. It had been many a day since she had seen him in that house. She bowed politely, and then withdrew.

"What doctor have you? Not the one at inquest?"

"Oh, no, no! We have Spriglehem, an old friend of the family. No, Maud must not speak with any one who has seen that ghastly sight. A description [Pg 44]of the unfortunate man, lying lifeless in his own gore, might drive her mad."

A dull pain filled Henry Cross' heart. She was suffering—and because of her love for another. But he closed his lips and made no sign. He had borne defeat and bitter agony of heart before; he would bear whatever came now.

"Yes, it is fearful!" went on the colonel, after a short silence. "I cannot as yet realize the sad blow myself."

"I imagine the best thing you can do is to take Maud on a long trip—to California or South America, for instance. It will do you both good."

"I cannot do it, Cross; that is one of the bad features of the case. I must remain here, and in New York."

"Surely your business can be placed in other hands, colonel. I know how attentive you usually are in such matters, but you owe it to yourself as well as to your daughter to try a change of scene."

Again Colonel Willowby groaned, deeper than before. He sprang up, his face livid with agony. He took a turn up and down the room and then faced Cross.

"I might as well tell you all, since it will be common property in a day or two," he said brokenly. "The death of Allen Chesterbrook has ruined me. I am a beggar."

"What!" and in his intense surprise Henry Cross leaped to his feet. "You surely do not mean that."

"I mean just that, nothing less. I am a beggar. All is gone—this house and grounds, my other real estate, my bonds, my honor." The colonel's voice [Pg 45]sank into a whisper. "I almost wish that I, too, were dead!"

Henry Cross stared at the man. Was he in a dream? What was the colonel saying? "A beggar!" he faltered.

"That word expresses my condition. Yes, a beggar!"

"But, but—how is this—how has Allen Chesterbrook brought you to this state?"

"I did not say he brought me to it. It is his death that has wrought all this woe, this misery that cannot be escaped. I will tell you all, but, perhaps, you do not care to hear. You cannot be interested in my private affairs."

"Excuse me, sir, but I am very much interested. And let me add, if I can help you in any way, I am at your service. I would certainly not see you and Maud in distress."

"But you—you are not like other men, Cross; I mean, you do not stand in the same relationship here as others would. I know something of the past—of your hopes—and of how they were shattered."

The young man straightened up with a flushed face.

"Let the past take care of itself, Colonel Willowby. I am speaking of the present. I am your friend and the friend of your daughter, and I am willing, nay, anxious, to assist you in your trouble, as far as lies in my power."

"Thank you for that assurance!" The colonel grasped his visitor's hand feverishly. "I wish——" he broke off. "Sit down and I will tell you all."

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The two took seats close together. For a few seconds only the sound of the clock on the old secretary in the corner could be heard. Then Colonel Willowby's voice arose in a half whisper, broken more than once by intense emotion.

"I do not know if you are aware that for some time past, for six months or more, I have been backing up the Lakeview Land Improvement Company. President Bixby is an old friend, and when he showed me the scheme by which it looked as if millions could easily be made, I went into it. At first I took only one-fifth of the shares, the par value of which amounted to fifty thousand dollars. Then I bought more of the shares from the Cresson estate, and, finally, Bixby and myself virtually carried the entire enterprise upon our shoulders alone.

"We made a number of improvements to Burr Point and around the cove, at a cost of quite a large sum. Then the Branders estate and the Cheeseborough were put in the market and we took them up, and also bought out the Snow Improvement Company, giving notes for all, for ninety days and six months. I indorsed the notes individually, thinking all would go well.

"Hardly had the notes been issued when suit was brought against us by the old Lakeview Real Estate Company, and all the property was involved in litigation. The matters have been in the courts for two months——"

"Yes, I know of this," interrupted Henry Cross. "It has bothered us slightly in buying up the right of way for the Riverhead Railroad."

"I suppose so. Well, to cut the story short, so [Pg 47]long as the matter is in litigation we can do nothing with the land. Yet the notes first issued have matured, and others will soon be due.

Bixby has no cash, and every effort to raise the sum has proven a failure. I have used up every dollar in lawyers' fees and in paying off the back debts.

"But up to ten o'clock this morning I was not alarmed. Allen had promised to help me; he was to indorse the new notes of the company before he and Maud started off on their wedding tour. He was willing to take any risk that was attached to the deal, feeling as Bixby and I do, that all would result well. Now the new notes will not be indorsed, the old company will push us to the wall—they have been hungry for a chance to get in on us—and the end is that we will be squeezed out of everything." The colonel gave a deep sigh. "Ah, it is hard, after one has worked so many years. I am no longer young—"

He broke off, and again silence fell, which Henry Cross interrupted by asking:

"For what amount are the new notes?"

"Sixty thousand dollars. That sum would tide us over, and extricate us from all permanent difficulties. I feel certain of it."

The young man's face fell. "Sixty thousand dollars! Could it not be made less?"

"I wanted to make it forty, but Allen said to make it sixty, and be sure. But even forty thousand, when a thing is in litigation—"

"If thirty thousand can help you, Colonel Willowby, the sum is at your service."

The old man stared at the speaker as if he had [Pg 48]not heard aright. The face of Henry Cross betrayed no excitement; indeed, he acted as if he had made but the commonest kind of a proposition.

"You will lend me thirty thousand—you!"

"Yes, colonel, gladly, if you think it will pull you through."

"But I did not know you had so much—that is, at command."

"By my uncle's death, last month, I received eighteen thousand dollars. I can raise the balance in various ways."

He did not state that he would be compelled to sell out almost his entire stock in the new Riverhead Railroad, something that was expected to pay big when once in operation.

"You are indeed a friend, Cross. Thirty thousand might do it; Bixby and I could, I think, manage to scrape up the rest somewhere. And we would be saved." Colonel Willowby breathed a sigh of relief as a drowning man might when drawn from the water. "But I did not expect it of you. No, not of you."

"That shows you did not know me," returned the young man, with a faint smile of pleasure.

"That is true, I did not know your worthiness, your generosity. Nor did Maud."

Henry Cross paled a trifle. He turned toward the window, where the light came in faintly through the closed shutters.

"Colonel," he said, turning back, "I wish to have your promise on one point, if I do this favor for you."

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"I grant it, Cross. I know you will not exact too much."

"Your daughter must not know of what I do."

"What, Maud! But—but—"

"I do not wish her to think I am currying favor—that I—I—"

"I understand you now, Cross. I would have understood before, but was thinking of my own affairs. But she ought to know what a noble young man you are."

"It is my wish that this matter shall not be mentioned to your daughter."

"Well, then, it shall be as you say. You do not know how you have relieved me! It was bad enough to have Allen murdered without having my poor daughter and myself turned out of our home as beggars."

Henry Cross caught at the word "murdered" and once again the color left his cheeks. He walked to the windows to make sure they were tightly closed, then to the door, which he opened to gaze out into the empty hallway.

"Colonel Willowby," he said, in a half whisper, "I have a secret on my mind that I must tell some one—tell you. Promise me that you will not disclose—or, no, you need promise nothing; you may do as you think best."

"I am willing to keep any secret you may intrust to me, Cross."

"It is not my secret, it is a dead man's—Allen Chesterbrook's."

"Allen's! What do you mean?"

"Hush; not so loud, or some one may overhear [Pg 50]you. It is a secret that must be kept, for your sake and for Maud's. The world must not know of this disgrace."

"But you talk in riddles. What is the secret? Out with it."

The colonel was all attention at once.

"Allen Chesterbrook was not the man you took him to be—honest, conscientious, willing to keep his word at any risk. He was a reckless trifler."

"Cross, what strange disclosure is this?"

"It is true, sir. And he was not murdered," the young man's voice sank still lower. "He committed suicide."

The secret that had been locked in Henry Cross' breast ever since he had picked up that bit of paper in front of the desk was out at last. No longer was the responsibility of keeping silent his alone.

"A suicide!" The colonel fairly choked over the word. "Never!"

"It is true, sir."

"You lie, you young—But, excuse me, Cross. No, no, not that!"

"It is a sad state of affairs, but, nevertheless, true. At the last moment he discovered that he had made a mistake in becoming engaged to your daughter, and rather than marry her, the coward—I can express it in no other term—took his own life."

"But the proof, man! Where is the proof?"

"I have it here. There is a slip of paper I found in his room. It is part of a letter he started to write to your daughter, and then tore up. It betrays the condition of his mind; it shows under what emotions he was laboring."

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"Give me the slip. Oh, if this is really true! But I remember now how cold he was when last I saw him. I fancied he had regretted his offer to aid me. Turn on the lights, my eyesight is none of the best now. Ah, it is his handwriting—I know that well! That will do; I can see it now."

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CHAPTER VI.

A MYSTERY WITHIN A MYSTERY.

Colonel Willowby read:

"Dear Miss Willowby: Even at this, the last moment, I feel it necessary to write to you, breaking off our engagement forever. You must know what pain this gives me; I would rather take my

very life. Sometimes I feel as if I must—but it cannot be otherwise. I know you love me, yet the love of a woman for a man is not alone enough to make those two people happy. You cannot imagine how much I regret that our wedding day is at hand—the mockery of it! Our wedding day, which will never be!

"You will be startled to learn that I—"

The rest was torn off. In fact, the slip itself was full of tears and creases, as if the writer had thought to entirely destroy the unfinished and unsent communication.

The colonel read the slip in silence. Then he reread the last line aloud: "You will be startled to learn that I—' He had some secret. The poor, miserable wretch!"

"It would seem so. If true, the secret died with him. It is enough to know that he committed suicide. He was just reckless enough for the deed."

The colonel shut his teeth hard. His former military experience had left no softness in his heart for the moral coward who would end his life rather [Pg 53]than confront his duty, stern as that duty might be. He glared at the paper, then crushed it in his palm and tossed it on the table. Fearing it might be forgotten and picked up by others, Henry Cross restored it to his pocket.

"It is a cold, unnatural letter for such a man as Chesterbrook to write," said Cross softly. "But, then, the condition of the room—all upset—"

"That was his work, to make it appear as if he had been murdered. If he did this for Maud's sake, it is the one commendable point in the entire miserable affair."

"I see! I see! I believe the detective said nothing was stolen."

"So far as Chesterbrook's valet could discover, not one cent's worth was taken."

"But if he upset the room for the purpose of deception, wouldn't he have gone further and thrown some money or jewels away to make the deception more complete?"

"A man on the point of suicide is not the man to take many things into consideration. The chances are that he became temporarily insane at the final moment—I fancy all suicides do—and, taking up the dagger, he plunged it into his heart just before the motor car drove up to take him to the church. His body was not quite cold when found."

Colonel Willowby shuddered. Apparently there was no escaping Henry Cross' skillful deductions. Yet he made one more effort.

"But the dagger; I never knew Allen to have such a weapon."

"He did have a dagger."

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"You are sure?"

"I am."

"I thought he and you were not good friends; as you were not friendly, you surely were not in his rooms——"

"Never, until this morning. I would not have lived in the same house, only the owner is my personal friend, and urged me to take the apartments."

"I understand something of the bitterness a young man in your position can feel, Cross. But let that pass. May I ask you where you saw him with his dagger? Was it the one used to-day?"

"I cannot say if it was the same. I had no opportunity or wish to examine the dagger he had when I saw him."

"And where did you see him?"

The young man was silent for a moment, evidently somewhat annoyed.

"If you must know, I saw him at the office of the Land Improvement Company."

"Our office!"

"Yes."

"And what was he doing with the dagger?"

"He was toying with it at a desk in the side office."

The colonel's face showed well his incredulity.

"And was he alone at the time?"

"No, he and that young lady were there together."

"You mean Miss Harding?"

"I believe that is her name. She is the regular typewriter."

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"That is Miss Harding. But what could they have been doing with the dagger?"

"That I cannot tell you. It was none of my business, and I only stopped for a second to look."

"How long ago was this?"

"Several weeks ago."

"Mr. Bixby was not around at the time?"

"No. It was after six o'clock in the evening, and I suppose he had gone home. One of the shades of the windows was down and the light over the desk was lighted. The light fell on the dagger as I was passing, and that made me halt."

The colonel was on his feet and moving slowly back and forth. Suddenly he halted and emitted a deep "Ah! It cannot be possible. And yet—" He stopped short. "Cross, this is a mystery within a mystery," he went on, aloud. "Do you know that Allen was the one to recommend Miss Harding to Bixby for that position?"

"I did not know."

"Yes. He was very anxious to obtain work for her in Lakeview. He told Bixby he had known her in New York, and could recommend her as a first-class stenographer, typewriter, and bookkeeper, and on the strength of his recommendation Bixby employed her."

"I see."

"Now, what were the two doing at the office so late in the evening?" asked the colonel, almost harshly.

"I cannot tell you, sir."

"The side office is a private one. That young woman has nothing to do in there."

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The colonel looked at his companion as if expecting him to speak, but for once Henry Cross remained silent. The silence continued, broken only by the monotonous tick of the clock. The colonel at last continued:

"Cross, you were not so blind as Maud and I; you saw more than we. Tell me what you know, what you think—everything. There is no use of hiding it. He is dead, and the truth can make no difference one way or the other."

The young man cleared his throat, started to speak twice, and stopped.

"I know nothing," he said finally.

"But what do you think?"

"What should I think, colonel?"

"Don't beat about the bush, Cross! Good heavens! things are bad enough now. I would rather have the truth than be in suspense. Unless you will be candid, I will make inquiries elsewhere."

"As I said, I know nothing, excepting that Chesterbrook and this Miss Harding were frequently together. That was not the first time I saw them at the office in the evening, and once I met them up the lake shore, seated in the moonlight on the rocks, and he—he—"

"Tell it all, man—all!"

"He was holding her hands. There, you have wrung the whole truth from me, and I did not mean to mention it, remembering he is dead."

The colonel put up his hands as if to ward off a blow.

"And this was the man Maud was willing to marry! The villain!"

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"Hush! We do not know if it was so bad. There may have been some reason—"

"Bah, Cross! You are young; you do not know the world as I do. I see it all. Didn't he say in his letter that Maud would be startled to learn something? Perhaps that young woman threatened him with exposure. She must have done so; and, fearing that she would betray him, he took his own cowardly way out of all trouble. And to think I nursed such a viper in my breast!—that I was willing to accept his financial assistance! It fills me with rage. If I had him here—"

"Remember, he is dead."

The old man stopped, and his anger subsided.

"Yes, he is dead—and, perhaps, we had better thank Heaven for it," he said. "My poor Maud!" and his eyes filled with tears.

"My advice would be to let the whole matter drop, so far as you are concerned. It will do no good to agitate it. Let the police think it was a murder. It is not likely they will discover the truth."

"I will do that. But that young woman? Supposing she comes forward with some claim against Allen's estate, for instance—"

"Let us hope she will not. She does not look like a young woman who is in the least crafty."

"Looks are often deceptive." Colonel Willowby paused and passed his hand over his forehead.

"But Maud must know the truth regarding Allen's death. She must not be left to grieve over such a man."

Henry Cross bowed.

"But my connection with the matter— —"

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"Shall remain a secret in my own breast, I give my word of honor."

Footsteps sounded in the hall, and a second later came a rap on the door. The colonel opened it to admit the doctor, who looked exceedingly grave.

"My daughter, doctor?" he asked the old man eagerly; and on the moment the discussion with Henry Cross was a thing of the past.

"She is resting quietly at last," returned the medical gentleman. "I have given her an opiate, and she must not be disturbed. I have also left some powders, and given directions to the colored woman concerning them. I will be here again in the morning."

"What do you think of her condition?"

"She is suffering from the shock; but she is young and healthy, and I have hopes she will soon overcome it." The doctor gazed at the colonel's haggard face. "You must take it easier, too, or you will be down."

"I can stand much, doctor. My friend, Mr. Cross, Doctor Spriglehem."

The two men shook hands, and a moment later the doctor passed out of the mansion. The colonel saw him to the door, and, when he returned to the library, he found Henry Cross also ready to take his departure.

Cross passed out of the gateway and on to the road in deep thought, his head bent and his hat pushed low on his forehead. He was wondering how Maud Willowby would receive the dreadful news her father had to impart. He paused to look back at the mansion, hunting out what he supposed [Pg 59] were the blinds to the windows of the girl's apartment.

"Excuse me, but will you tell me what house that is?"

The man who had asked the question had come up quite close to Cross. He was the sporty-looking fellow who had stood on the bridge near the lake; but the young man did not recognize him.

"That house?"

"Yes. Who lives there?"

"Colonel Willowby."

"That's the father of the young lady who was going to be married, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. Kind of curious, that's all. So much excitement."

As the questioning was distasteful to Cross, he moved on, and the sporty-looking fellow was soon left behind.

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CHAPTER VII.

ON THE BLUFF.

On the following day Coroner Granby, having deliberated long upon the matter, summoned a jury of twelve men to look into the case.

"I don't want the responsibility on my shoulders alone," was the way he put it, and his friends agreed with him.

So those who had testified were called upon to do so again. This time the questions asked were more numerous, and Henry Cross was kept on the rack a full hour. But no additional information was elicited from him. He refused to speak about his former quarrel with Chesterbrook, and the jury and the others present were left to think what they pleased about the matter.

Strange to say, not once during that inquest did the theory of suicide come up. If any juror thought of it, it was not mentioned by him. What cause had a young man, rich, and about to wed the lady of his choice, to take his own life? It was absurd.

It was dark by the time the testimony was all in and the coroner had finished his address to the jury. The lights were lit in a vacant room, and there the jurymen retired to consider their verdict. It was not long in coming, and once more they filed into the coroner's presence.

"We find that Allen Chesterbrook came to his [Pg 61]death by being stabbed to the heart with a dagger in the hand of some party unknown to this jury."

It was a simple verdict, yet it covered the whole ground. The necessary paper was made out and signed, the jurymen filed up to the clerk to receive their pay, and the inquest was over.

Detective Hull had taken but little active interest in the hearing. He had sat quietly by, hardly listening to the greater part of the testimony. Only toward the close had he suddenly straightened up and manifested more attention.

His renewed interest was caused by the sudden appearance of Violet Harding, who glided in silently, and took a seat in the farthest corner. The young lady was neatly dressed in a suit of black. Over her dark military hat she wore a moderately thick veil, which, as she hesitated at the door, she had pulled down over her face—a face now inexpressibly sad, yet sweet and charming.

"Humph!" Jack Hull muttered to himself, and from that moment his eyes studied her keenly.

When the verdict had been brought in, he had noted that she half arose to her feet in her eagerness to hear what it was. Then, as the verdict was announced, he saw her shiver, rise up, and hasten out before the general dispersion that followed.

"Wonderful women!" murmured Jack Hull to himself, as he followed her out. "Either they have no nerve at all, or they have enough to stagger the biggest man alive. It's a pity she wasn't here when the dagger was produced."

Jack Hull had not been idle. He had already [Pg 62]learned that Violet Harding was an orphan, who had formerly lived in New York. On the death of her invalid mother she had come to Lakeview, and it had been Allen Chesterbrook who had procured for her the position at the office of the Lakeview Land Improvement Company. This had all been easy work. But he had learned more.

Violet boarded with an old widow lady who owned a neat, unpretentious cottage one street back from the lake, and somewhat removed from the center of the town. Under pretense of finding board for a lady friend, and with a vague idea of a new turn in his manner of working, Hull had called at the cottage and interviewed Mrs. Callum. He had learned that she had a spare room, next to that occupied by Violet, and was anxious to rent it. The room and board for a young lady—she wished no gentlemen—would be six dollars weekly. Would Mr. Ulmer—so Hull had allowed her to catch his name—be pleased to send the young lady around? She was certain the room would please her.

"I will tell the young lady with pleasure," the detective had replied. "I expect her here in a day or two. By the way, have you any other boarders?"

And then Mrs. Callum had spoken of Violet, stated who she was and what she did, and added that she was sure Mr. Ulmer's friend would like her; every one did.

"My friend is rather a timid young lady," the detective had remarked. "She dreads going into a strange house. I am glad you think she would like your only other boarder. May I ask if you have much company coming to the house?"

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"I have no one. Miss Harding has a gentleman come once in a while—or did have—but he won't come any more," and the woman's tones became so impressive that he knew she referred to Chesterbrook.

He had tried to gain more information, but after that last remark Mrs. Callum had had but little to say, as he had gone off, stating he would at once communicate with his friend.

And now he followed Violet Harding down the street, and to that very cottage. After seeing her disappear within, he came to a halt on the corner, undecided what to do next. He hung around for over an hour, and just after dark she came forth again, clad in that same black dress, but with a light cape over her shoulders, for the evening was chilly.

He followed her through the street and down to the lake shore. She took almost the same path Henry Cross had taken the previous day. But before she came to the bridge at the gully, she halted, and, turning, walked up a slight bluff overlooking the rippling water, now bathed in the soft light of the new moon.

On the bluff she sat down. Afraid to draw too close, Jack Hull remained at a distance. He could not make out what she was doing, but saw her draw out a handkerchief, and use it on her face.

"I wonder if she is crying?" he thought. "That's just like a woman—do a thing, and then be dreadful sorry the minute after. By the boots! I don't know about this."

He uttered the last thought half aloud. A man had passed along the road close to where he stood [Pg 64]concealed behind some brush. The man had paused, but now he was making his way toward where Violet Harding was sitting. With a low whistle to himself Jack Hull looked about for some way of getting closer, and, at the risk of soiling his clothes, threw himself on the ground, flat, and wormed his way along in the tall grass.

He had scarcely advanced a dozen feet when he heard a slight shriek of alarm from Violet Harding, followed by a command from the man to keep silent.

"You followed me here!" the young woman exclaimed. "You have been watching me—dogging me!"

"What if I have?" returned the newcomer roughly. "You needn't think Chesterbrook is going to have you all to himself."

"Be still! Do you not know that Mr. Chesterbrook is dead?"

"So I heard. But I don't pay much attention to those things. I——"

"You pay more attention to drink, to cards, and to the race track," she went on, with a sneer.

"Don't preach to me, Miss Madcap! And to what did you pay attention?—tell me that. Sneaking out of New York, and coming down here with a rich chap——"

"Hush! You have no right to insult me. To insult another——"

"Maybe you expected to marry him, and that other girl cut you out."

In a wild rage the young woman clapped her hand over the fellow's mouth. In a moment all her [Pg 65]mildness of manner vanished, and she seemed like another person. She pushed him violently backward.

"Why did you follow me from New York? Why did you not return to your former haunts, and leave me alone? You shall get nothing out of me here."

"I'm not asking for money, Violet. I've got another scheme in my head to get that—piles of it, too."

"Not honestly." She laughed bitterly.

"Yes, honestly," he growled. "I've struck a bonanza; something I've been on the hunt for for years."

"I hope it will make you more respectable," she returned sarcastically.

"Ha, ha! You talk to me about respectability! I reckon I'm as good as you. But there, don't let us quarrel any more."

"What do you want of me?"

"Supposing I was rich and that I turned over a new leaf?"

"Well?"

"Would you marry me then?"

"Never."

"But if I changed my habits, got to be quite respectable, you know, and had the rocks to let you live like a lady, as you deserve——"

"I would never marry you, never! I detest the sight of you. Why should I marry you? I do not love you, never did love you. Do you already forget that when I was in New York you did all you could to ruin my happiness?"

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The young woman poured out the words as if they were so much molten lead, a torrent of living fire. But he did not quail. He was angry, and his dark eyes blazed with a jealous light. When it came to temper, these two were well matched.

"I had good excuse to be enraged. You loved that Chesterbrook!" he fairly hissed. "What a pity somebody killed him; or did he commit suicide? I heard somebody talk of that. But, then, he was going to marry another girl; I heard that, too," he went on, sarcastically. "I suppose he thought you were good enough for a jolly companion."

"Oh, you wretch!" she shrieked. "Cease your slander of the dead."

"All right; we won't mention him again."

"Now, another favor. I want you to relieve me of your presence. I came out here to be alone."

"And I came a good distance to see you. I'm not going to be put off like a—"

He did not finish. She had been edging away from him, and now she turned suddenly, and sped with flying feet toward the road. He was astonished; but quickly recovering, he leaped after her, and soon closed the gap between them.

"Once more in the toils, my little bird! Now you will listen to me," he cried, as he caught her about the waist. "You will listen whether you wish to or not."

"Oh, you coward! Release me."

"Yes, release her at once," put in a calm and determined voice beside them, and Jack Hull loomed up, his hand raised to strike the man should he dare disobey.

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It would be hard to say which was the more astonished and alarmed, the girl or the man. Both started back, and their faces blanched equally.

"I don't know your purpose in attacking this young lady," went on Jack Hull; "but as she evidently wants you to leave, you had better do so at once."

The man scowled. "This is none of your affair," he began.

"I have made it my affair," returned the detective, in the same cool tone. He turned to Violet Harding. "May I see you to your home, miss?"

The frightened look died out in her eyes and she looked grateful.

"Thank you; if you will, I shall be much obliged."

"We shall meet again," murmured her assailant, and without another word he hurried away in the darkness.

"I am glad I came along the road just when I did," said the detective glibly. "That fellow was evidently some ruffian of the town, of which Lakeview has altogether too many. I take it you live in Lakeview, or are stopping there?"

"Yes," she returned mildly. "I am very thankful to you," she went on, in a steadier voice. "Your presence evidently averted a peril that I little suspected when I strolled here. I shall not walk out so far again, alone."

He offered her his arm, and, as she took it, he felt she was trembling. He did not attempt to enter into conversation; it would be almost useless while she was in her present state of mind.

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It was not long before Mrs. Callum's cottage was reached.

"Thank you, Mr.——"

He murmured his name, but so indistinctly she did not catch it.

"My name is Violet Harding," she returned. "I am very much obliged, indeed!" and then she entered the little garden, ran up the porch steps, and entered the house before he could say another word.

"Humph!" It was his favorite expression, and he uttered it several times in succession. He stared at the closed door as if half expecting her to reappear. But she did not, and he stalked off down the street.

"Now, what is a man to make of all that?" he asked himself. "Confound it! If that fellow hadn't acted so roughly, but just kept on talking, I might have learned something. As it is, I am as much in the dark as ever. And I let that chap slip through my grasp, too. He might tell some things about that girl worth knowing. She has a beautiful face, and I don't wonder that Chesterbrook thought a good deal of her.

"I'd think a great deal of her myself," he went on. Then: "Bah, Jack Hull, what are you talking about? Don't let the sight of a beautiful face turn you from your duty—from the unraveling of this complicated case. She is beautiful, but she is willful, and has a violent temper—the temper that made her commit this deed—if she really is guilty."

He broke off for a moment, then continued: "But I may be in error. There is no use in jumping [Pg 69]conclusions. Her initials are V. H., her hair is golden, and she wears those self-same

crinkly hairpins, but there may possibly be some mistake. Perhaps I had better send for Frank Barton, after all. I must have more evidence before I try to force a confession."

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CHAPTER VIII.

A GUESS AT A TRUTH.

Four days after he had been found dead in his rooms, Allen Chesterbrook was buried. The funeral ceremony was conducted at the very church where he was to have been married to Maud Willowby; and while the church had been crowded on that beautiful morning, it was now, despite the cold rain that had set in, literally packed. People are fond of a sensation, especially when it contains a dash of tragedy. Most of them came; not out of respect for the dead, but to see what would take place and how Maud Willowby would carry herself.

But the sightseers were disappointed, so far as Maud was concerned. She did not appear, and it was whispered about that she was too ill to leave her bed. The colonel came alone, grave and dignified. His face was pale, and during the service, which was most impressive, it grew paler, but otherwise he exhibited no emotion. When it was announced that those present might advance to the front and take a last look at the departed one, he did not stir from his seat.

"He feels it too deeply—he doesn't dare to trust himself—he's that proud about manifesting any weakness," was the way most of the Lakeview folks judged him, and he was willing to allow them this belief.

When the final words were said some few pressed [Pg 71]forward to give him their sympathy and to send a kind word to his daughter. He listened in almost absolute silence, and at the first opportunity broke away and hurried to his conveyance, and that was the last seen of him for the day.

From the church the coffin, after being boxed, was taken to the boat landing, there to be shipped by water and rail to New York, for interment in Greenwood Cemetery. A host of relatives accompanied the remains, and as the boat sailed down the lake it could truly be said that the passing of Allen Chesterbrook was completed so far as Lakeview in general was concerned.

Of course, people continued to talk of his death, and wondered who had killed him, and a very few asked themselves if it was possible he had committed suicide; but other matters came up shortly after—a serious runaway and a fire at one of the hotels—and the nine days' wonder became merely a horrible shadow of the past.

For some reason, hardly perhaps known to himself, Henry Cross breathed easier when the body was removed from the bachelor apartment below his own rooms. On the day following, a relative who had been left behind packed up Chesterbrook's effects and had them sent away, and then the two rooms were aired by Jackson and locked up. It was likely no one would want them for some time to come; but as the rent was paid for the balance of the leased term, neither the owner nor the janitor was disturbed because the apartment was without a tenant.

The only man who seemed entirely forgotten during [Pg 72]the changes that were taking place was Jimmie Neirney, Chesterbrook's former valet. Not one of the rich man's relatives remembered his faithful services. He was paid what was due him, no more, and was told he might immediately look for a position elsewhere. It is barely possible that some of the relatives thought Chesterbrook's death would not have occurred had Jimmie paid more attention to his master's interests.

But Jimmie was too industrious a fellow to grieve over the way he had been treated. He wrote another letter to his sweetheart, telling her of what had happened and that the expected vacation could not be taken, and then hunted up a position with a gentleman who lived at Oakdale, another summer resort five miles up an arm of the lake. The change kept Jimmie busy, and he had no time to think of what had occurred or to remember the veiled woman he had seen pass out of the back door under the wash hung up to dry.

True to his promise, Henry Cross indorsed the notes, as per his agreement with Colonel Willowby. The transaction took place at the office of the Land Improvement Company, on the day after the funeral. Mr. Bixby, the president of the company, was present, as was also Violet Harding. In the presence of the outsiders the transaction was a formal one, and at its conclusion the colonel and the young man rode away together in the former's turnout.

"Bixby has succeeded in fixing up the other notes, so we are safe," said the colonel, as soon as they had started. "You cannot imagine what a load has been lifted from my heart, Cross."

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"I am glad to be of service, sir, as I said before. You have enough trouble otherwise. How is your daughter this morning?"

"I believe she is better. She came down and took breakfast with me, and that's a good sign."

"Did you—" The young man broke off suddenly.

"No, I have not yet told her, I am waiting for a favorable chance. It is not a pleasant theme to discuss with her in her present condition."

"Then perhaps you had better not say anything. Let matters take their own course. In time the whole miserable business will be forgotten."

"Perhaps you are right. I will wait and think it over. But I am curious to know more of that Miss Harding. Were you at the funeral yesterday?"

"No."

"Then you cannot say if she was there or not. Bixby told me she asked for permission to be absent from her duties on the wedding morning."

"Then it's more than likely she attended the funeral."

"Very probable. Her conduct is exceedingly strange. If I were sure she had helped Allen to deceive us I would pack her off at once."

"It may be she was herself deceived. I would not throw the poor girl out of work on suspicion."

"Oh, she can stay—for the present. But I am not as forgiving as you, Cross; I cannot so readily forget harm done."

"I am no saint." The young man uttered a short [Pg 74]laugh. "I did not forget my quarrel with Chesterbrook on the night of the Charity Ball."

"And what was that quarrel about, if I may ask? I understand you refused to speak of it at the inquest."

"It was not much. I had my name down for a dance with Maud, and he rubbed my name from her card and substituted his own. He claimed it was a mistake, and we had a few hot words down in the gentlemen's room, that was all. I merely refused to speak of this quarrel so that her name might not be dragged into the evidence before the coroner."

"I see. Chesterbrook was just reckless enough to do that and call it a joke."

"Well, some might have called it a joke; but—but—"

"I understand, perfectly. Between you two—at that time—it could be no joke; matters were too serious, eh?"

"Exactly, sir. By the way, what particular bit of land here is to be improved first?"

Henry Cross shifted the subject, thus showing that the discussion of what had occurred in the past was distasteful to him. The colonel took the hint and soon both were busy talking over future prospects in Lakeview realty.

Colonel Willowby took the young man around to various plots of ground, and grew enthusiastic as he spoke of what was to be accomplished; and the drive in the keen morning air did both men good. Shortly before noon the young man was dropped [Pg 75]at the door of the hotel at which he was in the habit of dining.

Colonel Willowby found his daughter in the library, reading the local morning paper, which contained a long account of the funeral and the events in connection with it. She wore a loose morning gown of deepest purple, and her golden hair was done up in a single large twist at the back. Her face was white and somewhat haggard, but she showed no signs of recent weeping.

The colonel came in quietly, and for the instant she did not notice him as he stood near the doorway, looking at her. Then she glanced up quickly, folded the paper, and put it away.

"You have been out riding, papa?" she asked.

"Yes, I had to go down to the Land Improvement office, Maud. And what has my girl been doing while I was away?" he went on, with an attempt at cheerfulness.

"I have been putting things away, and reading."

She did not say what things she had placed away, or what she had been reading; but he knew she meant her magnificent trousseau, and the article in the paper. A sigh struggled for utterance but he suppressed it.

"Don't you want to go out driving with me this afternoon? You can veil yourself, and we can take one of the country roads—"

"I will go gladly!" she cried. "That is just what I want—to get out—out in the open air, away from the house and people!"

"Then we will order luncheon at once. It is a trifle cold after the rain, but I think we can stand it."

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The order was immediately sent to the kitchen, and soon luncheon was served. She scarcely touched the food, but drank a cup of hot chocolate. He ate several chicken sandwiches and drank his coffee and wine, and then they were ready to go—in a buggy which the old colonel strongly refused to sacrifice for the "new-fangled" motor car.

Scarcely a word was spoken until the last of the houses on the road was left behind; then he turned to her.

"Which way shall it be, Maud? On toward Oakdale?"

"No, no, papa; let us go the other way. You know I don't like the scenery in that vicinity."

Without a word, he turned the head of the horse up a side road. It was a curious whim of Maud's, this never wishing to drive out to Oakdale; but he had always humored her in it and he humored her now. Never once did he imagine that there was any real reason behind that whim.

"You said before luncheon that you had been down to the Land Improvement office," she went on presently. "What are you going to do now, papa? Find some one else to indorse those horrid notes?"

"I have already found some one else—that is, for part of them; and Bixby is going to take care of the rest."

"I am glad, for your sake. You were worried, weren't you? I thought you were, by your face."

"Yes, Maud, I was very much worried, for there was so much at stake."

The girl sat silent, and then shivered. He fancied he knew what was in her mind. Should he tell her [Pg 77]the truth about Chesterbrook? He took a deep breath, but before he could speak she asked:

"Who indorsed the notes, papa? They were quite large, weren't they?"

He had hoped she would not refer to them again. His face flushed and he pretended to be busy with the horse, taking a new hold on the reins, and tapping the animal with the whip.

"A gentleman who did not wish his name mentioned in the transaction signed for me, and Bixby is going to get Dichter to sign the others. Gently, Tom, gently! Now go along steadily, that's a good fellow!"

He pretended to be busier than ever, but she was not to be put off. She waited a moment, and then asked:

"Was it Mr. Cross?"

"Why, what makes you think it was he?" he cried, in astonishment.

"I saw him call on you right after the—the—you know what I mean, papa."

"Do you think Mr. Cross such a rich man?"

"I know he inherited quite a sum from a relative some time ago. Am I right, papa?"

He did not answer directly. "The gentleman did not wish his name mentioned," he returned evasively. "I gave my promise."

She looked at his face and saw that she had struck the truth. She said no more on the subject.

On they went over the hilly roads, through patches of woods and past well-tilled fields, crossing half a dozen tiny brooks, with their picturesque rustic [Pg 78]bridges. The ride seemed to be doing her good, for some of the color came back to her cheeks.

All too soon, for her, it was time to return. She wished she could go on and on and on without ever stopping. But the evening shadows were creeping up, and the atmosphere had become almost too cool for comfort. The colonel tucked her in afresh and turned the horse's head homeward.

When they had started, he had had a faint idea that the chance might present itself to tell her the truth concerning Chesterbrook. But as he contemplated her pale face and sad expression, he had not the heart to do so. He thought, after all, that Henry Cross might be right; that it would be better to let matters rest as they were.

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CHAPTER IX.

THE NEW BOARDER.

On the day of Allen Chesterbrook's funeral Mrs. Callum took in another boarder. She had waited in vain for the appearance of the young lady Mr. Ulmer had spoken of sending, and eagerly showed the vacant room to the middle-aged woman in brown who came with a valise and a portfolio.

The newcomer was an agent for a new art work, specimens of which were contained in the portfolio. She explained that she had been directed to call upon the wealthy people in the vicinity, and would most likely need the room for three months, if not longer. The room suited her, and so did the price, and she paid for one week's board in advance and took possession immediately.

While the new boarder was removing the signs of travel Mrs. Callum prepared luncheon for her, and, during the progress of this, both became quite friendly. Miss Deems said she was tired, and doubted if she would attempt to do much that day.

"I have been very fortunate in my work," she explained, "and, that being so, I feel that I can afford to take it a bit easy."

"I don't believe you can do much to-day anyway," returned Mrs. Callum. "Most of the residents of the town are at Mr. Chesterbrook's funeral, and folks talk of nothing else."

And on being slightly encouraged by Miss Deems, [Pg 80]she told all that was known of the mystery, and ended by remarking that her other boarder, Miss Harding, had gone to the church with the rest of the young folks.

"She knew Mr. Chesterbrook," she explained. "Not very well, but still she knew him."

"It must have been a shock," was Miss Deems' comment.

"Indeed it was! Why, Violet—I always call her that, she is so friendlesslike and seems to invite familiarity—Violet came home sick; I thought she was going to have a spell. She went right to her room and didn't want any luncheon or anything."

"I suppose she had heard the news in church?" said the new boarder, questioningly.

"I suppose so; I didn't ask her. I wanted to give her a cup of tea, but she wouldn't even let me in the room. Strange how young girls do go on over such a thing. Of course, it's horrible, and gives one the creeps, but, as the deed's done, there's no use to make an ado about it. I buried two husbands and three children—one by the first and two by the second—and I lived through it."

"Perhaps she thought more of Mr. Chesterbrook than she was willing to own."

"Maybe. I never thought of that. He was kind to her, and got her a position at the Land Improvement office. But she had no business to think too much of him, for he was engaged to Miss Maud Willowby, and she knew it."

"Lots of girls do many things that are imprudent," and Miss Deems shrugged her shoulders suggestively.

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"I suppose that's so, too. But Violet is a good girl, a very nice, quiet girl, even though she does have strange fits of temper now and then. I tell you about the fits of temper, Miss Deems, so that you won't be astonished if you see her in one. She's got Spanish blood in her, she says, though she doesn't show it much, and once in a while she strikes fire, as my John used to say. But it doesn't last, and she doesn't mean anything. You'll like her; I know you will."

"I'm sure I will—if you do," smiled the new boarder, and then Mrs. Callum liked her better than ever.

The funeral had been over two hours before Violet Harding returned home, and was introduced to Miss Deems. A few remarks were exchanged concerning the crowd at the church, and then Violet begged to be excused and went to her room, not to appear for the remainder of the day. Mrs. Callum took supper up to her, but she said she had a headache and did not care to eat.

"I have a slight headache myself," said Miss Deems, after the landlady had returned below and told her what Violet had said. "I ought to retire early, too." And she did.

Once in her own room, with the door locked, Miss Deems' manner underwent a transformation. Her eyes brightened, her step grew noiselessly swifter, and she appeared ten years younger. She approached the side of the room where the bed stood against the wall, noiselessly, and shoved the article of furniture to one side.

Originally a doorway led from this room to one [Pg 82]occupied by Violet Harding. But now the door was locked and bolted, and completely blocked on one side by a bed and on the other partly by a wash-stand and an old-fashioned towel rack.

Having carefully shoved the bed to one side, Miss Deems paused to listen. Not a sound came from the other room. She approached the door and applied her eye to the keyhole, from which the key had long before been taken by Mrs. Callum.

Her range of vision into the next apartment was limited, yet she could see one side of the bed, the bureau, and a rocker in front of it. An oil lamp was lighted and turned down low.

Violet Harding lay upon the bed. She had removed her hat and veil, otherwise she was as completely dressed as before. She lay staring at the ceiling, without moving a muscle of her face.

Suddenly, when Miss Deems had been watching for several minutes, the girl sprang up, and ran her hands through her thick hair, which, being loose, came tumbling down over her shoulders. She gave a low moan and began to walk the apartment, rapidly at first, but gradually slower, and at last she sank down in the rocker and buried her face in her hands. She remained in this attitude only a few seconds and then bent forward, and, pulling open the bottom drawer of the bureau, began to search for something.

The search came to a sudden end as the girl brought forth a photograph and kissed it. Then she turned up the lamp and gazed at the picture, while her eyes filled with tears. Much to her chagrin, the [Pg 83]face of the photograph was hidden from Miss Deems' view.

The sight of the picture seemed to quiet the girl, even though she was crying. She gazed at it a long while, then placed it away again, closed the drawer and locked it, and began to make preparations to retire. A quarter of an hour later she was abed, and Miss Deems followed suit.

The next morning, at breakfast, Violet announced that she would not be home for luncheon.

"Just put me up a bite, will you?" she said to Mrs. Callum. "I have lost so much time lately that I must work the noon hour and overtime to make up."

She was quite agreeable to Miss Deems, but showed no disposition to become familiar, her mind evidently being preoccupied. The new boarder was disappointed at this, but took good care not to show it. Directly after Violet she went upstairs to prepare for her initial business trip, as she told Mrs. Callum.

It was nearly ten o'clock when she came down, although it had been scarcely eight when she had gone up.

"Perhaps I won't be back to luncheon either," she said to Mrs. Callum, and passed out, her portfolio under her arm.

Evidently Miss Deems was not undecided as to where to make the first strike for business. She walked directly toward a certain hotel, stopped at the door for a few minutes, and then entered the ladies' parlor, which was empty. In another minute a man joined her. It was Jack Hull.

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"Well, Frank, did you get in all right?" was his first question.

"I did," returned Miss Francis Barton, for such was Miss Deems' real name. She had as many assumed ones as would fill a small-sized directory. Her ability, which rivaled that of leaders in her calling, was responsible for her nickname.

"And have you discovered anything?" he went on eagerly.

"I have."

"Go on; don't keep me waiting," he cried impatiently.

"Well, in the first place," she returned, with something of pride in her tone, "let me tell you what I did," and, without waiting for consent, she related her experience up to the time she had gone upstairs to prepare for going out.

"When I returned to my room," she continued, "I waited long enough to make sure that Mrs. Callum was busy in the kitchen with the dishes, and then I entered Miss Harding's room. I first made a general search, which revealed nothing; and then attacked the bureau, which I knew must contain something important, otherwise they would not have locked it.

"Every drawer was locked, but I had seen her hide the key in her workbasket, so it did not take long to hunt it up and unlock all of them. I started with the top drawer, and found nothing of value; then I tried the middle drawer, and, among some unwashed linen, I found this."

Frank Barton opened her portfolio, and drew [Pg 85]forth a dainty handkerchief, delicately scented. On the handkerchief were several blotches of deep red.

"Humph!" muttered Jack Hull. "Blood, true enough!"

"Yes, human blood."

"Another clew, truly."

"The finding of the handkerchief stimulated me. I went carefully through to the bottom of the drawer—"

"Hold on. Was the handkerchief lying openly among the other linen?"

"No, it was wrapped in a bit of paper, probably to keep it from soiling the other things."

"I see. Go on!"

"At the bottom of the drawer I came to another slender package, also wrapped in paper. I unrolled it, and found this."

Once more Frank Barton placed her hand in the portfolio. This time she drew out a flat, leather case, bearing upon a plate on its side the letters V. H.

Jack Hull uttered a low whistle of surprise and pleasure, and took the case in his hands.

"The sheath for the dagger, sure enough!" he murmured. "This is indeed a find. I thought by having you go there we would discover something. Anything else?"

"There was nothing more in the middle drawer, but in the lower one I found several letters which Chesterbrook had written to her at various times, and also a photograph of the man and the photograph of an old lady."

"What did the letters contain?"

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"They were friendly letters. In one he spoke of having secured a position for her, and with another he had sent her twenty dollars for certain expenses. The third was the most interesting, and I copied a portion of it. I didn't bring the letters, for they were in a bundle with others, and I was afraid of disarranging them. Of course, unless you are going to proceed against her at once, I'll have to return the handkerchief and the dagger sheath to their original places. Here is the slip."

Jack Hull attentively read the extract from the letter.

"Humph!" he said. "This may mean everything and it may mean nothing. What does he mean by saying that 'She can rest assured he will keep the secret?' What secret?"

"Perhaps he held her secret, and she, fearing he would divulge it, killed him," suggested Frank Barton.

"It may be," mused Jack Hull, and he thought of the strange meeting between Violet Harding and the sporty-looking fellow on the bluff. "This affair only gets more perplexing instead of clearer. But one thing is certain—he was killed with Violet Harding's dagger," he went on, with some satisfaction. "There is foundation for a good story on the dagger and the bloody handkerchief, the hairs and the hairpin, and those letters; a fine story, if we can only reach the bottom of it."

"What do you wish me to do next?"

"Go back, make friends with her, and pump her. If you can't pump her, watch her, and note all she does. She's bound to say or do something worth [Pg 87]knowing, sooner or later. And I'll keep an eye on her myself. You can put those things back where you found them. You didn't read those other letters?"

"I glanced at them. I hadn't time to do more, for Mrs. Callum was preparing to come up and sweep."

"Then read all of them when you get the chance. You may strike some other clew. I'll meet you here every day at this time, if you wish—here, or outside, if the hotel people become suspicious."

"Then you are not going to frighten her into a revelation just yet?"

"No. I've got an idea. There may be much more in this murder than even we suspect. There is a fellow who knows her well, a fellow she is trying to get rid of. I'm going to hunt him up, if I can, and see if I can force him to tell what he knows of her. He's a dissolute sort of chap, and perhaps a few drinks will oil up his tongue."

"What's the fellow's name? I may learn about him through her."

"I don't know. But I remember his face, and I fancy he is hanging around Lakeview, watching for a chance to interview her. I don't believe she'll speak of him—she isn't that kind of a young woman."

The two separated, and Frank Barton went back to Mrs. Callum's house. She had no difficulty in restoring the things she had brought away to their original places, but gained no chance to read the remaining letters. She went out again, and did not reappear until Violet came home from work.

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That evening she did her best to make herself agreeable to the girl, and partly succeeded—something that gave her a little satisfaction.

"A stubborn person," she said to herself. "But I'll overcome that soon, see if I don't. I never yet failed."

But the work was harder than she anticipated. Day after day went by and still Violet kept her at a distance, even though there was nothing in her manner directly repellent. And one day a great surprise awaited her. Violet Harding was gone, trunk and all, and had left no future address behind her.

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CHAPTER X.

AT THE PIANO.

Spring had gone, and summer was almost over. Yet the season at Lakeview was at its height still, and down among the hotels and boarding houses the tragic death of Allen Chesterbrook was well-nigh forgotten. It was one continual round of outing trips, dances, and what not, and in the midst of this gayety few had time to think of anything else, especially anything dark, mysterious, and disagreeable.

General business, aside from that which came from summer visitors, was booming, too. The great litigation had come to an end, and Colonel Willowby and Bixby were victorious. Hardly was the verdict rendered than the improvements contemplated by the company were started, giving employment to a small army of laborers and artisans.

Having gained their point, the company was able to meet its notes promptly, and once more Henry Cross was able to use his cash as he saw fit. For his assistance the colonel offered him a block of the company's stock below actual value, but this the young man declined.

"I've got the new railroad in my head," he said, with a light laugh. "I'm going into that, heart and soul."

"Well, I imagine the railroad will be a big thing," returned Colonel Willowby. "And you can rest assured [Pg 90]that you will have no trouble over a right of way through the Land Company's property."

During the early summer Henry Cross had met Maud Willowby but seldom. When first they came face to face it was on one of the numerous country roads about Lakeview, and he started back in amazement at the change in her appearance. She looked older; she was no longer the girlish being of former days. And her hair, the beautiful golden hair, was duller, and here and

there was a faint streak of gray! He could hardly believe this, yet it was true, and she was not yet twenty-three.

She had greeted him with more warmth than he had expected, for during her engagement to Chesterbrook a coldness had sprung up between them. He did not know that she had discovered how he had saved them from ruin.

Their conversation had opened in a commonplace way, with not the slightest allusion to the past. He had often wondered if her father had told her the truth of that horrible affair, but nothing in her face or manner betrayed what she knew or of what she was ignorant. Before both realized it, he was walking home with her. They parted, however, at the gate.

After that he called on her several times, and on each occasion the talk grew more personal, and one by one formalities were cast aside, until, when the bright days of August were drawing to a close, he occupied almost the same position in her regard as before Chesterbrook had appeared on the scene.

But was her warmth toward him genuine? This was the question he found himself unconsciously [Pg 91]answering himself. Perhaps she was deceiving herself, he reasoned; perhaps she didn't know her own heart.

There was a good deal in her manner upon which to base such a supposition. There were times that she was not herself; he saw that so plainly there was no use in attempting to disguise the fact. She would grow suddenly cold, absent-minded, as if thinking of something far away, and then she would start up, as if from a dream, and force herself to pay attention to the present, to what he was saying and doing.

What if her mind was slightly unbalanced? Once he asked himself that question when they were reading together, and she had suddenly sprung up without apparent cause, and begun to walk the floor. But she had afterward laughed it off.

"I have a tooth that worries me. I must drive down to Doctor Califf and have him attend to it," she had said. Yet, so far as he could learn, she had never gone near the dentist.

But the young man was in love with her, and true love is certainly blind to many shortcomings. He excused all in her—that is, he was willing to excuse all, if he could make her his own. He had loved her for years, and such a love is not easily daunted or thrust aside.

The colonel saw the drift of affairs, and he encouraged the attentions of Cross, so far as lay in his power, for several reasons. He liked Henry Cross, and, so far as he knew, thought he would make a most excellent husband for Maud—a better, steadier fellow than Chesterbrook would have made. [Pg 92]Then, again, it would be a good thing for Maud. She needed a decided change, for

even the revelation that Chesterbrook had committed suicide had not kept her from brooding over the past.

One day Henry Cross drove up with a spanking new roadster. "I am going to drive out Oakdale way to look up the route of the new railroad," he said. "Wouldn't you like to go along? The leaves are beginning to turn, and it will be a beautiful ride. We can be back by sunset."

But she shook her head. "I don't like to go out Oakdale way," Maud replied. "And, besides, I guess you will have enough to do without me. I'll go some other time," and she smiled.

He was disappointed, but he remembered her promise, and a week or ten days later asked her to go out again, and they would motor anywhere she wished.

There was no refusing, and she accepted. They went off to a beautiful spot along a small mountain torrent that flowed into a beautiful stream below Lakeview. The run was full of natural interest, for the autumn leaves were now out in all their gorgeous glory of red and scarlet and gold, and their course brought them to many picturesque cascades, where the sparkling water dashed and splashed over the moss-hung rocks.

"How bright and happy it all looks," she sighed. "See how merrily the stream runs on, not knowing or caring whither. Why cannot we be just as careless—and free?"

"It was not meant so, I suppose," he returned. He had a mind to say more, but he remained silent.

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When they were driving home, she asked him about his new railroad; she called it his railroad, although he was but one of a dozen who were interested in it; and he told her many things concerning what had been done, and what was hoped for, growing enthusiastic, and quite forgetting himself.

"I am tiring you," he said at last, and his face fell. "What does a woman care for these things?"

"I care for the things you are interested in," she returned hastily, and then their eyes met, and hers fell before him. He wished to go on, but something restrained him, and an awkward pause followed. When it was broken, the entire subject was changed. But long after he had left her, that one look haunted him. It had been full of kindness, nay, love; but before that love was something else—doubt, fear, he could not tell what.

"Strange," he murmured to himself, "strange, indeed." But he could get no further.

A few days later he called again—he found himself thinking of her constantly now. She met him in the library, where she was finishing a letter.

"I am soon to have a visitor," she said. "An old schoolmate whom I have not seen for several years."

"Indeed!" he returned. "Do I know her?"

"Hardly, for she has never been in Lakeview before. We were chums at the seminary in Pennsylvania. Her name is Alice Devigney."

"No, I do not know her, but it seems to me I have heard you mention her name."

"Most likely. When I came home I used to speak of Alice constantly. She was going to call [Pg 94]on me right after, but her folks went on a tour to Europe, and took her along, and when they returned they settled down in Chicago, and she has never been East since."

He smiled. "I presume you look forward to the visit with much pleasure. You can talk over old times, and all that."

Her face paled just a trifle. "Oh, yes, we will do a lot of gossiping, as you may call it. Alice has seen many more of the former scholars than I have, for while I was there not one in the seminary was from this neighborhood."

"Is your friend married?"

"Yes. But her husband has gone to Canada. She informs me that he is in the lumber business, and goes there on a business trip once a year; so she is going to spend the time while he is away in visiting me."

"I see. I am glad you are going to have a companion here. It will make it less lonely. Is she a jolly sort of woman? I like that kind."

"Oh, Alice used to be full of fun. But she's married now. Marriage subdues most women, doesn't it?"

"Having never been a woman, and married, I can't say," he laughed. "But really, I don't see why marriage ought to make women gloomy—I mean, take the lightness of heart from them."

"In the marriage state women have far more responsibilities than when they were single."

"They ought to have less, if their husbands are the right sort of fellows, willing to bear most of the troubles themselves."

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"Perhaps they mean to when they get married. But they soon grow tired— —"

"Not if they love the woman—if there has been no mistake— —"

He stopped short, for he saw that her color was leaving her. She turned and bent over a drawer of the old secretary, looking for a postage stamp, but could not find any.

"Oh, dear! I thought there were a number of stamps here!"

"I will post it for you. It is my intention to go down to the post office from here," he said, as he took the letter and placed it in his pocket.

"Now don't forget it," she said roguishly. "I have heard of men carrying letters about for weeks before they thought of them again."

"Of married men; but we——" he laughed and she blushed. "You are anxious for your friend to come, I see. When she is here, I suppose I will be forgotten."

"Oh, you must come and see her, by all means!" she broke in. "You will like her—if she is anything like the Alice of schoolgirl days."

"When do you expect her?"

"It is likely she will come on very soon after she receives my letter."

They passed out of the library into the parlor. The piano stood open for the first time since that fateful wedding day. He noted it with pleasure, and asked her if she had been playing.

"Only a few exercises," she returned. "Papa wished it. He said I would get out of practice."

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"Here are a number of the old favorites," he went on, glancing over a pile of music which rested in a rack near by. "Won't you play something for me? You know how I love music."

She knew he spoke the truth. In the days long gone by she had played while he sang, and she had enjoyed that as much as anything in which he had a hand.

"I had not intended to play——" she began, and then smiled sadly. "I will accompany a song for you, if you wish."

"Very well; although I would have preferred to have you play alone. What shall it be?"

They began to look over the music together, her head bent close to his own. The impulse was strong in him to throw his arms about her and clasp her to his breast; but he restrained himself. His very love told him that a too hasty declaration would spoil all. To command his feelings he drew back.

In the meanwhile, a sudden thought came into her mind. Her cheeks flushed, and she began to turn over the music rapidly.

"Here is that solo you used to sing—'The Homeless Child,'" she said. "Can you sing it still?"

"I can try it. But would you not prefer something else—something brighter? 'Poor Butterfly,' or something like that?"

"This will do," she returned, placing the music on the piano. Her hands ran lightly over the keys and drifted softly into the introduction to the song.

It was an old piece, and the words were somewhat commonplace. But he sang them with all the ability at his command and with a fervor that brought [Pg 97]tears to her eyes. He was singing for her, and as he reached the pathetic lines:

"For the homeless child must live somewhere,

In this world so harsh and cold,"

his voice grew husky and nearly broke before the conclusion was reached.

"You sing the song very feelingly," she murmured, "as if the sentiment touched a sensitive chord in your heart."

"The words are very pathetic, I think," he rejoined. "There are hundreds of homeless children in our great cities for whom no one seems to care."

"Then humanity should prompt people to extend the hand of charity to the little waifs—especially the people that have no children of their own."

He was turning over the music left in the rack.

"I agree with you. I know if a homeless child came under my notice I think I would try to do something for it."

"Would you take it in your home? It would need a home, most likely, poor thing!"

"I might. It would depend on circumstances. But, then, I love children; but some people don't."

"That is true. If every one loved children, there wouldn't be so many deserted ones." Her face took on a brighter look. "Now you can sing 'Poor Butterfly,' if you will."

She struck the keys vigorously this time, and ran over them with a swiftness that aroused him as a touch of electricity might have done. Her grave mood was gone, and a demeanor almost gay had taken its place.

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He did not object, and sang the piece with a dash and spirit that made them both laugh. Half a dozen other songs followed, and when he found an old duet hidden away under some music

books, and brought it forth, she agreed to sing it with him, and her voice thrilled him as it never had before.

How that meeting might have ended, there is no telling. But the colonel came in at the end of the duet, and the musical tête-à-tête was interrupted. But when Henry Cross returned to his bachelor apartments he felt as if he were walking on air, so happy was he.

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CHAPTER XI.

A MYSTERY OF THE PAST.

With a low, hoarse whistle the afternoon boat from Mackanack Junction swept slowly up to the wharf at Lakeview. There was a crowd on hand, anxiously awaiting relatives and friends, and another crowd on the boat just as anxiously waiting to be welcomed. On the dock there was also in the crowd a number of the curious ones who came down to meet the boat just because it was the fashion so to do—one of the breaks in many a dull afternoon.

“Catch the bow line there—hold fast! Now to the stern with you! All right, sir!”

“Throw out the bridge! Be lively there!”

The bridge touched the edge of the dock and a rush of humanity followed—men, women, and children—with innumerable valises and bags, fishing rods, cameras, tennis rackets, and a hundred and one of the various articles with which the summer tourists load themselves as they start out on their annual outing.

“Alice!”

“Maud! Why, how you have changed! But you are just as pretty as ever.”

“You have not changed a bit. And you are married, too.”

“Why, you didn’t expect married life was going to make an old woman of me right off, did you, [Pg 100]dear?” and Alice Devigney gave a bright laugh. A dozen or more kisses followed.

“You are the same old Alice, I can see that,” returned Maud Willowby, and she gave a slight sigh. “Just as pert as ever, as Miss Breeker used to say.”

“And why shouldn’t I be, dear? Did you expect to see a matronly old woman, dragging half a dozen children behind her, and with a face lined with wrinkles?”

“We’ll talk of that hereafter,” answered Maud. “Now come this way; the car is waiting.”

"But my trunk, dear? Here is the check, and it must be somewhere. It has my name on it—Mrs. Willard Devigney. Funny I married a distant relative by the same name, wasn't it?"

"Never mind the trunk. Our man can come for that later. I only brought the runabout, for I wanted to have you all to myself on the way home."

"Do you live far from here?"

"It's not over a mile. Come along. Here we are."

"Oh, what a beauty of a machine! You must go out a great deal—or, at least, I suppose you did before—There! and I wasn't going to mention the subject. But I'm so sorry for you, dear! I nearly cried my eyes out when I heard the awful news—indeed I did. And the authorities haven't made any discovery yet, have they?"

"What do you mean?"

"As to who was guilty?"

"No." Maud Willowby turned her head away for a moment.

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"We can drive along slowly," said Maud, when they were seated, "and still be in plenty of time for dinner."

"It's a beautiful place, isn't it? How long have you lived here?"

"Four years—ever since we moved away from Fairwood."

"Gracious, how time flies! Four years, and to me it seems as if it was only yesterday when we were all at the seminary together."

"It seems a long while to me since then," returned Maud, in a sober tone.

"Yes? Well, it all depends upon one's experience. Now, I haven't had the least bit of trouble since I came away. Of course, poor papa died; but, then, he had been so long ill that death was really a relief from suffering. But how is your father; I almost forgot to ask?"

"Papa is quite well. He will, no doubt, be waiting for us when we arrive. I told him I expected you."

"I shall be delighted to make his acquaintance. They call him colonel, don't they? I don't want to make a mistake."

"Yes, papa is a colonel, or was, and clings to his title."

"And who else will be at the house? You have other visitors perhaps? Such a delightful summer resort!"

"There is no one else—except the servants. We live rather a retired life. But, of course, we have books and music, and horses, the two machines, and papa owns a motor boat on the lake."

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"Well, I should say that was enough. Do you go horseback riding? I love it!"

"I used to go, and will be glad to resume that delightful exercise, if you wish it."

"That will be jolly. There is a gentleman on horseback now approaching."

Maud Willowby gave a quick look in the direction indicated. "It is Mr. Cross."

"And who is he, a friend?"

"Yes. Papa and I have known him since we moved here, and he comes to the house quite often, to spend an afternoon or evening. I think he is out on business, for he is interested in a new railroad they have started to build along the lake from Bayport to Mackanack Junction."

By this time Henry Cross was beside them. Maud was right—he was on business; but he tarried long enough to be introduced to Mrs. Willard Devigney, and to exchange a few words with both ladies. On invitation, he said he would be pleased to call the next afternoon, and then rode off at a canter down a side path where some of the railroad surveyors were at work.

"A nice gentleman," was Alice Devigney's frank comment. "And such a sweet voice!"

"He is a tenor singer, and he often sings at the house. Perhaps we can get him to sing to-morrow—if you care to listen."

"Don't I dote on music? Wait! Isn't that a magnificent view down the slope to the lake. Whose mansion is that among those elm trees?"

"That is our home, Alice. We will be there in another minute."

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"What a beautiful place! No wonder you are content to remain there nearly all the time. There is a gentleman on the front piazza. He is waving his hand."

"It is papa." Maud Willowby started, and suddenly caught her companion by the arm. "In another minute we will be there, Alice. I meant to speak of it before, but I felt disinclined. Papa knows nothing of the past—absolutely nothing. The revelation now would kill him. Promise me—"

"I will say nothing, dear. Have I ever opened my lips to any one? No, not even to my Willard, much as I love him. With me your secret is safe."

"Thank you, Alice; I knew it would be. But sometimes I am so frightened——" Maud Willowby said no more, but let out the exhaust; and in a moment more the ride came to an end.

The colonel ran down to help them out, kissing his daughter and shaking hands warmly with her friend of former days. Then all bustled into the house. Dinner was nearly ready, and Maud showed Alice to her room, where she might lay off her wraps and prepare for it.

The dining room was aglow with lights, the shades were drawn down, and all was as bright and cheerful as it could be made. The colonel sat at the head of the table, with his visitor on his right and Maud on his left. He was in particularly good humor, and between him and the newcomer the room rang with bits of bright talk and light laughter.

Maud caught the feeling of the others, and never since that dark day in early spring had her heart [Pg 104]felt so light. It seemed as if the ominous clouds were rolling away at last, and that there was a promise of clearer skies beyond.

The colonel remained to smoke a cigar, and the two young women sought the piano, where they played alternately, much to the smoker's satisfaction, as they learned by the clapping of his hands. Then he came in himself, and songs followed until both of the fair singers were tired.

They retired early. Alice Devigney confessed that she was fatigued after her long traveling, yet she could not resist the temptation to ask Maud to come into her room, "just for a bit of quiet chat," after both had slipped on loose gowns.

"We are quite alone, aren't we?" she asked, as Maud closed the door and crossed over to where a tiny blaze gave the open grate a most inviting appearance.

"Yes, we are alone. I have sent Nancy off, and she is too anxious to go to bed to disobey me."

"I wanted to have a little chat just about ourselves, you know. You have hardly asked me anything about Willard," a little reproachfully.

"That is true; but it seems to me I haven't had time for anything since you came, I am so pleased to have you here. Where is he, and what is his occupation?"

"He's in Toronto now. He is head of the Michigan Consolidated Lumber Company, and he says he is going to make a lot of money this year. Oh, but he's a splendid fellow, and you must come out and see him soon. I can't bring him here, he's so busy. I have his photograph in my trunk."

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Alice Devigney rattled on about her husband for fully five minutes. Then she broke off, lowered her voice, and bent forward. "But, Maud, you said your secret was unknown to your father. How did you keep it from him?"

Maud Willowby had expected this question and had dreaded it. She put out her hand pleadingly.

"Hush, Alice! Some one may hear you," she whispered.

"But we are alone, dear. You said so yourself."

"Oh, Alice, dear, on that subject I dread even a whisper."

"Oh, you are too frightened. It is all past and gone now, isn't it?"

"Yes," and Maud shivered.

"And he is dead?"

"Yes."

"Then what have you to fear? You are sure your father never suspected— —"

"No, no, no! Dear papa never dreamed of such a thing. It would kill him to know how I deceived him—deceived every one."

"Maud, I don't believe you ever really loved him, did you?"

"I don't know—I don't believe I did. I hated him after—after—you know."

"Yes, I know. Well, after all, dear, perhaps it is well he is dead. He was never your equal, despite his money."

Maud trembled, and, turning away, she hid her face in her hands and began to sob. In a moment Alice Devigney was at her feet.

"There, there, dear, don't cry. I didn't mean [Pg 106]to hurt your feelings; indeed, I didn't. I am sorry I mentioned the disagreeable subject. But I spoke thoughtlessly. Let us forget it."

"Oh, if I only could forget!" wailed Maud.

"Time will bring forgetfulness."

"Never, Alice! That is something I can never forget—never, so long as I breathe," and Maud sobbed louder than ever.

For once Alice Devigney was nonplused, not knowing what to say. In that extremity she did the wisest thing possible. She remained silent until Maud had had her cry out. Then the two kissed half a dozen times and separated for the night.

But in her own room Maud Willowby lay on the bed wide awake all the night, staring at the ceiling and thinking, thinking, thinking—of the past and the present.

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CHAPTER XII.

A REVELATION.

On the following morning when Maud came down to breakfast she looked so pale and haggard that Alice Devigney's heart smote her. Yet she dared not say anything, for the colonel was present, and she saw that Maud's greatest desire was to keep her father in ignorance of the fact that something had gone wrong.

The three chatted gayly over their coffee, Maud forcing herself to be merry. Then, just as they arose, and the colonel prepared to go down to the land office, one of the servants returned from the Lakeview post office with the morning mail.

"Two letters for you, my dear," said the colonel, handing his daughter the epistles. "Two for you, and three for myself. You will excuse us a few minutes, Mrs. Devigney?"

"Certainly," returned Alice. "I wish to write a line to Willard, informing him of my safe arrival," and off she ran to the library.

Colonel Willowby turned to his letters, without questioning his daughter concerning her own; therefore, he did not notice how she started and sank back when the handwriting on one of the envelopes met her gaze.

She glanced at her father; then, as if afraid he might question her, she glided out of the room. In [Pg 108]one corner of the hall she tore open the letter and fairly devoured its contents at a glance.

"Oh, Heaven above! Why did she not write before?" she moaned. "I must go at once, no matter what they may think! It would be torture to remain away—a torture I could not bear!"

She thrust the letter into her pocket, along with the other, which, in her excitement, she had completely forgotten. She returned to the dining hall.

"Father—" she began, but he interrupted her.

"I have a letter from Grant Havadale," he said. "He wants me to come down to the Junction to-day on some of the company's business. I am afraid I will have to go, and leave you and your friend until late to-night."

"Business is business, papa," she rejoined, with a forced laugh. "We will have to get along without you."

"If I can I will return on the lake boat." He hurried on, and in a few minutes he was on the way.

He seemed to be growing younger since business matters had taken a brighter turn.

His conveyance was scarcely out of the grounds when Maud sought Alice, who was walking up and down in the sunshine, a light-blue shawl over her shoulders.

"Maud, what a glorious morning! The air is so invigorating."

"Yes, it is, Alice. But, listen: I have a little bad news. I have received a letter telling me some one is sick at a friend's house. I fear I must make [Pg 109]a call, and leave you alone for a few hours, or until some time this afternoon."

"Somebody sick? That's too bad. But don't inconvenience yourself for me. I will manage to make myself comfortable."

"Supposing I order John to take you driving or motoring while I am gone? He knows many of the points of interest."

"Just the thing! And I want to post this note to Willard. I didn't write but a line. I'll send a long letter to-night."

In a few minutes more Maud was in her own room, preparing to go out. She took her purse, opened a casket in her bureau drawer, and filled the purse with money. Then, with a hurried kiss, she said good-by to Alice, and started off on foot, by the road which came up to the rear of the Willowby estate.

Once out of sight, she stopped near a cluster of brush and adjusted a heavy veil over her hat and face, a veil that completely concealed her features, and placed a somewhat faded shawl over her shoulders. Had any one taken the trouble to notice, they would have seen that the skirt she had on was not one of those she was in the habit of wearing.

In the meantime, Alice Devigney continued her walk about the garden, and even took a short turn up the road. Presently John came in sight, returning from Colonel Willowby's trip.

She explained matters and said she would be ready to go for a drive in half an hour. Then she prepared for the outing.

It was past lunch time when she returned, but [Pg 110]a dainty bite was awaiting her, which she relished keenly, for the trip had made her hungry. As she finished her last charlotte russe, she looked out of the window, and saw Henry Cross ride up on horseback. She came out to greet him.

"I hope you can go," he said. "It is such a glorious day."

"Go where?" she asked.

"Why, out on the lake. Did not Miss Willowby get my note this morning?"

"I don't know," returned Alice; and then she told of Maud's going off to visit some sick person. The young man was greatly disappointed; he had hoped to give both of the ladies an afternoon of pleasure. At Alice's invitation, he came in and made himself comfortable.

They were soon on very friendly terms. She spoke of life in Chicago and other Western cities, and he told her much of New York and of the towns and villages about the lake. Then they descended to personalities.

Mrs. Willard Devigney was naturally a shrewd young woman, and it was not long before she guessed the truth—that Henry Cross was in love with Maud. She smiled to herself at this, and it became her instant desire to help matters along. By doing so she imagined she could atone in part for the suffering she had caused Maud the night before.

She openly praised Maud for her goodness of heart and her other virtues, and she found Cross willing to believe all that she said. The time passed quickly and pleasantly.

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It was nearly six o'clock when Maud returned. She came in the side door, and spent a few minutes in her own room before making her appearance below. When she did appear before Cross, her face had lost much of the troubled look of the early morning.

"I am so sorry I had to disappoint you," she said, taking his hand. "But the truth is, I did not open your letter until I had left home. I hope you have had a good time here."

"A very agreeable time, thanks to Mrs. Devigney," he said gallantly. "And, if you wish, we can go out on the lake to-morrow."

She at once consented, and after a few pleasant words he took his leave. When he was gone, Alice playfully patted Maud on the cheek.

"I see through it, my dear," she said softly. "And I think he is a splendid young man, I do indeed."

"Alice, how can you?"

"Oh, I'm an old married woman, you know—and I want to see others happy besides myself. He is rich, too, isn't he?"

"I don't care so much for riches," and Maud Willowby cast her eyes down.

"But you love him—or at least you highly esteem him."

"But, Alice——" Maud hid her head on her friend's shoulder. "Think of—of——"

"Now, Maud, don't be a fool. I wouldn't let the past ruin my whole future, no, indeed! Why, you were going to marry that Chester——"

"Don't, don't! Oh, Alice, no more on that [Pg 112]subject unless you want me to leave you right away!"

"All right, I won't say another word. But don't be a goose, dear. If he loves you—and I can see that he does—and you love him, why, I'd marry him, and I wouldn't bother my head about what's past and gone."

Maud uttered a deep sigh. She seemed to be on the point of speaking, of making some confession, but she changed her mind.

None too swiftly did the evening pass for her. She wanted to be alone, to communicate with her own thoughts, but the presence of Alice in the house rendered this impossible. She was glad when the last good night was said; but nature was now rebelling against the loss of sleep the night previous, and before she was aware she was sound in slumber.

Yet toward morning she began to tumble and toss in a bad dream, and just at daylight she started up with a groan of agony.

"And they say he committed suicide," she muttered. "Oh, how blind!"

Then she was wide awake, and leaped to her feet with a dreadful shiver, the cold perspiration standing out upon her forehead. She shook so that for fully ten minutes she was unable to make the first move toward dressing herself.

But by breakfast time the horror of that dream was gone, and she was once more herself. She suggested a horseback ride into town, and the animals were soon saddled and waiting at the door. The ride lasted almost until noon, and put [Pg 113]more color into her cheeks than anything else could have done.

At the appointed hour Henry Cross came to take the three out on the lake. But just previous to his arrival Alice Devigney pleaded a headache, and at the last moment excused herself. Maud was not altogether pleased at this, knowing it was a ruse; but Alice was firm, and, as a

consequence, the two went off alone, Henry Cross inwardly thanking fortune that headaches did occasionally come to some women.

It was an unusually warm day for that time of the year, and the sun shone forth from a cloudless sky. The surface of the lake was as smooth as glass, the best possible condition for a motor boat.

Everything was in readiness, and soon, under the guidance of an old man who took care of the boat, Cross' craft was speeding through the water rapidly, while Maud and her escort sat in the stern, the girl wrapped in a comfortable coat sweater.

Their course was down the lake and toward the opposite shore, where numerous islands were situated, some having upon them hotels and boarding houses. They stopped at one of the islands for refreshments, and took a walk to a grassy bank overlooking the lake.

He was very attentive, and when she stumbled as they were passing over a little hollow, he was quick to catch her about the waist and support her from falling. His arm lingered a trifle longer than was absolutely necessary, but she did not resent it, and this made him bolder. He led the way to a rustic seat placed beneath a shady tree. His [Pg 114]very silence was suggestive. He looked at her fair hands as they rested in her lap, and rapturously seized one of them.

"Maud," he whispered, and his voice trembled with emotion, "Maud, don't think me too bold or impetuous. I cannot keep silent longer. Don't you remember the happy days of the past when first I revealed to you the passionate ardor of a devoted heart? I love you still, Maud, more ardently than ever I loved you even when I thought you were lost to me. You won't refuse me now, will you, darling?"

He paused and bent down, that he might gaze into her lovely eyes, so shaded with those long, sweeping lashes.

"Oh, Harry! Yes, I know, but—but—"

"I know what you are going to say—that I am too hasty—that I haven't given you time enough to recover from the shock that—"

"No, no, it is not that! But you do not know me thoroughly, Harry. I want to—to—I ought to be candid with you, but I cannot—I really cannot."

"But you love me, Maud? Oh, Maud, light of my life, give me hope, for I am so heart-hungry."

He had placed his hand gently under her rounded chin and raised her face to his own. She could not escape him; she had not the heart to try. She gave way to the bliss of the moment.

"Yes, I love you, Harry. I have loved you through it all."

"Maud, my own!" and he attempted to clasp her to his bosom, but she held him off.

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"Now you know something of how bad I can be," she went on. "I loved you, and I—I—"

"Never mind what you did, my darling! It is enough to know that you love me. Thank Heaven for that love!" and now, despite her resistance, he rapturously pressed her to his breast, heart to heart. "Mine—mine at last!"

She did not answer. The past was completely forgotten, the future ignored. She acknowledged him the master of her heart. No matter what might come between them henceforth, both would know the joy and pain of having loved.

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CHAPTER XIII.

A SETBACK FOR DETECTIVE HULL.

When Miss Frank Barton learned of Violet Harding's sudden disappearance, she was much chagrined, but took care not to exhibit more than ordinary surprise before Mrs. Callum.

"Gone away, you say," she said. "Sudden, wasn't it?"

"Indeed, it was," exclaimed the landlady. It was easy to see she was not pleased. "I never expected to have the room thrown on my hands without some notice."

"Did she say why she was going?"

"She said she was tired of work at the Land Office, and that she had the chance of a good place in Brooklyn."

"I see. Well, you can't blame her for leaving. Did she say where she was going to work in Brooklyn, or live? I have friends down there."

The landlady shook her head.

"She said Brooklyn, and that's all. I don't care, either; but it was a shame to leave my house without warning," and Mrs. Callum marched off in a state of resentment.

Frank Barton lost no time in seeking Hull.

"She has gone—and left no address," she said, and then went rapidly into the particulars.

"Humph! You must have aroused her suspicions," he muttered.

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"I don't see how. I was very careful."

"She was a shrewd girl—too shrewd to show that she suspected you."

"But how could she suspect? I was very cautious."

"Well, it is evident that she has learned something, and that's enough. We must find out where she has gone. You can bet it wasn't to Brooklyn."

"Perhaps it was. I tell you, Jack, she was candid in most things, although her movements were somewhat questionable. It was only her occasional temper that was at fault."

"Bah, don't grow sentimental! She has wound you around her finger, as no doubt she did that Chesterbrook—"

This angered Frank Barton, and she felt, as she did not hesitate to declare, like giving up the job then and there.

"Suit yourself," he said, so indifferently that she cooled down at once; and they both started out to discover what really had become of the young woman.

For a man of Jack Hull's resources this was not a difficult task. He found the man who had taken away her trunk, and learned from him that that article had been taken to a warehouse for storage. But she had appeared with her check for it, and paid a month's charges in advance, and had gone off up a country road leading to Rayville, two miles back of the lake, carrying a large suit case.

It took a full day to trace the flight of the young lady with the suit case, but before sundown it [Pg 118]was accomplished, and he located her at a farmhouse at which several persons were stopping, among them an elderly man, an author, who had written several books on political economy.

During the first week of her stay at the farmhouse Violet Harding showed herself but rarely. When she took a walk, it was usually early in the morning or late in the evening, and always alone, and with her veil over her face.

"She thinks to escape discovery," said Jack Hull to himself. "She received a warning of some sort, and fled to avoid arrest. I guess I might as well put the thumb screws on her."

Yet he hesitated, and deferred the matter from day to day. Then he was called back to New York, and once more set Frank Barton to watch.

When he returned she had no news to tell.

"She is working for an old author who is boarding there. She is acting as his amanuensis—taking down a book in short hand and then writing it out in full. I saw them both at work. But the book is nearly finished, and when it is the author is going away."

"And she'll skip, too," returned Jack Hull. "If her engagement up here had been a perfectly legitimate one, she would not have deceived Mrs. Callum as to her whereabouts."

On the following day the old author took his departure. The detective and his companion saw Violet Harding shake hands with him in the doorway of the farmhouse, but she did not come outside.

But late that evening they saw her come forth, [Pg 119]suit case in hand, and hurry down a side road, where, at a certain point, the evening stage for the Junction passed.

"We can waste no more time on her," said Jack Hull. "I'll adduce facts that will astound her, and then force a confession from her."

Violet Harding was much astonished to be confronted by a strange man on the road. She started to scream, but he checked her.

"Don't do that; I'm not going to hurt you," he said.

"What do you want?" and she tried to shake off the grasp he had taken of her arm.

"You do not remember me?" he asked.

"Remember you?" she questioned, in a puzzled way. "No, I do not remember you," and she spoke the truth, for she had been too agitated after that strange encounter on the bluff in the dusk to make any mental note of the appearance of her rescuer.

He thought she might be telling a falsehood, but he was willing to let that pass. He turned about so that the little light that was left in the sky might fall more upon her face than his own.

"Never mind; I have business with you," he went on. "I want you," and his last words were somewhat stern.

"Oh, sir!"

She attempted to break away, but his grasp could not be shaken off.

"Here, none of that, miss! I guess you know why I want you," he added, as he bent his sharp eyes full upon her.

She looked at him in bewilderment—he saw there [Pg 120]was no sham about that—and his heart sank a bit. He had hoped she would break down, and make the forcing of a confession an easy matter.

"I do not know you, and I do not know your motive for detaining me. Let me go, or I shall scream for help."

"It will do no good, Violet Harding. I arrest you for the murder of Allen Chesterbrook."

He made the announcement as thrilling, as terror-striking, as he could.

He knew when it was advantageous to be impressive. He had broken down criminals before. She screamed with fright, and gazed at him in horror. She tried to speak, but for several seconds the words would not come. He took advantage of the silence.

"It will be useless to utter a denial. I have the proofs of your guilt in my possession. You may as well confess."

Still she did not speak. Then she gave a gasp.

"You think I killed Allen Chesterbrook!" she panted. "You must be mad! He was my—my—best friend!"

"You dare deny the accusation?" he cried. "Remember what I said. I have the proofs of your guilt."

"You have no proofs, since I am innocent. You believe that I killed him. Oh, Heaven above us!" She raised her hands and clasped her forehead. "Who are you?"

"I am a New York detective, and I have watched you ever since the day the murder was committed, I and a companion."

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"Then you have made a great mistake, sir."

"Do you deny that you called on Allen Chesterbrook on that fateful wedding morning?"

"I never called on him."

"Are you willing to swear you were never in his rooms?"

"I—in his rooms! Yes, I am willing to swear."

"But I have proofs of your visit."

"You may have what you think are proofs. But they are not such; they cannot be, for I was not there."

"Do you know whose dagger killed Allen Chesterbrook?"

Again she screamed, this time in anguish. He saw that that shot, at least, had told.

"Yes, yes!" she wailed. "Oh, why do you torture me in this way?"

"Because the law compels me—the world must know the truth," he sternly returned. "He was killed with a dagger belonging to you." She shivered and almost sank to the ground. "You corresponded with him; he sent you money, and got you a position where you might be near each other."

"He was my friend—my best friend."

"And nothing more?"

She hung her head, and the warm blood mounted swiftly into her face.

"Nothing more," she replied softly.

"You are telling what is not true. He was something to you. He——"

"Stop, sir!" On the instant her manner changed, and that violent temper came to the fore. "You [Pg 122]may be a detective, an officer of the law, but you are going too far. Even the law must respect certain private rights, and detectives ought to try to be gentlemen," she added, the last words with almost a sneer.

"Humph!" This was not the style in which he had expected to be addressed. "If you were not in his room, perhaps you will explain how it was that he was killed with your dagger."

"I cannot explain that, excepting to state that the horrible thing was in his possession, and had been for some time. I never liked to own the thing; it was left by my grandfather, Vincent Harding, and I was glad to get rid of it."

"Do you mean to say you gave it to Chesterbrook?"

"I let him have it, yes."

"It was a curious gift."

"People sometimes get rid of things they don't appreciate by giving them away."

"That is true. Did you take it to him, or did he see it at your boarding house?"

"He saw it at the office, where I sometimes used it as a paper cutter, but not often, for I couldn't help but think of the bloody tales my grandfather used to tell in connection with it."

"Humph! Well, can you tell me how——" Hull broke off. He had intended to mention the threads of golden hair and the crinkly hairpin, but he changed his mind. "If you are not guilty—if you were not in his room—you ought to be able to prove an alibi."

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She gave a little cry, half of joy. "I can do that! Why did I not think of it before?"

"You can?" he exclaimed, aghast. "Why, you left your boarding house before nine o'clock that morning, and all thought you were going to the wedding, you—"

"I stopped to see a sick woman, Mrs. Bidwell, and was with her nearly an hour. She can prove it, and so can Doctor Parlington, the minister, for he was there at the time."

Jack Hull felt as if the ground had suddenly slipped from under him. Careful searching had failed to reveal where the girl had been during that all-important time, and here she stood ready to prove an alibi with the greatest of ease. He felt as if he had made very much of a fool of himself.

"Yes, but look here," he went on lamely, "your actions have been very suspicious. Why did you leave Mrs. Callum's so secretly, saying you were going to Brooklyn, and all that?"

She flushed up. "I have my own private reasons for that. They have nothing to do with this other terrible occurrence."

"You won't tell me?"

"Why should I? I can prove an alibi. Isn't that enough?"

"But you say Mr. Chesterbrook was your friend."

"He was—my best friend."

"Then why won't you help me to clear up this mystery? You must know something of his private life."

"I know nothing—absolutely nothing—of who [Pg 124]killed him, nor can I give you any clew. What could a poor girl like me learn when such a great detective as yourself has failed?"

Jack Hull winced, for there was fine irony in the remark. He felt that he had failed, and was beaten. Still he wished to retire from the field gracefully.

"I see you are obdurate. Very well; let it be so. Will you tell me where you are going?"

"Why do you wish to know?"

"In case I want to communicate with you."

She hesitated. "I am not going far; you can find that out by shadowing me. Any letter addressed to me at the Mackanack Junction post office will reach me. Perhaps I may soon return to Lakeview; but in that case I will leave word at the post office, so that the letter can be sent after me. Is that all you want of me? I see the stage is coming."

It would have been the proper thing to have detained her until he could ascertain if her story was really true. But he realized that she had triumphed over him enough, and he was unwilling to give her another chance to belittle him. He could easily run her down if she had lied.

"That is all," he said.

And, with a forced smile, he bowed and walked away to where Frank Barton was awaiting him behind some bushes. A second later the coach rattled up, came to a halt, and Violet Harding got aboard. Soon it was moving away in a cloud of red dust.

Jack Hull was thoroughly dejected, and had [Pg 125]nothing to say on his way back to Lakeview. Frank Barton had heard it all, and she knew better than to force a conversation with her companion at such a time as this. She simply asked him if she should call on Mrs. Bidwell, the sick woman, and he answered in the affirmative.

She called that very evening. The visit was not a long one. She returned to find Jack Hull smoking a strong cigar, and chewing it vigorously at the same time.

"She told the truth," she said.

When Jack Hull heard the report of his assistant, he was deeply perplexed. He realized, with considerable mortification, that he had been following a false clew.

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CHAPTER XIV. A NEW THEORY.

When Frank Barton departed, it was plainly evident to any one that Jack Hull was not in a cheerful mood. He smoked three strong cigars in rapid succession, excitedly chewing the ends as he smoked, and still a scowl clouded his face.

"Never made such a fool of myself in my life," he muttered several times. "Never! I had better go into the backwoods and turn farmer, but even then I wouldn't know enough to go in when it rains."

At last he got up and began walking about the room. This was an indication that he had settled down to hard thinking. His coat came off, and during the next hour he must have covered at least three miles. Finally he stopped short, as if a new idea had entered his brain.

"I'll work it up and see what's in it," he said.

He was as good as his word. On the following morning Frank Barton was sent back to New York, and from that hour Hull began to cultivate the acquaintance of several of the young men who occasionally patronized the bar and billiard rooms of the hotel.

He became firm friends with one in particular, Ned Degroot. Ned could handle a billiard cue with considerable dexterity, and as Jack Hull was [Pg 127]also a skillful player, the two spent much time together over the tables.

It was during the progress of these games that Jack Hull questioned Degroot about Henry Cross. He had seen Cross out with Maud Willowby, and he mentioned the fact.

"Oh, Henry Cross was always sweet on her," said Ned. "He would have married her before she took up with Chesterfield, if he had had the chance."

"They seem to be very friendly now," returned Jack Hull.

"Are they? There! that ends the run for me; go ahead. Well, I suppose, behind it all, Cross is not sorry that poor Allen is out of the way."

"He was an admirer of Miss Willowby, eh?"

"I think so, but, of course, he was rather shy in displaying his admiration. But his quarrel with poor Ches showed pretty much how the wind blew."

"Yes, I heard they had a quarrel. Here, take this fresh bit of chalk. What was the cause of the quarrel?"

"It was over a dance at the Charity Ball. Cross had put his name on Maud Willowby's card for a waltz, and in some way it was obliterated, or crowded out of place, by Allen's writing. Your play again. Well, after the dance was over they both went down to the gentlemen's room and had it out."

"Were there any blows struck?"

"I believe Cross tried to strike Allen in the face with the flat of his hand. Allen wanted to laugh it off, and said Cross had had too much [Pg 128]champagne. Hot words followed freely, and just as I came on the scene Cross caught Allen by the throat, ran him up against the wall, and swore he'd kill him. They were both intensely enraged, and for fear the quarrel would end seriously a dozen men jumped in and separated them."

"Humph! And after that?"

"Oh, after that both cooled down, and refused even to notice each other. I believe Maud brought about some kind of reconciliation later on, but I never heard the particulars."

The game went on for a few minutes in silence.

"How long ago was this?"

"Only last January."

"Cross is pretty well fixed, isn't he?"

"I believe he is. But he is such a close-mouthed fellow no one knows much about his affairs."

"Yes, I met him a couple of times," returned Jack Hull. He was posing just then as a young society man from Philadelphia. "I thought he was peculiar."

"He is—deucedly peculiar," rejoined Degroot. "He is good enough, but he never makes friends, nor has a jolly crowd up in his rooms, like the other fellows. Now try your best, for you only have one more chance."

Jack Hull made a weak attempt to run up and failed. Degroot finished the game in half a dozen strokes; and then the two adjourned to the bar, where drinks and more conversation followed.

The detective had work before him requiring great caution, and he went about it deliberately. He knew where Henry Cross' office was, and knew [Pg 129]there was a boy of sixteen in charge while Cross himself was not there. The boy's name was Mark Jepson, and Hull soon made friends with him.

From Jepson he learned, in a roundabout way, that Henry Cross had come down to the office on the morning of the murder at eight o'clock, and remained there probably half an hour. Then he had returned to his rooms to dress for the occasion.

"It doesn't matter much," said Hull. "I was looking for him that morning, that was all, and I couldn't find him," and he went away, leaving the boy perplexed, but not suspicious.

"By his own confession he was in the house from nine o'clock until the body was found, at least three quarters of an hour later. Let me see if I can't find out whether or not he spent all of that time in dressing for the wedding."

Hull's next move was to see Jackson, the janitor. He knew Chesterbrook's rooms were empty, and, after changing his clothes and putting on a false beard, he called on the man.

"You have a few spare rooms in the building for rent?" he asked.

Jackson was all attention at once. Yes, he had two separate rooms and two suites. Would the gentleman be pleased to look at them?

"I want a couple of rooms, not too high up," said Hull. "I hate to climb stairs, and I see there is no elevator." Jackson's face fell a trifle.

"The suite I was going to show you is on the top floor," he said. "There is another pair, but the lease has not yet run out, and, besides——"

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"Besides what?"

"Well, if you must know, sir, a man was murdered in them. But that doesn't hurt 'em, sir. They have been well cleaned and aired."

"A murder! Then I presume the rooms are full of ghosts and strange noises?"

"Nary a ghost or a noise, sir."

"Too bad! If there were ghosts, I would insist on having the rooms on the spot—if I could obtain them." Jackson stared as if he were confronted by a madman. "I see you are surprised. Let me explain that I am something of a theosophist and spiritualist, and I desire an opportunity to study phenomena of this sort. I am skeptical, and will not believe altogether until I behold some practical demonstration."

"Well, there are no ghosts around here," returned Jackson, who hardly understood the explanation advanced. "So you can't study 'em. But if you are not timid, I guess you will be pleased with the rooms."

"Very well; let me see them."

The janitor lost no time in showing the way to the apartment Allen Chesterbrook had occupied. As he had said, they had been thoroughly cleaned and aired, and they looked bright and cheerful.

"I am particular about my neighbors," said Hull. "Who occupies the room next to this?"

"A very nice young lawyer, sir, who just moved in last week."

"And overhead?"

"A gentleman named Henry Cross, sir; another nice, quiet person."

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"He has lived here quite a while?"

"Oh, yes."

"And you are sure he is quiet? I don't like a crowd overhead, cutting up during the hours I devote to my studies."

"He is very quiet, sir—never has company at all, and you will hardly hear him coming in and going out."

"That suits me, and I think I will take the rooms."

The price was talked over, and Hull asked if a little more furniture might not be put in.

"Oh, yes, sir," replied Jackson. "We merely took it out because Mr. Chesterbrook had so many things of his own. It's stored away in the attic."

"Then get it in readiness, and I will be around this afternoon. Here is my card, and here are a couple of Boston references."

A few more pleasant words followed, and then the detective left. Late in the afternoon he returned accompanied by an expressman, with a couple of trunks, and took possession.

Jack Hull smiled grimly when left alone in the apartment. Here he was domiciled in the rooms of the murdered man, on a quest for the murderer.

A more sensitive fellow might have shuddered at the thought of sleeping in the bed once occupied by Chesterbrook and walking on the bit of carpet over which Jackson had tacked a large rug to hide the spots of blood; but Jack Hull did not shudder. He would have slept with a corpse if, by so doing, he could unravel a mystery and add to his laurels.

"Now I'll have a splendid chance of watching [Pg 132]this Henry Cross," he mused, "and of watching him, too, when he least suspects that he is being observed."

Hull had already conceived an idea for gaining access to Cross' rooms. He remembered that at the coroner's inquest it had been said that the rooms above were exactly like these he was occupying. If that were so, what would be easier than to cut a hole in the top of the closet below, to communicate with the one above?

"I'll do it, and visit his rooms when he's out. I may find more important evidence than Frank Barton discovered in that Harding girl's room."

But he could do nothing that evening, for shortly afterward Henry Cross came in and remained for the night. Hull heard him walk around for probably half an hour before all became quiet.

On the following morning Henry Cross left for his office at half past eight o'clock. Then the detective slipped out for a hasty breakfast, and soon returned and locked himself in. He had brought with him several tools in a tight bag. The tools were to be used in cutting through the ceiling, and the bag utilized for carrying away the litter.

Hull placed a chair in the closet, and on this put a stool. With a flash lamp in one hand and a hammer in the other, he clambered up to begin proceedings.

Instead of being plastered like the rooms, the closet was boarded with narrow, oiled cedar boards, half an inch in thickness. The work had been poorly done, and at the top half a dozen of the [Pg 133]boards were loose. He removed them with scarcely an effort.

"Humph!" he muttered, and the expression meant a good deal. "Contract work, or else—"

He did not finish, but, taking hold of the head of the hammer, he pushed the end of the handle up between the beams upon which the flooring above rested. The boards were nailed down tightly and refused to budge.

"Humph!" muttered Hull again.

Then he stopped, reflected for a few moments, and descended to the floor. He put the hammer down and switched off the lamp.

A few minutes later he was sneaking up the stairs. A half dozen keys and a bent wire were clutched in the hand that was thrust in the pocket of his coat.

He reached one of the doors of Henry Cross' rooms without being perceived. He tried one key after another. None fitted the lock, and he had recourse to the wire. That worked after some manipulation, and he let himself in, and again locked the door from the inside.

His first movement was toward the closet, which, true enough, occupied the same position as the one below. It was filled with clothing, and on the floor rested half a dozen pairs of shoes, boots, and slippers, a fishing outfit, a shotgun, and a pair of spurs.

Noting how the articles on the floor were arranged, or, rather, disarranged, he hauled them out. Then he dropped on his knees, lighted his flash [Pg 134]lamp, and began an examination of the bare boards before him.

"Ah!" the sound escaped him softly. He continued to hunt around, examining every nail and the manner in which it had been driven in.

"Ten-penny nails on the outside everywhere," he muttered to himself. "Six-penny nails around this square between the beams, and half of them in wrong side to the grain, or else the wood wouldn't be split in so many places. An amateur carpenter put down that patch, that's certain. I wonder how long ago?"

He arose and placed the articles in the closet as they had been before. He looked on the shelf above, as if half expecting to find a hammer and a box of nails, but he was disappointed.

"Pshaw! he would be too shrewd to leave them here," he went on, under his breath. "A man who is shrewd enough to admit a quarrel, smoothing it over at the same time, is a slick customer to deal with. I'll hunt elsewhere for the nails that were left over."

From the closet Hull passed over the bureau, the writing desk and the bookcase. They were all unlocked, and he rummaged through them to his heart's content. The bookcase had a desk attached, and in this lay a number of letters and other documents.

At a glance he saw the documents and letters were purely of a business nature. He put them back, and was about to close the desk, when a slip of paper lying in a blank notebook caught his eye. [Pg 135]He took up the slip, saw there was writing on one side of it, and began to read:

"Dear Miss Willowby: Even at this, the last moment, I feel it necessary to write to you, breaking off our engagement forever. You must know what pain this gives me; I would rather take my very life. Sometimes I feel as if I must—but it cannot be otherwise. I know you love me, yet the love of a woman for a man is not alone enough to make those two people happy. You cannot imagine how much I regret that our wedding day is at hand—the mockery of it! Our wedding day, which will never be!

"You will be startled to learn that I—"

He read the slip carefully—three times. His brow contracted into the fiercest of scowls.

"Now what in the devil's name is this? A letter to Maud Willowby, breaking an engagement—a hint at suicide. Who wrote it? How did it come here?" He walked over to the light. "Cross had no occasion to write such a letter, unless it was written years ago, when Chesterbrook cut him out. That handwriting looks familiar, yet I don't remember having seen Cross' handwriting. Humph! Did Chesterbrook write this himself? If he did, what is it doing here? I'll take it with me and study it out."

With the all-important document in his possession, he was soon back in his own rooms. He had specimens of the dead man's handwriting in one of his trunks—specimens he had picked up at the inquest. He brought them out and laid them beside the slip of paper.

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"His handwriting, sure enough. Then Chesterbrook wrote that. Why did he want to break off the engagement?" He paused, and then gave a start. "Can it be possible that that is a forgery, a clever forgery? There are some differences between the writing on that slip and that on those other specimens—the penmanship on the slip is more cramped and heavy. It may be a forgery, and, if it is, what then?"

Again he paused, and now began to walk up and down. Suddenly he came to a halt.

"If he did that, he's a master in crime—a master without an equal. Only the brain of an expert could evolve such a scheme: to kill off his rival, play the part of the generous-hearted, and thereby win the hand of the dead man's sweetheart!"

Jack Hull grew enthusiastic.

"Ah, Henry Cross, no wonder you come and go in silence, and have few friends. A man like you needs no friends; he can rely upon himself. I wonder whom he told first? Probably her father, for didn't the coroner tell me that Colonel Willowby seemed to take no interest in the hunt for the murderer? Jack Hull, you are on the right track at last."

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CHAPTER XV.

AN UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER.

When, long after sunset, Maud Willowby returned home with Henry Cross, the young man was in too happy a state of mind to confront Colonel Willowby or Alice Devigney. Maud had requested him to remain silent for a time concerning what had passed, and he had promised; and now he felt that if he went into the house, they would read the truth in his face.

So he kissed her good night at the gate—a long, tender good night—and went forth humming a popular melody, and never once dreaming of the fearful awakening that was so close at hand.

On the following morning a message came to him, requesting his immediate presence at a certain point along the proposed line of the new railroad. The surveyors had encountered some difficulty, and he must go and straighten matters out.

Next in importance to his love for Maud was his new scheme for wealth, and he hastened off, without stopping longer than to swallow a cup of coffee and a couple of rolls. He went on horseback, and, as the weather looked threatening, carried with him a blanket for the beast and a rubber coat for himself.

He found the surveyors at a spot called Kelly's Gap. Here an old farmer owned a tract of a hundred acres, some woodland, and the rest rocky and [Pg 138]decidedly uneven. The surveyors wished to take one route across the land; the old farmer demanded that they take another. Matters had arrived at such a crisis that the farmer was guarding the land with a shotgun, while the surveyors and linemen were resting in their tent in disgust.

The excitement was such that Cross at once forgot the tender thoughts that had previously occupied his mind. He politely accosted the farmer, calmed his ruffled temper, and at last both adjourned to the farmhouse to talk matters over.

The conference lasted two hours, and Cross won the day, although it cost the company a few dollars. Then the necessary papers were made out, and the young man set the gang once more at work.

"And no more lagging," he said. "Before long winter will be on us, and this road must be well under way before that."

Henry Cross remained on the scene until nightfall. He was about to return to Lakeview, when there came another message, asking him to come up to Cherrytown, a little village two miles to the north of Oakdale. Five thousand railroad ties had been brought in, and they were defective.

Despite the darkness and the fact that it was beginning to rain, the young man set off by a lonely forest road. It was a tedious journey, and he was glad enough when, after missing his way twice, he finally reached the Cherrytown tavern. It was too late to do anything that night, so he put up at the hostelry, and did full justice to the appetizing rabbit stew mine host served up.

In the morning it cleared off for a time, and [Pg 139]Cross hunted up the railroad men and made inquiries regarding the defective ties. Another long wrangle followed, and it took until noon to settle matters again.

At one o'clock the young man found himself on the way to Oakdale, through which he must pass on his journey home. It had stopped raining, but the clouds still hung low, as if holding another downpour in readiness. A cold, raw wind faced him, and he wrapped himself up as best he could in the rubber overcoat, and pulled his hat down over his eyes.

A mile to the northeast of Oakdale runs a mountain torrent, bridged by a stout iron structure, placed there by the county board. As Cross neared this bridge, a sudden blast of wind came rushing down the course of the stream, carrying with it flying leaves and branches, and compelling his horse to come to a halt.

"Phew! But this is rather violent—eh, Dan?" he muttered, as he crouched down in the saddle.
"Wait a bit, boy; we shall not attempt to cross until the storm subsides. We might both be swept into the stream."

As the wind came tearing along more violently than ever, he turned his horse aside to the shelter afforded by a hill of rocks. The wind moderated in a little while, and Cross was about to advance again, but the horse seemed disinclined to go forth. Good-naturedly, Cross decided to humor him a trifle, and they remained where they were.

Three minutes passed, and Cross' attention was attracted to the figure of a woman hurrying along [Pg 140]the road on the opposite side of the bridge. She was plainly dressed, wore a red shawl over her shoulders, and had a veil tied over her hat and face. She was trying to move up a path that led parallel to the stream, and in the teeth of that momentary gale she could scarcely keep her feet.

"She must be hard pressed, or she would wait until the blow was over," thought Henry Cross. "My! the wind almost sweeps her from the ground. If she isn't careful, she'll go over into the stream."

He continued to watch the woman, who kept on, sometimes moving a yard or two, and then scarcely an inch, up the path that led to the summit of a thickly wooded hill.

Suddenly an unusually heavy blast rushed furiously down the water course, and along the path. It lifted the woman from her feet and whirled her into a dense mass of low brush. The hat that had been pinned on so tightly was wrenched loose, and with it came the veil.

"She's down now—perhaps I had better go to her assistance," mused Cross. "But she ought to know enough to stick close to the shelter of the wood. If she—"

He abruptly paused, speechless with amazement. The woman was Maud Willowby!

At first he could not believe it. He leaped from his horse and ran forward to obtain a better view, and, as he did so, the figure on the opposite side of the torrent raised itself up and clutched the hat and veil. There was no mistake—it was really the woman he loved.

He stood dazed, dumfounded. What was she [Pg 141]doing out here, so far from home, alone, and in such weather?

His first impulse was to run to her assistance and ask for an explanation, and he half started across the bridge for that purpose. But reflection made him change his mind, and he ended by drawing back out of sight once more.

She had come there for a purpose—was bound on some errand—had come alone, and, consequently, wished to keep that errand a secret. All this flashed instantaneously through his mind. And he remembered, too, that she had often spoken of her aversion to Oakdale, had often refused to drive to the locality, although some of the roads in the vicinity were most picturesque.

The more he reflected the more he became perplexed. Like many another lover, he became at once jealous of any secret his sweetheart tried to keep from him. He would follow her and see where she went. She might be in peril, and, sooner or later, need his assistance.

By this time Maud Willowby had succeeded in moving out of the direct path of the wind. Standing in the shelter of a huge tree, she adjusted her hat and veil once more. Then, without once looking back, she continued her flight up the hillside path.

Running to his horse, Henry Cross led him behind the rocks and into the woods a short distance, and there tied him to a tree and blanketed him. This done, he crossed the bridge, despite the

raging wind, and followed along the path, keeping the figure before him well in view, and himself on [Pg 142]guard to dart out of sight should she take it into her head to turn around.

It was a disagreeable walk, over masses of mud and stones, and under low-hanging, dripping-wet tree branches. But the young man scarcely noticed this, so occupied was his mind by what was before him.

At last he saw Maud turn from the path and enter a thicket on the side of the hill. Peering through the bushes, he caught sight of a long, low stone cottage set in the midst of a small clearing. At one side of the building was a well-kept garden, and farther on a tidy barn, showing that the dwellers there were neat and thrifty.

Henry Cross paused in the thicket and watched breathlessly as Maud knocked sharply on the back door of the habitation. Three seconds passed, and then the door was opened by an elderly woman, and the girl hastily slipped inside, carefully closing the door after her.

By this time the young man's curiosity was aroused to its highest pitch. He felt assured that he was on the scent of some great secret, but what, he could not for the moment imagine. One thing alone was certain—no ordinary quest had brought Maud Willowby to such a lonely place on such a disagreeable afternoon.

The cottage contained but few windows, each hung with a white curtain on an old-fashioned wooden roller. The young woman had not vanished over two minutes when every curtain in the house was pulled tightly together, although it was still fairly bright outside.

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"She dreads being observed by any stray pedestrian," thought Henry Cross, and this made him more curious than ever to fathom the mystery.

The curtains down, a lamp was lighted in the main room and placed on a table in the center of the apartment. This threw fantastic shadows on the starched white muslin, which grew more and more distinct as the evening advanced.

At the risk of being discovered, Henry Cross approached quite closely to the cottage, and walked completely around it. But nowhere could he see as much of what was going on within as at a certain window on the south side, and here, concealed behind a crooked apple tree, he took up his stand.

For a long while the shadows of the old woman and of Maud Willowby were distantly outlined on the curtain. Occasionally he would see one or the other stop and bend down, and he could see by their gesticulations that they were engaged in earnest conversation.

"If it were not such a lonely place, so far from her home, and such a beastly day, I would not be annoyed with suspicions," he murmured. "But what could bring her——Ah!"

He stopped and looked forward eagerly. Maud Willowby had come to a halt close to the curtain. She stooped down, and the next instant Henry Cross saw her holding a boy in her arms. She caught the boy to her breast, and kissed him several times, and then set him down out of sight.

The young man gave a start and a sigh. But there was no time for conjecture. He heard the [Pg 144]back door of the cottage being unbolted, and Maud Willowby came out. The old woman followed as far as the sheltered porch would permit.

"Oh, yes, I dare say it's all right," Cross heard her exclaim, in a high, disagreeable voice. "But I want the money——"

"You shall have it, Mrs. Darrow, never fear," interrupted Maud Willowby hastily. "In a few days I will have my quarterly allowance, and then I will bring it."

"The doctor's bill was heavy. He wouldn't come away out here to attend the young one unless he was certain of a big fee."

"I suppose not. But it will be all right, do not fear."

"I'll wait a week—no longer. If the money isn't coming then, I'll march up and tell——"

"Hush!"

The young woman's voice was full of fear. Then she dropped her voice to a whispered tone, and Henry Cross did not catch what she said. The conversation continued for a few moments, and then the door was closed, and Maud Willowby sped away along the path by which she had come.

She passed close to where her lover was standing, so close that he could see that she was in a state of nervousness bordering upon hysteria. She began to run, and in less than half a minute was lost to sight in the rain that was now coming down in torrents. For fully five minutes he stood still, unmindful of the storm or the gathering darkness. What did it all mean? What mystery was [Pg 145]this, and in what way did it involve the woman he loved?

"I am harassed with terrible suspicions, with doubts and fears," he murmured. "I must look into this matter. I dare not return home until I have at least endeavored to discover the meaning of Maud's extraordinary conduct."

CHAPTER XVI.

SOMEBODY'S CHILD.

After waiting ten minutes to be certain that Maud Willowby had gone too far to catch him, Henry Cross stalked hurriedly up to the cottage and knocked on the door. The elderly woman at once answered the summons, and asked what was desired.

"I have missed my way in the darkness and the rain," said Henry Cross. "I would like to obtain shelter and a bite to eat."

The woman looked at him doubtfully for a moment. Her face was sharp and shrewd, but not altogether unpleasant.

"Well, I don't know—" she began.

"I will pay you well for any trouble I may give you," he broke in. "I guess it is a good step to Cherrytown."

The mention of pay made the woman brighten up instantly. She was a miser, and money was always acceptable.

"You can come in," she said, and threw the door open to its full extent. "Yes, you are all of two miles from Cherrytown, which, too, is on the other side of the stream. Have you been out hunting?"

And she looked to see if he had a gun.

"No, I have been out with a party of surveyors. Ah, this is comfortable!" he cried, and, throwing off his rubber coat, he advanced to where a bright [Pg 147]fire was burning in a small cooking stove. "I am chilled to the bone."

"No doubt, sir—it's very cold outside. It's a wonder it isn't snow instead of rain."

"It may turn into snow before morning," rejoined Cross. "You have it comfortable enough here," he went on, giving a brief gaze around.

"Yes, sir, me and my man find it comfortable enough, although it will be a bit lonely from now on until spring."

"Your husband keeps that garden I saw outside, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir, he's something of a gardener, and cuts wood besides. He's up the lake just now, on a tow. Will you have coffee, sir—and some fried potatoes, and some broiled rabbit, that was shot only yesterday afternoon?"

"Thank you, they will do very well. Oh, how do you do, my little man."

The last to the boy, who had advanced shyly from the sitting room beyond.

"Roy has been sick," lisped the boy, who was scarcely five years old, and very small for his age. He was rather thin, with curly yellow hair and deep blue eyes.

"Been sick, eh? Well, that's too bad."

"Roy better now. Roy stayed out of bed all day," went on the little chap, growing more confidential, and coming close to Cross.

"He had a touch of the croup, but he's well over it now," explained the woman. "Don't climb on the gentleman, Roy. Can't you see he is all wet? Don't try to take more cold."

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Thus spoken to, the boy retreated to the opposite side of the stove. There seemed to be something about the lad that caused Cross to observe him keenly. The yellow hair and blue eyes especially attracted his attention.

"Want a penny?" he said, with a smile, and drew from his pocket a shining cent.

The child looked at the coin for a moment, and then shook his hand with a slight touch of sadness.

"Roy can't use penny," he murmured. "Roy never sees no stores no more—tandy stores."

"Well, put it in your bank," and Cross pressed the coin into the thin hand. "A nice little fellow. Is he your own, madame?"

"Oh, he's good enough—when he's out of mischief," she replied evasively. "Roy, you had better run into the other room now," she continued.

"Roy wants to talk to man," lisped the child resolutely.

"The gentleman is going to have his supper, and you must not bother him. Run in and play with the new blocks you got last week."

The child still hesitated, but a warning shake of the hand from the woman decided the matter, and he backed out of sight. The woman at once shut the door between the two rooms.

A table was soon set, and Henry Cross took the chair the woman placed for him. He drank the coffee eagerly, but his appetite was gone. Yet he lingered long over the various dishes, wondering how he might gain the information he sought. He thought it extremely odd that the woman had [Pg 149]not answered his question concerning the parentage of the child.

Presently there was heard a hammering on the closed door.

"Mammy Darrow, Roy want a light; it's all dark here, and Roy's afraid!" came in childish tones, full of fear.

The woman started up and hurried into the next room. A blow followed, then a cry of pain and fright combined, and then silence. She came back to the kitchen, frowning darkly.

"He is such a bother—when he can't have his own way," she said, by way of an explanation.
"Will you have another cup of coffee?"

"Thank you, yes. And, if you do not mind, I will take off my boots and dry them under the stove. That was a very good supper indeed."

He went back to the chair by the stove. He wished very much that he might interview the little boy, satisfied that to question the woman concerning Maud Willowby's visit would be useless. He thought for a while, and then waited for a blast of wind to come along and rattle the windows.

It came, driving the rain before it furiously. The woman busied herself with the dishes, and did not mind. But he sprang up.

"Did you hear that?" he cried.

"Hear what?" she queried, with a startled look.

"That noise outside—over there." He pointed in the direction of the barn. "It sounded like some cattle breaking loose."

"It must be the cows. They have caused me so [Pg 150]much trouble! Maybe the barn door has blown open."

She paused and looked at him.

"I'll go out for you," he said. "Just wait till I put on these boots again." He began to struggle with the articles in question. "Confound it! they are all wet, and I can't squeeze in my feet," he panted.

"Never mind, I'll go!" returned the woman.

She caught up a big bag lying on a chair, flung it over her head, and rushed out of the cottage.

Henry Cross banged the door shut and locked it. Three steps brought him to the sitting room. He hurried inside, and found the little boy crouching on a lounge, crying softly to himself in the darkness.

"Don't cry any more," he said kindly. "Mammy Darrow has gone outside."

"She—she won't let me have a—a light, and Roy af—afraid of the dark!" sobbed the little one.

"It's too bad. But don't mind—the darkness never hurt any one. Who is Mammy Darrow—your mother?"

"Oh, no, sir! My mamma is a nice lady—only she makes me stay with Mammy Darrow," and again the child sobbed.

"What is your mamma's name?" and Henry's heart arose in his throat as he asked the question.

"Mamma's a nice lady," returned the child.

He would say no more—having evidently been drilled into this little speech.

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"And where is papa?" asked the young man, trying a new course.

"Papa is dead." The little boy did not appear to be sorry, but merely stated the fact as a bit of news of no great importance. "Will you make Mammy Darrow give Roy a light?" he went on eagerly.

"Perhaps, if you won't tell her I came in here to speak to you. She is out at the barn, and I slipped in because I thought you were alone in the dark."

"You is a good gen'man. Roy won't say nuffin."

"Why won't mamma take you home with her—away from Mammy Darrow?"

"Cause she can't—the great black bear will eat her up." The child's eyes flashed bravely. "Roy is going to fight big black bear when Roy is growed up, an' kill him!"

"What is your other name, Roy?"

The boy stared vacantly for a moment.

"Roy is name—only got Roy name. Don't want no other, 'cause mamma says Roy nice name."

"So it is—a very nice name. Does mamma come to see you very often?"

"Mamma come—come once a while." The child hesitated. "Mamma can't come no more times'n that—the big black bear won't let her."

"I wish I could help you to kill the big black bear, so you could go to your mamma. Did she come when you were sick?"

"Yes, an' afterward, too. She was here to-day—Oh, dear, Roy didn't mean to tell so much!"

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And the child pouted, fearing he had done a great wrong.

"Never mind." Henry Cross turned away his face, fearful that even this little one might notice the change that was creeping over it. "I shan't tell anybody, so the big black bear won't hear of it—or Mammy Darrow. So mamma came to-day—in all the rain? Then she must have gone away just before I came, eh?"

"Yes, just before," replied the little boy innocently.

The words were like a dagger thrust to Henry Cross. He had feared—yet hoped against hope—and now? He could hardly keep from groaning aloud, the truth was so keen, so bitter. Oh, the endless misery of this hideous discovery!

He looked at the boy again, turning so that the light of the lamp in the kitchen might fall on the childish face. The resemblance was startling. There were Maud's own blue eyes, and that hair would soon be like her own. Maud Willowby was evidently the mother of this boy.

The mother! He felt like rushing out into the storm, into the darkness and the rain. The worse the raging of the elements, the better—if it would help to drown out that something which was strangling him. He tried to suppress his agitation, to speak calmly to the child, but it was impossible.

"How old are you?" he gasped, at last.

The boy did not answer. He was frightened, and once more he burst out crying. The childish wailing had a calming effect upon Cross.

"There, there, don't cry; I didn't mean to be [Pg 153]rude. Hark! Mammy Darrow is coming back. I will ask her for the light for you; but, remember, don't tell her I came in to speak to you. One word more—has mamma blue eyes and golden hair, like your own?"

"Ye-es, only mamma's eyes is bluer," faltered the little one.

Henry Cross groaned.

"That's all, Roy; good night. Remember not to say I came in and talked to you."

Mrs. Darrow was already knocking loudly on the kitchen door. With a boot in one hand, Cross walked across the floor and opened it.

"I locked it so the wind couldn't blow it open. My boots are terribly shrunken," he went on, eying that in his hand critically. "Anything seriously wrong at the barn?"

"Nothing that I could see," was the woman's reply. She gazed sharply at her visitor, and threw the wet bag over a box behind the stove. "I found a tree branch blown down. It must have been that. The rain is letting up a bit."

"Is it? Then I must be off."

Henry Cross began at the boots again, and finally slipped them on his feet.

"How much do I owe you, my good woman?" "Anything you wish to pay, sir," she replied. She had sized him up as being rich, and well able to compensate her liberally.

He handed over a dollar, which seemed to please her, for she received it with numerous thanks. Then she held his rubber coat so that he might get into it with ease.

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"The little boy in the next room has been crying," he said, when at the door. "Let him have a little light, just to please me, won't you? I dislike to see children crying on account of the dark."

"He can come out in the kitchen now," she returned; and then, with a brief good night, Henry Cross left the cottage, and plunged down the narrow pathway into the darkness.

He stumbled on like a blind man, falling more than once, and picking himself up without scarcely knowing it. His mind was in a whirl, so like an electrical shock had this revelation come upon him. Maud Willowby, the woman he loved, was the mother of that child! He could think of nothing else.

But by the time the bridge at the foot of the hill had been reached and crossed, and he was once more beside his shivering horse, he had calmed down somewhat. Then he remembered other things.

"I see it all. Now I comprehend the meaning of those songs at the piano—that talk of homeless orphans," he murmured. "She wanted to test me. She had some scheme for marrying me, and then bringing in that child as one to be adopted. And she was so fearful of her secret being discovered that she tried to make people think she did not like the surroundings at Oakdale, and would never travel in that direction."

He sprang on his horse, and once more the head of the animal was turned toward Oakdale. He drew his rubber coat close about him, and communed with his own sad thoughts.

"Yes, she was determined to marry me, in spite [Pg 155]of her guilty secret, she loved me so!" He drew a long breath: there was consolation in that. "Once my wife, she would trust to luck and woman's ingenuity for the rest. Who is the father of that child? Not Chesterbrook; she

could not have known him so long back. But she might have—Chesterbrook used to travel about a great deal, so I have heard. Ah!"

The interjection came so suddenly that the horse stopped short, thinking it a command to halt. The mind of Henry Cross had gone back to that morning in Chesterbrook's room—to the slip of paper he had picked up by the desk. He remembered the words—every one of them was burned upon his brain—and he repeated them to himself now.

"Chesterbrook had a cause—he had a cause!" he whispered hoarsely. "He had discovered her secret, had learned that she was not what he had thought her. And to think that I risked so much to gain her!"

He broke off and shuddered like one who is going insane. He plunged his spurs deep into the animal, and it started off on a mad gallop. The young man felt as if he had played for a fortune—for life itself—and lost.

He had always pictured her as a sweet, innocent girl, with a past that was beyond suspicion, and to have this picture torn to shreds caused him the keenest anguish.

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CHAPTER XVII.

A NIGHTMARE, OR WHAT?

Jack Hull had gone back to cigars that were far from strong, and that meant a good deal. He smoked strong cigars only when perplexed, or when doing what he called "some tall thinking." When his mind was clear and tranquil, he preferred mild cigars.

He was convinced that he was making good progress—that at last he was on the right track; and this time there would be no mistake, he was positive of that. He had had a long and very frank talk with Colonel Willowby. He had not denied that he was a detective; he had acknowledged it at once, and he had come right to the point about the suicide theory.

At first the colonel had been startled and dismayed. He had tried to shift about, to avoid the subject. But Jack Hull had pinned him down in such a fashion that there was no escape, and he had told the whole truth, as he knew it.

"It was a suicide, so you may as well drop the matter," had been his words. "But for my sake, and the sake of my daughter, say nothing of it. If you have lost time over the case, send your bill to me, and I will pay it."

"I want no pay. I was not regularly engaged upon the case," Hull had made answer. "And if poor Chesterbrook was a suicide, I shall be the [Pg 157]last man in the world to do that which will injure your daughter's feelings," and then, after thanking the colonel, he had gone off, laughing in his sleeve over the way he was tightening the cords about Henry Cross.

Hull found the hammer, too, that had been used in nailing down that bit of boarding in the center of the closet floor in Cross' apartment. The discovery was the result of shrewd conjecture.

One day, when Cross was away from home, he had reasoned it all out. The hammer had been taken away, not thrown away. Then where to? Why, to his office, of course. Jack Hull had gone to the office.

"I would like to borrow a hammer and a couple of nails. My wagon has broken down around the corner."

The boy in charge had lent him a hammer, and handed over a box containing six-penny nails—nails of the same size as those used in that bit of flooring. He had, in a roundabout way, asked the boy about the hammer, and learned that Henry Cross had brought it to the office, along with the nails, two days after the murder.

So matters were progressing admirably, and Jack Hull changed from dark cigars to those of lighter shades. He felt on very good terms with himself, and when a minstrel company opened up for three nights at the Lakeview Opera House, he attended one of the performances and laughed loud and long at the fun.

But that night something happened which gave him a shock, and caused him intense wonderment.

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It was a little after midnight. After coming home from the opera house, he had thrown himself down in an easy-chair, and lighted a cigar.

For a long while he had watched Henry Cross day and night, but had discovered nothing out of the ordinary. The young man was evidently interested in the new railroad, and when he went off on what Hull ascertained were purely business trips, he did not follow his man.

He listened, but not a sound came from the rooms overhead. He rightly guessed that Henry Cross was in bed and asleep.

"Humph! He little thinks that some one is on his track," muttered Jack Hull. "A few more bits of evidence, and my chain about his neck will be complete. What a fool I was not to think of him before—but the dagger and the hairpin led me astray, and Frank Barton's discoveries only

confused me. Confound it! a woman never did do much in the detective line. I achieve better results when I work alone, as I'm doing now."

Jack Hull continued to ruminate until the cigar was all but consumed. Then he threw the end away and prepared to go to bed.

He had just removed his coat when a noise overhead caught his ear. He paused to listen, and heard a bed creak. Then there came to his ears the sounds of some one walking across the floor.

"Henry Cross has arisen," he murmured. "Why, I wonder?"

He heard the steps move about slowly. Then he heard a door open and close.

"It was his door—I'm certain of that," went [Pg 159]on Jack Hull. "He must be—he's coming downstairs," he added, as he peeped out of his own door. "Hello! he's in his pajamas."

Hull was right. Henry Cross wore the pajamas in which he had retired. In his right hand he carried a bit of brown wrapping paper. His eyes were almost closed, and he moved with an uncertain step.

"He must be sick," mused the detective. Then he gave a start. "No, by Jove! he's walking in his sleep."

Hardly had Jack Hull made the discovery than he heard a step coming from another direction. Jackson, the janitor, had heard the door open and shut, and had arisen to see what was the matter.

The janitor was about to call to Cross, but Jack Hull glided up to him and clapped a heavy hand over his mouth.

"Hush!" he whispered. "Don't you see he is asleep? Do not disturb him. I want to study the phases of somnambulism; they relate to theosophy and spiritualism."

"Walking in his sleep!" muttered Jackson, in astonishment.

Then he remembered what his new tenant had previously said about his studies, and retreated a few steps.

In the meantime, like one in a dream, Henry Cross had glided forward to the door leading to the detective's front room. It was still open, yet he put out his hand and turned an imaginary handle before entering.

"He has entered your room!" gasped Jackson.

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"Exactly. Come softly; we will follow him," whispered Jack Hull.

He was trembling himself, not from fear, but with expectation. He had heard before of criminals doing strange things in their sleep.

Silently they glided like two shadows after Cross. They found him standing in the center of the front room, holding the piece of paper before him. He hesitated for some time; then, with a firm step, walked to the side of the room where Chesterbrook's desk had stood, and placed the paper down—on the top of one of Jack Hull's trunks.

"Humph!" muttered the detective. Jackson looked frightened, but held his tongue. Both wondered what Henry Cross would do next. "It will tell the tale," thought Hull.

Slower than ever before, Henry Cross moved toward the back room, where stood the bed precisely as it had stood during Chesterbrook's occupancy. Henry Cross passed the bed, and approached the closet in the corner.

He opened the closet door and came to a halt.

He did not move for several minutes—minutes that to Jack Hull and the janitor seemed an age.

Suddenly his whole manner changed. His face grew set and determined, his hands were tightly clenched, and he bent forward as if about to spring at something or some one. Leaving the closet door open, he stole forward until the foot of the bed was reached.

In one corner of the room, within arm's length, stood a bureau, upon the top of which rested a pair of gloves and a comb and brush. Stretching out [Pg 161]his hand, Henry Cross felt over the top of the bureau until his fingers came in contact with the brush. He clutched the brush by the handle, as one might clutch a dagger. Whirling around rapidly, he brought the end of the brush down through the air, as if striking hatefully at something. The movement was made but once, then his hand relaxed, and the brush fell with a dull sound on the heavy carpet.

"Merciful heavens——" began Jackson, but he got no further.

Again Jack Hull's hand was pressed over his mouth, and one look at the detective's eager, excited face was enough to make him dumb once more.

Henry Cross was again moving, once more toward the closet in the corner. But ere he reached it a visible tremor agitated his frame, and turning about he appeared to be excitedly contending with several imaginary assailants. At last he acted as if he had overpowered them, or escaped from them, and on a run he dashed toward the door through which he had entered.

Jack Hull and Jackson followed, but he was too swift for them. Before they could get outside, Henry Cross had disappeared up the stairs. They heard his door open and close, heard the key turn in the lock, and heard the bed creak—and then all became silent.

"Gone to bed again!" whispered Jackson, in a voice trembling with emotion.

"Yes, he has gone to bed," returned Jack Hull dryly. "His nightmare is finished."

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"But did you see it—how he grabbed up the brush and viciously struck at some imaginary victim?" went on the janitor. "Merciful heavens, man, if you only knew the whole story!"

"I do know the whole story, Jackson. Come into my rooms; want to talk to you," and clutching the janitor by the arm, Jack Hull pushed him into the front room once again, and closed the door. "Sit down."

"He may come back."

"I think not. I'll see that both doors are locked. There, now we are safe enough! What do you think of the whole business?"

Jackson was silent, hardly daring to utter aloud the thought that was in his mind. At last he looked at Jack Hull in a shamefaced way.

"Do you know the whole story?"

"I do."

"That poor Mr. Chesterbrook was killed right there—stabbed to the heart with a dagger?"

"Exactly."

Again Jackson paused.

"Mr. Cross has the rooms directly overhead—had 'em when poor Chesterbrook's life was taken."

"I know that, too. Go on! What do you think? Out with it!"

"I'd rather not say, sir; Mr. Cross always looked such a nice man," stammered Jackson.

"Humph! I thought so," and Jack Hull's eyes lighted up. "It looks as if he had committed the murder, and was having bad dreams over it. Isn't that it?" he added sharply.

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"Yes, sir. But, Lord love you, sir, Mr. Cross is a gentleman——"

"Of course, of course. But gentlemen can do violent things when they are worked up to it."

"And you really believe he did it, sir?"

The janitor's eye expressed the intense fear and agitation under which he was laboring.

"Never mind what I think, Jackson, I am very glad that you were present to witness this—this—nightmare with me. Now I want you to make me a promise."

"What, sir?"

"That you will not tell a soul of this for one week."

"Why, sir?"

"As I said before, I want to make sure of all the links in this extraordinary case. It is the best chance I ever had, and I wish to present a chain of incontrovertible evidence. Keep your mouth tightly closed, and watch with me, and I can give you my word that before the week is out you will see and hear of things you never even suspected."

"Do you think he'll git 'em again?"

"Never mind—you'll be astonished, mark my words. Just keep quiet."

"All right, sir; I'll not say one word. But, it can't be possible that Mr. Cross did that—no, sir, never! He's dreaming, that's all."

Shivering at the very thought, Jackson walked from the room, and in the semidarkness of the large hall hastened to his apartments as if pursued by the ghost of the murdered man. It is, perhaps, needless to say that he passed a sleepless night.

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So also did Jack Hull, but for a different reason. The detective's ears were on the alert to catch the faintest sound from upstairs. But his watch until daylight was without reward, for Henry Cross did not again leave his bed.

After that Jack Hull rarely retired until the gray streaks of dawn were beginning to show in the east. Then he slept until noon, after which he dined, and continued his secret work of forging the chain of evidence about the unsuspecting lodger overhead.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

WHAT JIMMIE REMEMBERED.

A great change had come over Henry Cross. His step was no longer elastic, the peculiar smile that lighted up his face so often was gone, and he appeared old and haggard. "Must be going into hasty consumption," said some, and several replied, with knowing winks: "Oh, he's in love, and his girl has gone back on him."

He had made an engagement with Maud Willowby to call the next day, but had sent word excusing himself, stating that his business demanded all his attention for the next few days.

The night following the terrible discovery had been a fearful one. He had slept only a part of the time, and then his mind was disturbed by such horrible things that he was glad enough when consciousness returned. And yet the awakening was equally painful.

It had been his intention to spend the morning at the office looking over a number of legal documents. Now he was in no condition to do this. He breakfasted early, and then went around to the livery stable for his horse.

"I will take a ride, and that may do me some good," he reasoned.

The storm of the previous day had cleared away, leaving the sky bright with sunshine. The roads were somewhat muddy, but this he did not mind, [Pg 166]and once out of Lakeview he dashed off at a mad gallop.

Once or twice he was half inclined to visit again the lonely stone cottage in the woods, with the hope of learning more of the mystery surrounding the little boy. But each time something induced him to change his intention, and he passed by the hillside road and rode on to Cherrytown.

Here he was seen by a foreman of the railroad gang, and hailed. More difficulties were on hand, and in straightening them out Cross temporarily forgot that which was driving him crazy.

Noon found him riding rapidly toward Oakdale. As he neared the village he came up alongside of an empty coach, driven by a rigid figure in blue cloth and silver buttons. He was about to pass on when a familiar voice hailed him:

"Mr. Cross!"

He looked back. The figure was that of Jimmie Neirney. He slackened his speed, for he had not seen the faithful Irishman since the days of the inquest.

"Well, Jimmie, so you have a job as coachman, eh?" he said pleasantly.

"I have a job doin' most everything, sir," replied the man. "I'm valet, coachman, butler, and ginaler man all in wan, sir."

"Indeed! I hope the pay is good, to recompense you for your numerous duties," and Cross managed to utter a feeble laugh.

"Pretty good, sir; I wouldn't kape my situation otherwise, not me. But seein' you, sir, put me in mind to ax you a question. Have the police learned [Pg 167]anything yet about poor Mr. Chesterbrook? I don't hear much news up here."

"As far as I know, they have learned nothing. I am inclined to think they have dropped the case."

"Bad luck to 'em, sir, for that. Mr. Chesterbrook was too good a man to let his murderer git off so easy."

"They had no clew, so knew not in what direction to look for the guilty person."

"I reckon they didn't work very hard—seein' there was no reward," replied Jimmie, with a shrewd shake of his fiery head.

"Do you think you could find the murderer if a big reward was offered?"

"The reward wouldn't make no difference to me, sir, not a mite. If I knew who killed poor Mr. Chesterbrook, I would hand him over to the hangman at wanst, sir, an' ax not a penny for it."

"I believe you, Jimmie. Now I must be on my way. My horse is faster than your team."

"He's faster than I dare drive this old coach, sir, that's true for you. But hold on a bit, please, sir. I want to spake of something else."

Henry Cross drew up again.

"All right; what is it?"

"Something has been on me mind, sir, for some time. I didn't think of it at all before—at the inquest. But, perhaps, it's of no importance, anyway."

"Something you forgot to tell about the case?" asked Henry Cross quickly.

"Not that exactly, but something I might have [Pg 168]mentioned, if I had thought of it, which I didn't, I was that excited."

"And what was that?"

"It was about a woman, sir—a woman I saw leave the house by the back door on that morning. I forgot all about her until after I left Lakeview and came here."

The young man became interested at once.

"You saw a woman leave the building in which Mr. Chesterbrook lived on the morning of the murder?"

"I did, sir—that is, I'm almost sure I did. I didn't give her much attention at the time, you see."

"And she left by the back door?"

"Yes, sir."

"When was this?"

"It runs in my mind it was when I went downstairs to Jackson's sitting room."

"And what time was that?"

Jimmie Neirney thought for a moment.

"It must have been a little after nine o'clock, sir. I went down an' talked to Jackson some little while before the machine came up for Mr. Chesterbrook. I couldn't say to the minute, sir."

"Did you see the woman's face?"

"No, sir."

"Do you remember anything of her looks?"

"She had a veil over her face; I remember that, sir."

"Was she tall or short?"

"Rather tall, sir."

"And how was she dressed?"

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Jimmie shook his head.

"I couldn't tell you, sir."

"Try to think. This clew may be of importance."

Little did the driver of the coach dream of what was passing in his questioner's mind.

"If I should make a guess, I should say she wore a red shawl, sir," returned Jimmie slowly. "But it would be only a guess."

"She had on a shawl. You are sure of that?"

"I should say so, sir."

"And was her dress dark or light? You ought to remember that?"

"It was dark—black or brown, or something like that. But do you really believe she had anything to do with it?"

"I'm sure I don't know. Where did she come from?"

"I can't say that, sir. As I remember it, I was just goin' down the stairs when I heard a rustle of a skirt, an' I looked around to see her goin' out of the back door and down the stairs into the yard, where some clothes was dhryin'."

"And you didn't see where she went?"

"Not at all, indade; I forgot her the next minit, so I did, an' didn't think of her again, as I told you, until I was up here an' settled down in my new place."

Henry Cross drew a long breath. Was this news really of importance? If given to the police, would it lead to anything?

"What do you think of it, sir?" asked Jimmie, after waiting some time for a reply.

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"I don't know what to think, Jimmie. That woman might know something of the murder, but—
—"

"It's not likely, sir—that's what you was going to say, is it not? I thought as much, an' I might as well not go to the throuble of telling the officers."

"Do as you think best. The woman might have been only a book agent or something like that."

By this time Oakdale had been reached, and Jimmie brought the coach to a halt in front of a store on the main street. A lady came forth to enter the turn-out, and Henry Cross rode on his way.

The young man had been greatly stirred by what the Irishman had related. He knew that women visited his house but rarely. It was such a typical bachelor's home he had never seen a woman upon the floor he occupied in all the time he had been there.

He remembered how Maud Willowby had been dressed the day before—that faded brown skirt, the red shawl, and the veil, and he remembered, too, that she was tall. But he refused to think further.

"Bah! The discovery of yesterday has turned my head completely," he muttered. "It is ridiculous to think that she was even near the place on the morning of the murder. She was at home,

being dressed for the wedding—surrounded, no doubt, by one or two friends, and attended by servants. I must be getting foolish!"

He rode through Oakdale, and it was not until the middle of the afternoon that he turned homeward. But he could not dismiss the veiled [Pg 171]lady from his mind, and, after putting up his horse, he paid a visit to the back yard.

This was a very ordinary place. In the center was a grass plot, with four wash-line posts at the corners; on one side was a large ash box, and on the other a pile of packing cases, left there by various people who lived in the house. The yard was surrounded by a high board fence, with a gate in a far corner, through which the tradesmen who supplied Jackson with goods came and went. The gate led to an alley which opened on the street in the rear, next to a lumber yard.

Henry Cross looked around the yard and into the alleyway, but nothing of interest caught his eye. He looked at the various houses in the neighborhood, and noted that none of the windows looked directly down on the place. He looked over the grass plot and along the brick wall to the gate, and even went out to the street beyond, but failed to make any discovery.

"A fool's errand, as I thought," he mused, and went to his rooms, innocent of the knowledge that Jack Hull's eyes were on him and had taken in every detail of his movements.

Then his thoughts went back to Maud Willowby and to what he had seen during the storm. His heart was full of bitterness, and he was in a state of deep perplexity. What should he do—remain silent a while longer, or go to Maud at once and frankly ask for an explanation?

He dreaded to do the latter, but it seemed the only proper course, disagreeable as it was. He wanted to be open with her—he disliked secrecy—in [Pg 172]a case of this kind. And his heart was burning with anxiety to know the truth—hoping that there must be some terrible mistake—that she was still all he had fancied her.

His thoughts became unendurable, and a sense of suffocation warned him that his rooms were close. He felt that he needed air and exercise. In a few moments he put on his hat and overcoat once more and sallied forth. He would run down to his office, late as it was, and see if he could not forget himself in looking over those law papers which were awaiting his attention.

It was drawing toward sundown, and, as the atmosphere was quite cold now, few people loitered upon the streets, and these hurried by quickly, bent upon reaching their destinations. A dozen folks passed Cross, and then a colored woman, whom he recognized as Nancy Motley, the old family servant at Colonel Willowby's mansion.

She was well beyond him before he appeared to remember her, so preoccupied was he with his own thoughts. Then, taken by a sudden notion, he wheeled about and followed her.

She carried a pair of well-worn shoes under her arm, and was bound for a cobbler's shop. She had almost reached the door of the establishment when he overtook her.

"Where are you going, Nancy?"

"Oh, Mr. Cross, it dat yo', sah? I'se gwine ter leab dis pair ob shoes in Tom Quigg's shop, sah."

"Oh, all right. When you come out I want to talk to you."

[Pg 173]

"Yes, sah."

The colored woman smiled and passed into the place. She anticipated some message for Maud, with a liberal tip for carrying the same. In two minutes she was outside again.

"Come over to my office," went on Henry Cross. "It is too cold to talk in the street," and he led the way.

The office was not far off. The boy in charge was just closing up for the day, and looked in surprise at his employer as he entered.

"It's all right, Mark," said Cross. "You can go. I'll lock up myself when I am through. Has any one called?"

"Only Mr. Pardue, sir, and he said he would come again to-morrow at noon."

The boy was anxious to get away, and in another minute he was ready for departure. He said good night politely, and went off whistling cheerfully.

"Sit down, Nancy," said Cross, motioning the colored woman to a chair by the little cylinder stove. "You must be tired. You are not in a hurry?"

"Not exactly, sah—no, sah," and down she plumped, for she tipped the scales at two hundred. She had always been fat, happy, and good-natured, because she believed in taking life easy. "I was gwine ter buy me a new wrapper at Salter's, but dat kin wait, sah."

"I want to ask you a few questions, Nancy," he went on uneasily. "They really don't amount to much, but I just happened to think of them."

"Yes, sah."

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"You have been with the colonel's family a good many years, haven't you?"

"Yes, sah."

"I thought so. I want to ask a few questions about them. Perhaps you know why."

"Yo' is in lub wid Miss Maud, dat's why," responded Nancy, and her fat form shook with laughter. "Go on, Mistah Cross; I'se yo' friend in dis mattah, cos I always liked yo'; yo' knows dat, don't yo'?"

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CHAPTER XIX.

THE COLORED WOMAN'S STATEMENT.

Henry Cross was compelled to smile in spite of the serious and weighty thoughts that were engrossing his mind. He stopped short in his pacing up and down the office.

"Yes, you have always been my friend, Nancy, ever since I knew you. That is why I come to you now."

The colored woman felt flattered at this speech, and her mouth broadened even more than before.

"Yo' kin rely on me tellin' yo' de truf," she said.

"How old was Miss Maud when you went to live with the colonel's family?"

"She was about twelve yeahs, sah—jess a slip ob a child, wid wild, golden hair a-streamin' down her back. I kin remember her a-playin' in de back garden down in Fairwood—as happy as de honey bees dat was a-buzzin' about, sah!"

"She lived at Fairwood until she came here four years ago, did she not?"

"Yes, sah—that is, when she was home. She went to boardin' school fo' three yeahs, jess befo' de family moved yeah—to a place way out in Pennsylvania."

"Oh! And she came from the boarding school to Lakeview?"

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"Yes, sah. De colonel was all settled yeah when she came back."

"I knew she had been to school somewhere. And—and she knew Mr. Chesterbrook before she came here, didn't she?"

The colored woman rolled her eyes in thought.

"I don't know as she did, sah. It might be, sah, but I nebber heered tell ob it, sah. But he's dead an' gone now, Mistah Cross, so wot's de use ob——"

"Oh, I only thought to ask, that's all," he interrupted. "By the way, wasn't there another gentleman friend who used to call on her at that time?"

Nancy Motley shook her head.

"No, indeed, sah. When Miss Maud came from de boardin' school she was quite a different young lady, sah, dan she is now. She didn't hab no company, an' she didn't want none. De colonel used to try to git her to go out, but she didn't eben want to do dat. She used to hav some school friend dat libed a good way off, an' she went once in a while to visit her, an' dat was all. Yo' was about de fust gentleman frien' she had in Lakeview; an' den Mr. Chesterbrook came along, an' if you hadn't a-been so shy—excuse me fo' sayin' it—yo' might have been de chosen one long ago, sah, to my way of thinkin', sah," and again Nancy Motley smiled broadly in a way that made Henry Cross' heart ache.

"We do not always know things when we should," he said, somewhat softly, and with a double meaning. "Did Miss Maud come home [Pg 177]often from school—say, during the holidays or at other times?"

"Werry seldom, sah. De colonel went West on business half a dozen times, so she had small occasion fo' dat, sah."

"Yes, I've heard of the colonel's Western trips. By the way, Mrs. Devigney is one of her old school friends, I believe. I wonder why she didn't come on to take part in the wedding?"

"She couldn't, sah—at least so she told Miss Maud. But dar was enough others, sah—more'n Miss Maud wanted."

"Did you help her to dress on that awful morning—I mean before she and the colonel took the coach for the church?" and, to hide his eagerness, the young man turned to the window and stood staring out.

"I helped her a bit, sah, but she didn't want no 'sistance—said so herself."

"Didn't want you to assist her on her wedding morning! That was strange."

"Miss Maud wasn't herself dat morning, sah. I is inclined to beliebe dat spirits was around her, a-tellin' her dat all wasn't gwine ter be right," and the colored woman rolled her eyes solemnly.

She came from a place where hoodooism flourished, and she was a firm believer in spirits and the like.

"And she dressed entirely alone?"

"I was wid her in de early mornin', sah, about eight o'clock. Den she sent me away to de kitchen to help on de weddin' lunch, wot dey was gwine [Pg 178]to hab arfter dey came from church—an' locked herself in her room all alone, sah."

"And didn't you go to her again?"

"I went up arfter a while an' knocked, but she wouldn't answer me, an' I t'ink she must hab had a spell on, sah—indeed I do. Den I went away; an' de next t'ing I knew she was all dressed an' in the parlor wid de colonel. She was as white as a ghost, an' I was suah she was sick, sah; but she wasn't—leastwise, she said she wasn't—an' den dey drobe off to church, an' me an' John and Mary, de cook, follered in de yaller carriage—an' yo' know de rest, sah. It was awful, sah. But de Lord didn't mean it to be, sah—she wasn't to marry him, sah; she was to marry yo', sah—bless yo' heart!"

It was well that the office was dark, that Cross had not taken the trouble to turn on one of the lights. She could not see his face, so white and full of agony. He tried to speak, but the words would not come, and he walked to the water cooler to moisten his lips.

"And so you are sure she had no one around when she dressed on that morning—no friend or dressmaker?" he asked finally.

"No, sah, not a soul. She locked herself in all alone, sah."

He gave a groan, and, to hide it, pretended that he had stubbed his toe on the corner of a desk. She watched him curiously, too obtuse to fathom his manner or suspect what he had been driving at.

"I was going to ask you about Mrs. Devigney," [Pg 179]he said, changing the subject. "How long is she going to stay?"

"She is gwine away to-morrow, sah."

"On the boat?"

"Yes, sah."

"I was in hopes I might see her again. But perhaps I shall be unable to do so now. Now, Nancy, please don't say anything about our little talk." He forced a smile. "You know how young men are when they—you know."

"Oh, yes, sah. Thank you, sah, thank you!" the last words as her fat hand closed over a bank note he had thrust into her palm. "Didn't I say I was yo' friend? Anyting else I can do fo' you, sah?"

"Not now." He led the way to the door and let her out. "You'll have a cold walk home, I'm afraid. Good night."

He closed the door before she had time to say a word in return. In the darkness he moved toward a couch in his inner office and threw himself face downward upon this, giving himself up to reflections that to him were almost as bitter as death.

He spent the night in the office, too overcome by his feelings to go out and walk to his apartments. At daybreak he arose from the couch, his head aching and his heart like a lump of lead within his breast. When the clock on the wall struck seven, fearful that the boy would come and find him there, he slipped outside, locking the door after him.

He turned his footsteps at first toward his [Pg 180] bachelor home, but before it was reached he changed his mind. Regardless of the wintry wind that was blowing, he turned away from the lake and followed the road that led up into the woods.

On and on and on he trudged, walking rapidly, and apparently aimlessly. It seemed to ease his heart and mind to keep moving. But at last he grew exhausted, and at the noon hour, eight miles from Lakeview, he threw himself on a flat rock, too tired to advance another step.

Here he remained until he was chilled to the bone; then, with blue lips and chattering teeth, he arose once more and started to go back.

"She will wonder what is keeping me away," he murmured. "And what shall I say to her when we come face to face? Shall I say I have discovered her secret? Shall I ask her if she went there?"

He had forgotten all about his business—that Mr. Pardue wished to see him at noon. He glanced at his watch. It was half past one.

"Business must take care of itself—bonds, mortgages, railroad, and all," he thought. "This must be settled first; I must know the truth. I must know the truth."

He repeated the last words over and over again, as though to build up a resolution upon their utterance. Sitting on the rock had rested him, and again he walked along as fast as ever.

Presently the sound of carriage wheels broke upon his ears. He stepped to one side to let the turn-out pass, but it did not; it came to a halt instead.

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"Why, Harry, what in the world are you doing away out here?"

He looked up in amazement. There was Maud Willowby before him, seated in her father's buggy alone. Her face expressed intense surprise.

"I—I took a walk. I did not feel well," he stammered. "How came you here?"

"I have just taken Alice to the boat—she has gone away, you know. I thought you would call at the house before she went away. Will you get in?"

He could not decline the invitation. He got in. But he did not attempt to kiss her, although they were utterly alone. He did not even take her hand. She noticed his coolness and indifference, and her face grew a trifle pale.

"Are you very sick?" she asked.

"Not very," he murmured. "It is my head, and I thought the fresh air would do me good."

"I am so sorry! Can't I do something for you? Let me take you to the house, and—"

"No, no, don't drive to the house. Let us drive—drive along the road. Let us keep out of town, away from the houses."

"Well, just as you wish." She was more surprised than ever. "I am afraid you have been working too hard lately. You must take it easier, or you will be down with brain fever or something as bad."

"Not I!" he laughed hollowly. "So Mrs. Devigney has gone away?"

"Yes. She received a message to come home—an aunt is very sick. She sent you a good-by."

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"Thanks for it."

There was an embarrassing pause as he tried to think of the best way to broach the disagreeable topic upon which he wished to question her. Then he started to speak, but broke off abruptly.

"What is it—there is something on your mind," she cried presently. "I can see it in your face. Can you not trust me?"

Now he groaned aloud. Trust her! What was the meaning of those words?

"Maud!"

The name sounded so strange that it came like a shock to her.

"What is it? Tell me plainly." A sudden fear sprang up in her eyes. "Did you—have you—made a mistake—about me, Harry?" she faltered. "Don't be afraid to tell the truth."

She looked at him as though expecting him to throw his arms about her, and he would have done it on the instant had not his mind been racked with the torture of suspicion—nay, something more than suspicion. He turned his face away.

“Maud, answer me truthfully”—he breathed hard. “Did you remain home all the morning when you were to marry Chesterbrook, or did you go out?”

She gave a sharp gasp, and, turning to gaze at her, he saw every particle of color leave her face. She tried to turn away, but he would not let her.

“Tell me the truth,” he went on. “Did you remain home or not?”

She did not answer—indeed, all her breath seemed to be escaping from her pale lips. Had he been [Pg 183]less interested and less jealous, he would have had more pity.

“Why don’t you speak? It is a very simple question to answer. Did you remain home, or did you—go to Chesterbrook’s rooms?”

The last words were hardly uttered when she gave a cry, so shrill, so full of anguish, that it pierced him to the very soul. But he never took his eyes from her, and in those big, staring blue orbs he saw that he had reached the truth.

“You went to his rooms, then. I see it in your face; you dare not deny it. And for what purpose?”

At last she gained her voice.

“He was my affianced husband,” she murmured.

“Your affianced husband?” He almost threw a sneer into his tones. “Your affianced husband, and you——”

“Stop, stop! Oh, heavens above us, have mercy! Harry, have mercy!” she wailed.

“And you were the last one who saw him alive?” he went on.

She shivered.

“Yes, I was the last one who saw him alive,” she replied, in such a low tone that he could scarcely hear her.

“And why did you go to him at that time—the last hour? Will you tell me that?”

“I cannot! I cannot! Oh, have mercy!”

“Why should I be merciful? Did you have mercy on me? I loved you, madly, blindly—and hopelessly! Why did you not tell me—or send me off! If you had killed off my love it would have [Pg 184]been a thousand times better. But you permitted it to grow—almost to master me.

And all the time you were hiding the truth from me. You were hiding the awful fact that you had a son, a boy named Roy——”

He got no further. Again she cried out, and would have fallen from the vehicle had he not caught her in his arms. The cry was succeeded by utter stillness. She lay like a dead body in his arms.

Alarmed, he sprang with her to the ground. He laid her upon a grassy bank, and, running to a pool, brought his hat full of water, with which he bathed her face. In a few moments she revived and stared wildly at him.

“Let me go home!” she wailed. “Let me go home. I never want to see you or any one again! Oh, I wish I were dead!”

She dragged herself to her feet. He attempted to assist her, but she pushed him off, and staggered to the buggy, pulling herself into it.

“Maud! Come back! I love you!” he cried loudly, frantically; but she would not listen, and so passed out of his sight.

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CHAPTER XX.

THE ARREST.

How he got back to his rooms Henry Cross could not tell. He was in a fever of excitement—and despair. Never before in his life had he felt so utterly dejected, so broken in spirit and hopes. He had confronted her, accused her, made her flee from him to hide her tell-tale face, and awakened to the knowledge that, in spite of all, he loved her.

He paced the front room like a caged animal that longs for the trackless forest where no sign of man or civilization is yet visible. He wanted to be alone, and he also wanted to throw off the weight that depressed his heart.

“I’ll do it!” he muttered savagely. “I don’t care what becomes of the railroad. Pardue and the rest can take care of it. I’ll leave Lakeview and go to—to Alaska, South America—or somewhere.”

He continued to walk restlessly for a few minutes more. He wondered what Maud would say and think when he was gone. Would she be sorry, or would she feel relieved?

Half an hour later he was hard at work packing a trunk, having fully determined to go away. In another half hour the task was completed, and he looked at his watch.

"Just forty minutes before the boat arrives that will take me to Mackanack Junction," he said.
"That will give me time to write to the other [Pg 186]fellows, draw some money out of the bank, and—drop her a line."

The last was an afterthought which he felt bound to heed. Yes, he would write to her, telling her that, no matter what had come between them, no matter how far, henceforth, their lives might drift apart, he would always continue to love her.

The letters were dashed off quickly, one to Pardue, another to the constructing superintendent, a third to his office boy, and the last to Maud, over which he lingered the longest. He stamped them all and gave them to Jackson to mail.

"I am going away for a while," he said. "Lock up my rooms and guard them well during my absence."

He fancied the janitor stared at him curiously when he announced his intention, but he thought this only natural, for he had never gone away for any length of time before. Little did he know of what was passing in the man's mind.

"Yes, sir, I'll look out for them, sir. May I ask are you going far?"

"I'm off on a vacation, first to New York, and thence to any place that pleases me. Go and get an expressman to take my trunk and bag to the dock at once. I want to catch the afternoon boat."

It was past the regular banking hours, but the clerks had not yet left the big stone building, and Henry Cross had no difficulty in getting the cashier to pay him several hundred dollars on his personal check. He placed the bills in his breast pocket, looked at the long clock on the wall, and found he had just eight minutes in which to reach the [Pg 187]water front ere the boat should cast off on her way down the lake.

It was growing colder, and in the air there were signs of an early fall of snow. He turned up the collar of his overcoat, pulled his hat over his eyes, and hurried down the street.

He was not aware that he was shadowed—that Jack Hull had been watching him, and had been informed by Jackson of his intention to leave the vicinity. All unconscious, he made his way to the dock, and, entering the little office, called for a through ticket to New York City, at the same time laying down a ten-dollar bill for payment.

The bit of pasteboard was handed over, along with the change, and Cross turned to go outside, when a hand was placed on his shoulder.

"Come with me, please; I wish to speak to you."

Henry Cross turned to look at the person who had addressed him. He remembered the face of the detective, now without his beard, whom he had met at the inquest.

"You wish to speak to me?" he repeated.

"Yes. Come outside."

The young man breathed quickly. There was that in Jack Hull's manner that made him scent danger. He went out on the dock, with Hull still close beside him.

"Come with me, Cross."

"With you? What do you want?"

"I want you to come with me up to the town jail."

"But I haven't time. I wish to take the boat. See? I have just bought a ticket for New York."

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"Can't help that. You must come with me," and now Jack Hull's voice was cold and determined.

"Why, confound it, what's up?"

"Well, if you must know, I arrest you for the murder of Allen Chesterbrook."

Henry Cross staggered back—what man would have not?—and his face became pale as ashes.

"Arrest me? Surely you are joking."

"Not a bit of it, Cross. Come, I tell you; I have found you out at last."

"This is absurd—nonsensical in the extreme."

"Come on—you can do your talking at the jail—unless you want to cause a scene here."

Henry Cross' eyes flashed defiantly. Then a change came over him. A crowd was collecting, for a few had overheard what Hull had said.

"All right, I'll go along. But you will find that you have made a great mistake. Will you be kind enough to have my baggage detained, too? There is no use of their going on without me."

The sarcasm was completely lost on Jack Hull.

"I've attended to that already; the bag and trunk are in the hands of the police."

"Ah, then you have been watching me—spying on my movements."

"I've been watching you practically since the day of the murder. Now, Cross, don't ask any more questions, but come along."

Once more the detective placed his hand on the young man's arm. Cross did not shake off the grasp, and together they left the dock and marched along the street leading to the Lakeview County and town jail.

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A crowd followed—a crowd that grew larger at every corner. The news spread like wild fire. Henry Cross had been arrested for the murder of Allen Chesterbrook! How the tongues of the gossips wagged! Oh, he was guilty. They had always suspected him. He might as well confess at once.

Some ran ahead of the detective and his prisoner, and when the two arrived at the room in which the police court was held they found it crowded.

But the room was soon cleared, and then a formal charge of murder was made against Henry Cross. He pleaded not guilty and was held to await the action of the grand jury, which had begun its sittings for that term the day previous. As it was a capital crime of which he was charged, no bail was set, and he was taken to a cell.

During the brief hearing the young man had remained strangely silent, saving to state that he was innocent and would try to prove it later on. When the jailer asked him if he wished to send any messages, he said no, not for the present.

Feeling sure he could prove his man guilty, Jack Hull did not hesitate to speak of the case, and late in the evening the local paper came out with an extra, giving the details of the murder, as previously published, and with the present news, so far as it was made public. This special edition sold rapidly, and it was the Willowby chauffeur who bought one and took it to the astonished colonel.

"No, no, never! It's scandalous!" Such were the colonel's comments. He was on the point of rushing off to tell Maud the news, but suddenly [Pg 190]stopped, remembering that she had gone to bed early, complaining that she felt quite ill. "It will be time enough for her to hear the sad news, poor thing, in the morning."

The colonel could not remain at home, so he went down to the jail. He would call on Cross and show the young man that he was willing to stand by him in this hour of darkness.

But at the jail he met with a setback.

"Mr. Cross wishes to see no one. He sent out word to that effect."

The colonel would not believe it.

"He will see me, surely. Tell him I am here," he said.

The jailer took in the message. He was gone fully five minutes. On returning he shook his head.

"Just as I said, sir. He thanks you for your kindness in coming, but he prefers to be left alone at present. He says he may see you later on."

"And is that all? He sent no other message?" Colonel Willowby was thinking of his daughter.

"No, sir, not a word."

The old man turned, and without another word left the building. Several who saw him come and go shook their heads.

"This is a big blow to him, for Cross was sweet on his daughter," they said to one another.

The next day was a busy one for Jack Hull. He was closeted with the prosecuting attorney for many hours, and then the two appeared before the grand jury. They were also before that august body on the morning following, and then Henry [Pg 191]Cross was formally charged with murder in the first degree. As the court was not busy, the trial was set down to begin on the following Monday at ten o'clock in the morning.

In the meantime, Henry Cross remained in his cell, refusing to see all who called, with the single exception of Pardue, who came on a purely business matter, and never once mentioned the trouble on hand. Cross smiled bitterly as he realized that even this semipartner thought him guilty.

Yet Cross had one friend who would not be put off. This was a young lawyer named Andrew Welford. Welford had always drawn up all legal papers required by Cross, and the two had been confidential in many matters. The lawyer wrote to Cross, begging him to take some legal steps to protect himself.

"I know that you are innocent," he wrote, "and it is the height of folly for you to sit down calmly and do nothing. You must have a lawyer—you ought to have two—and if you will only give me permission, I will arrange the matter for you. I can get Martinham from New York, who has no equal, and I will assist him to the best of my ability. It is suicidal not to defend yourself. I think you know me well enough not to imagine I am snuffing around for a fat fee."

This straightforward note had the desired effect upon Henry Cross, and he wrote back to Welford, asking him to call at the jail. Half an hour later the young lawyer was on the spot.

He was truly astonished at the change in Cross' appearance. The young man's cheeks were sunken [Pg 192]and pale, and his eyes had an uneasy, introspective look that was anything but hopeful. When he arose to shake hands he appeared old and feeble.

"By Jove, Cross, this trouble is telling on you," exclaimed Welford, with honest sympathy expressed in his clear, brown eyes. "You must not take it so to heart; you'll go to pieces before the trial comes off."

"Sit down, Welford," returned Henry Cross gently. "I'm all right. Only I'm not used to being cooped up."

"That's true. Well, what about it? Shall I engage Martinham? I saw him yesterday, and he is not overbusy."

"No, I don't want Martinham."

"No? Then supposing I write to Fordike or Innersoll——"

"It's not necessary, Welford. I have already settled on a lawyer. Your kind letter settled it. I'll have you alone."

The young lawyer smiled and his eyes sparkled. But then he shook his head.

"You have an immense amount of confidence in me, I must say; but it won't do. I've had too little practice in such cases."

"You know the method?"

"Oh, yes; but still——"

"That is enough. If I am to have any one, I'll have you. I don't want a stranger."

And to this decision Henry Cross adhered, despite all the arguments Welford could bring to bear. Moreover, he was opposed to having the trial deferred.

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"Delay would be useless," he said. "To me this solitary confinement is unendurable. Let the trial go on and be finished as soon as possible."

"But, Cross, you don't appear to realize the seriousness of the case."

"I do, perfectly."

"That detective may have some damning evidence hidden away—false, of course—and unless we are well prepared, it may—may knock us out."

"What if it does? I'll only be hung, and that will be the end of the whole miserable business."

Welford sprang from his seat in amazement. Never before had he heard a man utter such hopeless words so calmly, so dispassionately, as if he was dismissing the merest trifle. It flashed over him that Cross must be becoming demented.

"Don't talk that way, man. You are not going to hang; and you really must brace up. Do you suppose I'm going to let that detective get the best of us? Not much! Come, tell me your story, and we'll exert our best efforts to knock his yarn into a cocked hat."

In this manner he attempted to arouse Cross from his apparent indifference, and he partly succeeded, for Cross' face took on a brighter look, and he began to walk the narrow confines of the cell nervously.

"I haven't much to tell outside of what you already know," he said. "You heard my story before the coroner, did you not?"

"I did."

"I told everything there."

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"You knew nothing more?"

Cross hesitated.

"Nothing," he said, and turned away to continue his walk.

"You said something about a quarrel with Chesterbrook?"

"That did not amount to anything."

"You refused to go into the particulars."

"We quarreled at the Charity Ball, over a dance with a young lady." Henry Cross mentioned no name, but Welford knew very well whom he meant. "We exchanged a few hot words, and that ended it. I dare say both of us were ashamed of the quarrel the next day. I know I was."

For once Henry Cross spoke as if he meant what he said. Welford continued to question him, but failed to gain further information that seemed likely to be of value.

Welford realized that the most damaging testimony against his client would be the fact that he had been alone at the time the murder was committed, and that his rooms were directly over those formerly used by Chesterbrook—this coupled with the fact that both men loved the same woman, and had quarreled.

Once the young lawyer started to bring in the name of Maud Willowby; but Henry Cross at once stopped him.

"If you try to bring her into the case I will dismiss you," he said. "She must be left alone entirely. If she comes forward of her own free will—" Here he stopped and would go no [Pg 195]further. But he cautioned Welford again not to seek her assistance.

The conference lasted hardly an hour, and Welford went back to his office in no easy frame of mind. He believed Cross innocent, and also believed that his client was holding back evidence that would readily clear him.

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CHAPTER XXI.

THE OPENING OF THE TRIAL.

Little did those who looked at Henry Cross on that morning as he stood up to listen to the reading of the indictment against him realize all that had passed through the young man's mind since he had been placed under arrest. They saw him pale, hollow-cheeked, and hollow-eyed—restless, too—and given to clasping and unclasping his hands at frequent intervals. Many thought they saw the signs of guilt staring from his face, and wondered how it was he had not broken down and confessed all.

They did not know the heavy secret he carried locked up in his heart—a secret he had determined should not be forced from him, even though he be made to walk to the very chair. "If she will not speak, I shall remain silent," he had said to himself. He loved her too much to uncover her crimes to the world.

Many times had he wondered and wondered, trying to fathom Maud's secret. Who was the father of her son—Chesterbrook or another? What had taken her to that man's rooms on their wedding morning?—a quarrel between them, or some discovery on his part? Had he really committed suicide, or had she in anger or fear struck that deadly blow?

These questions and a hundred others had coursed [Pg 197]through his brain, and he had found himself unable to answer even the first of them. And then there was that strange slip of paper. Who had placed that by the desk? Was it genuine or a forgery?

At first he had thought to place that slip in evidence, but he had realized that this would bring Maud on the witness stand, and he had given up the idea. No, she must come entirely by her own free will, or not at all.

The courtroom was crowded long before the case was called. There was a buzz of conversation, which was, however, immediately hushed at the announcement:

"The People against Henry Cross!"

Cross stood up, and the indictment was read, slowly and distinctly, accusing him of having willfully and with malice aforethought killed Allen Chesterbrook by stabbing the man in the heart with a dagger, on the morning of May 20th, of the current year.

"Prisoner at the bar, how do you plead?"

Cross drew a long, deep breath.

"Not guilty," he said, in a low but clear voice. Then he sat down.

After the usual routine the selection of a jury began. Cross took but scant interest in this, but both Welford and the prosecuting attorney were on the alert, and it was noon before the jury was finally settled upon. A recess of half an hour was taken, and then the trial really opened.

It is not our intention to go into the details of that great case as it was presented for several days in the Lakeview courthouse. To those wishing for [Pg 198]all the particulars we would say that they may be found in the back files of most of the leading journals of the country, for this trial and its sensational ending attracted widespread attention. Both sides went into many useless details, which wearied both judge and jury.

The first real surprise came when Jack Hull took the stand and began to relate all that he had discovered. He told first of the quarrel that had taken place between Cross and Chesterbrook, and said it was his knowledge of this that had made him suspect Cross. Then he related how he had taken Chesterbrook's rooms, the finding of the loose ceiling in the closet, of the square that had been nailed down with six-penny nails, while the other boards were nailed with ten-penny nails; of his going to the office and asking for some nails to mend a wagon, and of the office boy giving him a hammer and some nails that Cross had brought there two days after the murder.

He told how the square in the closet floor had been put down—in a way that proved it had not been done by a regular carpenter—and said it was large enough to admit of the passage of any ordinary man's body, being sixteen inches wide by twenty and a half inches long, the boards being two in number, eight inches wide each.

Many looked at Cross as Hull paused here in his testimony, and they saw him start and flush; but otherwise he retained his composure. At this point Hull asked for and received a drink of water, and then continued his testimony.

Now every one listened with bated breath as [Pg 199]the detective related how he had shadowed Henry Cross many times, and noticed his restlessness. How, as long as he had occupied the murdered man's rooms, Cross had scarcely looked at him.

And then he told of the night when he was sitting in his room, and Cross had come down the stairs in his pajamas, fast asleep. One could have heard a pin drop when, in low, impressive tones, he related the particulars of Cross' appearance at that time. He vividly pictured Jackson's conduct, and how he—Hull—had cautioned the man to keep silent.

Then came the horrible, thrilling climax which held the audience spellbound—how Cross had stalked into the front room, passed to the one in the rear, gone to the closet, and then how his manner had changed as with a face full of bitter hatred he had sprung to the bureau, caught up the hairbrush as one would a dagger, and stabbed quickly and heavily at the empty air.

He stopped and looked at Cross, and the audience, the jury, and the judge followed that gaze. The prisoner had arisen; he was clutching the rail before him, and shaking as with the ague. He had listened to every word, and he stood there doubting the evidence of his own senses, the heavy beads of perspiration standing out upon his forehead, over which his uncombed hair hung wildly. As all present looked at him his eyes fell, and he dropped limply into his seat.

After this Hull's testimony came to a rapid close. He told how Cross had vanished from the room, and how he had cautioned Jackson to remain [Pg 200]silent for a few days. The knowledge that Cross was going to flee next reached his ears, and he had waited no longer, but arrested the criminal just as he was about to step on board one of the lake boats.

A long line of witnesses followed; Ned Degroot and Bart Harkness, who had witnessed the quarrel at the Charity Ball, and overheard Cross say he would kill Chesterbrook; Mark Jepson, who was compelled to testify about the nails and the hammer; Jackson, who corroborated Hull's story of Cross' somnambulism, and several other witnesses of lesser importance.

Then the case was adjourned for the day, and the prisoner was taken back to his cell, while the people streamed out into the raw, wintry air, saying to themselves that Henry Cross had not the ghost of a chance of being acquitted.

On the following morning, after a sleepless night and a long interview with his lawyer, the prisoner was put on the stand. He was more calm than on the day previous, and all could see that he had nerved himself for a searching encounter with the prosecuting attorney.

No cross-examination had yet been indulged in, and the case had moved on without a hitch. Consequently the prosecuting attorney was contented, satisfied that the case would be decided against the prisoner. He handled Cross lightly, almost pityingly. The prisoner admitted what had

been said about the quarrel, and the hammer and nails, and the prosecutor did not ask him concerning his alleged sleep-walking.

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It was then that Welford showed what was in him. He began his opening address with confidence and excellent judgment. In a few well-chosen words he brushed aside almost all of the so-styled evidence against his client, who, he asserted, was entirely innocent of this foul charge brought against him.

He endeavored to prove that the quarrel between his client and Chesterbrook had been patched up long before the murder, so much so that on that fateful morning Cross had been gayly bound for the church where the wedding was to take place, with never an idea in his head that murder most foul had been committed.

Hull smiled to himself here. He had not mentioned that slip of paper, for several reasons, and he was glad to learn that no plea of suicide was to be entered.

And as for that hole in the closet, Welford went on, Cross had found the boards loose weeks before and nailed them fast, and had taken the hammer and nails to his office merely because he needed them more there than he did at his rooms.

As to the sleep-walking—well, lots of people were at times subject to somnambulism, and did very curious things when in that condition. He could recite half a dozen queerer cases. Cross' mind had been full of the murder; he wouldn't deny that, for his rooms were directly over those of the murdered man, and he had been the first to find him.

His client was a sensitive man, of an imaginative turn of mind, and during that sleep-walking had merely dreamed of the awful deed, and imagined [Pg 202] how it had been committed, just as he or any man on the jury might do when he had eaten a heavy supper. If the sleep-walking meant anything, it meant that Cross had come down to that room while in a somnambulistic state, and had reenacted the murder of poor Chesterbrook, as the details had been impressed upon his mind by listening to them as described by the witnesses at the inquest.

The recess of the day was now reached, and the afternoon was mainly devoted to the cross-examination of the witnesses, but nothing of importance was elicited.

Among those who attended the trial was Colonel Willowby, who came escorting a young woman who was heavily veiled. That his companion was Maud Willowby no one for one moment doubted, but there was that in the stern old military man's bearing which precluded questioning on the point. The two sat very nearly in the middle of the courtroom, in a little seat cut off from the others by two columns running to the ceiling, and during the progress of the case the eyes of the veiled lady were never once taken from the face of the prisoner.

Maud had received Henry Cross' letter on the morning after it had been written and hardly had she finished reading it when her father had brought her the news of the young man's arrest. The announcement had caused her to faint, and she had gone to bed sick, not to get up until the Sunday previous to the day on which the great trial opened.

Her determination to witness the trial had surprised her father, who had sought to interview [Pg 203]Cross three times, but without success. But he was forced to accede to her demands, and so there they were, like a couple of outsiders, listening to all that was going on. Many times had the young woman shivered to think that she might at any moment be called on to take the stand and reveal her awful secret, but the call had not come. Still the trial was not yet ended.

When the court adjourned for the day, the crowd was slow in leaving the building, many remaining behind to see the sheriff once more take charge of his prisoner, so pale, so haggard, and yet growing firmer every hour.

There were all kinds of people there, business men, idlers from the race track down at Creston, tramps, who thought as much of the shelter as they did of the trial, and some few criminals to whom such scenes were all too familiar. They stared at Cross openly and impudently, and did not stir until he had passed out of sight through a door behind the jury box. Then the spectators drifted out singly and in pairs, and the conversation became loud and general.

The colonel and Maud waited in their retired seat until the main aisle of the courtroom was almost cleared. Then the father took his daughter by the arm.

"Come, my dear; we can easily get to the street now," he said.

She did not reply, but, trembling over the strain she had endured throughout the afternoon, arose and followed him. As she turned her face toward the open doors, a man who had occupied a seat [Pg 204]but a yard or two to the rear of them also passed out to the aisle, and he and Maud came face to face.

The young woman gazed at the stranger as if spellbound with horror. She took a step forward as though to grasp him by the arm, then fell back with bitter loathing depicted on her hidden face. She threw up her hands wildly, gave one long, pitiable shriek, and fell at her father's feet like one dead.

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CHAPTER XXII.
A GHOST OF THE PAST.

That wild cry caused a sensation throughout the half-empty courtroom. Men looked toward her in alarm, and then sprang forward to go to her assistance.

The colonel, who had at that instant been looking in another direction, could not account for the unexpected change in his daughter's demeanor. He gazed at her in amazement; then, with a quick exclamation of alarm, bent down and raised her up. She was a dead weight in his arms. He carried her to a bench, tore away her veil, and saw that her eyes were closed, and that her breath was coming in short, sharp gasps.

"What is it, colonel? What's the matter?" cried several, as they pushed forward.

"My daughter has fainted," was the old man's excited reply. "Is there a doctor near?"

He bent down, unclasped the belt about her waist, and began to rub her hands. The crowd increased, and presently a physician pushed his way forward.

"Give her more room, and open the windows," was the medical man's first command. "She needs fresh air more than anything else. The atmosphere has been too close and enervating for her in here."

This seemed reasonable enough. Two constables who were present at once began to clear the room, and the windows went up with a bang. Among [Pg 206]other things the physician brought forth a bottle of smelling salts, and applied it to the nostrils of the unconscious one.

Presently Maud opened her eyes and gazed about her vacantly.

"Where is he?" she demanded, and struggled to sit up.

"What is it, my dear?" asked her father. "There! There! Do not excite yourself. You are all right now."

"But—but—he— What has happened to me?" and now she stared at the strange physician.

"You fainted, Maud, but you are all right now."

She did not reply to this, but drew a long breath and shuddered. She tried to rise, but found herself too weak to do so.

"Sit still a while, my dear; there is no need of haste. This gentleman is a doctor."

She stared at the physician. Then she sprang up and looked about the courtroom, but the man who had so suddenly confronted her was gone.

"I do not want to remain here, papa; take me home," she almost sobbed.

"In a little while, Maud. Calm yourself—"

"No, no! Take me home now, please."

He could not resist her appeal, and, as she arose, he supported her on one side. The physician assisted her on the other side, and thus the three passed to the conveyance outside, through two lines of curious onlookers. Maud was helped into the vehicle, and the colonel, after handing his card to the doctor, followed.

"I thought it was too close in the courtroom, [Pg 207]especially where we sat, so near the stove," was the colonel's comment, when they had started.

"Yes, it was fearfully close," she replied; "I do not think I will want to go there again."

"Well, it was the mental strain, too," he went on. "The proceedings were very dramatic."

"Yes, papa."

"Cross appears to bear up, though, even if he is rather pale."

"Yes, papa."

He saw that she did not wish to converse on the subject, nor, indeed, on any theme, and so he lapsed into silence. He thought he understood all that was passing in her mind, but he was greatly deceived. She had not given a thought to Henry Cross since the trial had closed for the day.

When the mansion was at last reached, the two alighted at the side porch, and the colonel assisted his daughter into the house.

"I will go upstairs and change my dress," she said, and off she sped up the broad steps, before he had time to make answer.

Her room reached, she locked herself in. The hat and veil were cast aside, and with one prolonged sob, the utterance of an overcharged heart, she cast herself, face downward, on the bed. Her fair form shook from head to foot with agony, and it was only the soft pillow that kept her convulsive cries of anguish from ringing through the house.

"Alive!" she moaned over and over again. "Alive! And I thought him dead! What will become of me now? What will become of my darling Roy?"

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Over and over she asked herself those questions. The hot, scalding tears ran down her cheeks and wet the pillow. A strange light came into her wide-open blue eyes.

"Oh, to end it all—to get away from this misery forever!" she whispered. "Why did I not die? Why didn't they let me die, when Roy was born?—and why didn't he die with me? It would have been so much easier for us both. So much easier."

She sat up and rocked to and fro, running her hands through the long silken hair that had tumbled down over her shoulders. Never before had her heart, which had stood so much, been wrung with so much keen torture as now. She leaped up desperately, and ran toward a dainty stand in a corner. There was a drawer to the stand, and, pulling this out, she felt beneath a number of loose articles, and brought forth—a tiny, pearl-handled revolver.

"His pistol!" she went on, gazing at the weapon curiously. "His pistol, the one he once threatened me with when he was angry with drink. Why not make use of it, and end all? Why not?"

Toying with the revolver, she began to pace the floor nervously. It could easily be done. She had but to place that glistening muzzle to her forehead, press the trigger, and all would be over.

And see what good she could do! Her written confession would clear Henry Cross, for she would tell all—her guilty secret—how Chesterbrook had discovered it, and thought That Man still alive. He then had written the letter breaking off the marriage. She had gone to him, with this letter in [Pg 209]her hand, and said that He was dead, had been drowned, and that she was free, but for the child. Chesterbrook had forgiven her—at least, he had said he would—and she had hurried home at the last moment, to prepare for their wedding; and then he had changed his mind and taken his own life.

Ah, what a miserable world, where everything went wrong! And what sort of woman was she to bring one man to self-destruction and another in the shadow of the electric chair? And Chesterbrook had been so kind to her through it all; and here was Cross, willing to die rather than drag her and her secret before the public. But he should not die. No! She loved him—and—and—he must not die for her sins.

She grasped the pistol tighter, and went again to the stand and got out several sheets of paper and a pencil. How should she begin? To whom should she write? To her father?

The thought of that kind face, of the loving heart waiting for her below gave her another shock. What had her father said about Chesterbrook?

"Maud, that man committed suicide. Let us forget him, for he is unworthy to be remembered. A thousand times better had an enemy killed him by inches than to die such a base, ignoble death! Forget him, my child, for the suicide is a moral coward, not worthy to receive one tribute of regret from those left behind."

Those were his words, and he seemed to be now addressing them to her again. She flung away the paper and the pencil, and the hand that held the revolver fell limply by her side.

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She would not be a coward; she would be brave; she would face it all. She placed the revolver on the bureau, sank down on her knees before the bed, and began to pray.

When she arose it was dark, and below the bell had already been rung for dinner, about which the colonel was, as with everything else, very punctual. She took off her dress, donned a simple house gown, and sought, by the aid of water and some toilet preparation, to remove the signs of her keen suffering. She glided below and took her accustomed seat at the table without a word.

The colonel was already there, sipping his soup. He looked at her and noted her white face, but said nothing. He had been thinking deeply while standing before the open grate in the library, but he had reached no satisfactory conclusion, and he did not speak, mainly because he did not know what to say. It was only when the meat was brought on, and she refused to partake of it, that he opened his mouth.

"Come, come, my dear, you really must eat. Why, you will become a mere shadow if you don't. Here is a tempting piece, just done to perfection. Try that now." And she was forced to swallow half a dozen mouthfuls just for his sake. She was glad enough when the coffee was served, and she could leave him to his glass of old port and his cigar.

She walked into the parlor, for that was still dark, and she preferred the gloom. The blinds of one of the windows were still open, and here she sat down to gaze fixedly out at the almost wintry [Pg 211]landscape. The autumn was going fast, she thought—going like her own hopes, leaving the world cold and drear.

How would it all end? That was the question which now tortured her. The end must come, sooner or later—it must be close at hand. And he was alive. He had not been drowned at all, and she had so often thanked Heaven that he had been taken away!

Presently a servant came in to close the blinds and turn on the lights. She was about to give orders to the contrary when a boy ascended to the front piazza and rang the bell. He held an envelope in his hand.

Filled with a strange presentiment, Maud hurried to the door to see what the boy wanted. It was as she supposed—the letter he carried was for her, and it was marked personal.

"There's no reply," said the youth. Then he lingered, and added: "It's a putty good long walk up to here, miss, and mighty cold, too."

She understood him and handed him a quarter. He grinned, thanked her, and ran down the steps with a clatter. With her heart beating rapidly, she reentered the house and hurried up to her room. On the instant the envelope was torn open. It contained but a small slip of paper, on which was written:

"Meet me at the white, double boathouse up the lake front at eight o'clock to-night. Fail, at your peril!"

There was no signature, but she knew the writer only too well.

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CHAPTER XXIII.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

In that woman who skulked along the hedges and the bushes, by the back road that led down to the lake front, no one would have recognized the tall and stately Maud Willowby, the former belle of Lakeview, the gifted person whose proposed grand wedding to one of fortune's favorites had been so tragically prevented. She hurried along as if full of a nameless terror, her shoulders covered by an old shawl, and her face completely hidden by the veil, which was ever present now. Once a man passed her, and gazed at her curiously. "By the boots, but she looks like a witch!" he muttered, and lost no time in moving on his way.

It was cold and cheerless, and the wind sighed dismally through the leafless branches of the trees that lined the way. But she paid no heed, and when she struck her foot against a stone and fell heavily she rose to her feet again without so much as a thought of the pain inflicted.

On and on she sped until the road was left behind, and she came out of the woods onto the broad stretch of sand which kept the rolling lake beyond in everlasting check. Here she paused for a moment. "The white, double boathouse," she said musingly. "He must mean the one at Gains' Point. I know of no other."

Again she moved forward, down the lake shore, [Pg 213]her eyes bent straight ahead to where a short and broad white structure stood out prominently on a curving arm of the land. That was the place he meant, true enough. He must be waiting for her, for it was ten minutes after the time he had appointed.

Her heart was beating loudly as if endeavoring to burst its confines. She was to face him again—face him and speak to him after thinking him dead so many years.

The boathouse was reached. All was dark and silent—not a soul in sight. She paused at the rear entrance. Had she made a mistake and come to the wrong place?

A hasty step around the corner of the building reassured her and almost made her heart stand still. It was the man she had faced in the courtroom—her husband!

Both stood silent for fully ten seconds—a long time to them. Then he stretched out his hand. She drew back, and her face assumed a proud, defiant look, although her very soul was quaking within her.

“Humph!” was his first exclamation. “You won’t even shake hands. You don’t seem very glad to see me.”

“Where did you come from?” she asked, fairly forcing her lips to move.

“Where did I come from?” he repeated. “That’s a nice greeting for a woman to give her husband after a separation of—let me see—how many years is it?”

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“I asked you where you came from? How did you escape?”

“Oh! You mean how did I escape the wreck on the great lake? It was really very simple, although a close call, I can tell you that. When the *Water Queen* went down, I managed to keep myself afloat on a bit of wreckage for ten or twelve hours. It was an infernally long time, I can assure you, and at the last something struck me on the head, and I lost consciousness.

“When I came to, I was lying in a ward in the hospital at Clydehaven, on the Canadian side. They told me I had been out of my head for nearly three weeks, and I reckon they told the truth; for after I left the hospital there were times when I hardly knew what I was doing.

“I drifted away to Seattle, and into a number of the mining camps a couple of hundred miles back of there, and never thought to come East again until about a year ago. Now you’ve got the whole history, properly condensed, as the old professor up at the college used to say.”

“It’s a pity you didn’t stay away forever,” she returned bitterly.

“By Jove, Maud, now, that’s unkind. Don’t be so infernally rough on a poor fellow. I really wasn’t to blame—it was my head; upon my honor, it was.”

“And you have come back here, after all these years, simply to—to torture me?”

“Torture you? That’s good.” He paused, and saw that she was shivering. “Come into the boathouse. I have a key, and it’s more comfortable [Pg 215]there than in this freezing cold wind. Oh, you can trust me,” he added, as he saw that she hesitated.

He led the way around to the side and entered by a door which stood open. She followed, and he lighted a lantern.

"No one will come here to-night, so we can have our little talk without fear of interruption," he continued. "Here's a bench, if you'll sit down. I prefer to stand."

"Will you tell me why you have come back?" she asked, still remaining close to the partly open door. "Why did you not—not—"

"Die off. Is that what you were going to say? Well, you see, it was not Dick Harley's luck, that's why. I might have come to you before this, only I hadn't your address, and I imagined you were not thirsting for a sight of me."

"You are a—a monster!"

"Oh, come, Maud, don't ride that high horse. It won't go with me. I reckon, when I left you, you were willing I should go."

"You were right there. I hated you!" She put all of her vehemence into the words. "You coaxed me, a wild schoolgirl, into secretly marrying you, and then you neglected me—gambled, drank, and went to the dogs generally."

"I used my own money for it," he growled. "A gentleman has a right to drink and bet on horses if he chooses."

"No man has a right to ruin his young wife's happiness. Even if you did not love me, as you [Pg 216]swore you did, you should have remained honorable; you should have stayed by my side."

"What was the use? We didn't love each other—you didn't love me, and that's the reason I didn't care for you, and went to the dogs."

"Ah! Then you admit your own depravity. You may also admit that it was only the natural bent of your own dwarfed character that impelled you onward in the path of sin. It was no consideration—or want of consideration—for me that made you a drunkard and a gambler."

"There you go again, Maud. Do you want to anger me? Please to remember that we are married—that you are my wife."

He now faced her boldly, brazenly, and she cowered back as if struck a blow in the face. Yes, it was only too true; no matter what he was—gambler, drunkard, or worse—he was her husband.

"It's not seemly for a wife to upbraid her husband in this fashion," he went on. "Why don't you try to make yourself more agreeable and greet me as a husband ought to be greeted?"

He advanced a step, but she thrust him back.

"Keep off, Richard Harley!" she cried. "Do not dare to touch me. Even if I am your wife in name, I hate you, despise you."

He paused, and his small eyes blinked rapidly.

"You're a vixen," he said sarcastically. "But such high-strung actions have no effect on me. Let me tell you something: I haven't just arrived in Lakeview; I've been here some time, over at the race track, and I've been making a few quiet inquiries about you. You've been doing the nice [Pg 217]thing, haven't you—engaging yourself to another man when you were married to me, and—"

"I thought you were dead. The papers all announced your death."

"Yes, the papers said I was dead, and you were extremely willing to take their word for it. You might have made a few inquiries—"

"I did. Every one said you were dead, and what reason had I to believe otherwise, when you did not return?"

"Well, let that pass. I am back now, well and strong, too, and I want to know what you propose doing about it? Shall I go up to your house with you, arm in arm, and break the news to that old father of yours?"

"No! Oh, Heaven above me, no! Not that! You would kill him," she cried. "Anything but that!"

He gazed at her coolly, without one spark of pity. "I thought as much. That's why I didn't present myself, but sent for you instead."

"Why do you not go away forever?" she earnestly cried.

"Oh, I dare say that would suit you first-rate—it would leave you free to catch some other fellow, now that this Chesterbrook—was that his name?—is out of the way."

"No! No! I only want to get rid of you—so that my father may never learn of my wickedness," she moaned.

"You won't make up with me? If I promise to reform, and all that?" he asked curiously.

"Never! Never!"

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"You are a woman of determination, and no mistake. Well, supposing we come to some agreement."

"Yes. Yes!" she interrupted eagerly. "I will do anything if you will only go away and keep the past a secret."

"Then I don't know but that it can be fixed up without much trouble," said he, and he looked out of the doorway to see that no one was in sight. "I thought maybe you would rather have my absence than my company, so I came prepared to talk business."

"And what do you propose?"

"I want money," was the sudden and blunt reply. "The races have gone against me, and I've about struck my last dollar. Get me five thousand dollars, and I'll dust out and never come near you again."

"Five thousand dollars!" Then it was money that he was after. He had sunk so low that he was willing to be bribed into departing. She despised him more than ever.

And at the same time her heart quailed at the announcement. It was a large sum he demanded, and she had but very little, for nearly all her cash had been turned over to Mrs. Darrow for the care of Roy. As she thought of this, she wondered that he had never suspected the birth of the child, born after he deserted her.

"Five thousand ain't much," he continued—"that is, to one fixed as you are. I used to be well off, but that time's past now. Come, what do you say?"

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"I haven't so much," she faltered. "I might raise a thousand; but five—"

"You can raise that if you try. You have diamonds and the like, and you'll have to squeeze your father a bit, maybe; but see what you are gaining?"

"And you will promise—nay, swear—never to come near me again?" she asked, in almost a whisper.

"Yes, I'll swear, or do anything else you desire," he returned readily. "When can you bring me the money?" he went on, as though the matter was settled.

"I do not know. I must see what I can do. This is all so sudden."

"The racing is at an end, and I want to leave Lakeview. There is nothing going on here, excepting the trial of the poor devil they have arrested for the murder of that lover of yours."

A heart-wrung sigh escaped her. She had forgotten about that for the time being. Oh, what troubles seemed to be accumulating about her!

"I will send you word to-morrow," she said. "Where can I find you?"

"I'll come here, say, at noon sharp, and you must come yourself; I don't want any letter."

"I cannot have the money at that time, but I will let you know what I can do."

"All right." He held up the lantern, that he might gaze for once into her lovely face. "By Jove, Maud, you are a greater beauty than when I married you. No wonder that fellow who was killed wanted you all to himself."

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"Don't! Don't!" she cried. "Remember, he is dead."

"I'll remember that, all right enough. But say, you were extremely intimate before the time set for the wedding, weren't you?"

"Extremely intimate? What do you mean?" She gazed at him quickly and searchingly. "What do you know of my—my engagement to Allen Chesterbrook?"

"Oh, I know a lot. Didn't I tell you I had been around here a bit, looking up your doings? I wanted to learn how my dear wife was conducting herself, you know," he added sarcastically.

"You spied on my doings?"

"Well, I suppose folks would call it that. I had the right."

"You had not the right. Why did you not come to me at once, before—before—"

"Before you and he got too intimate, eh? I had my reasons."

A strange light began to shine in her eyes, and she clenched her two white hands convulsively.

"You spied on me. What did you see?"

"I saw enough."

"Answer me—what did you see?"

"I said I saw enough. You ought to know what that means."

"You dare not answer me. You saw nothing, Dick Harley. You are simply trying to frighten me."

She put so much contempt into the words that they stung him deeply. His dissipated face flushed, and, setting down the lantern, he strode close to her.

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"Didn't I see something, though?" he fairly hissed. "Didn't I see you sneak into his rooms on the very morning you and he were going to be married? Didn't I hear all that pretty love-making after you had been in there a while? And didn't I see you sneak out of the back door of the house, and make for your home by a lonely back path? Oh, I may be bad, but you are no angel, I

can tell you that. Aha, my fine lady, I know something of your doings—something that you would not like to be known."

His words startled her; she staggered back in turn, staring at him with distended eyes, her face as pale as that of a corpse.

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CHAPTER XXIV.

A LIGHT UPON THE MYSTERY.

In a few moments Maud recovered from her agitation. With her eyes still fixed upon the man, she hoarsely asked:

"You saw all that—on—on the morning of the tragedy?"

"I did, and you can't deny the facts."

"I am not denying them, Dick Harley. What would be the use to deny them—to you? But, let me tell you something." She clutched him violently by the coat collar. "If you saw all that—if you were there in that house—you murdered Allen Chesterbrook."

As she uttered the terrible accusation she held him tight, still gazing into his eyes with an intensity, an earnestness that fairly penetrated his soul. He tried to shake off her hold, but she clung to him with the force of desperation.

"You cannot deny it, Dick Harley; you went back and murdered him. You stabbed him through the heart with the dagger that lay on the bureau."

His eyes fell and his face blanched. He could have withstood a judge and jury, a hundred others, but he could not withstand her—the woman he had once loved—nay, the woman he still loved, in his own selfish fashion.

"What makes you think I went back—" He [Pg 223]began, but she boldly interrupted him; she was not to be hoodwinked.

"It is you who did that foul deed. What answer have you to make to this accusation?"

She bent closer and both hands now grasped his collar. She would not let him turn his face away.

"I had the right," he muttered, at last. "You were my wife, and he had no right to your affection."

She flung him from her. She had heard enough. He had confessed the foul deed. He had murdered Allen Chesterbrook.

She was married to this man. Even at that intense moment she thought of the terrible truth. He was her husband, and he was a murderer.

"You—you base wretch!" She could find nothing else to say.

"Don't be hard on me," he cried. "Consider the circumstances—the demon of jealousy that was aroused within me when I saw his endearments with my wife. He had no right to your love. And, besides, if he had lived, and you had married him, see what trouble it would have made. You surely wouldn't want to have two husbands."

"You murdered him!" This sentence expressed everything—the acme of his villainy. That single bitter thought was supreme. Oh, to think that she was married to this vile wretch! She felt as if her very heart was dead within her.

"Don't call it that, Maud; say I removed him out of our way. And I had good cause. Do you [Pg 224]suppose I loved you so lightly I was willing to give up my claim on you?"

"And yet you were willing to sacrifice that claim for a few paltry dollars!" At last she found her tongue. "You would sell it out—after dyeing your hands red with——"

"Stop! No more of that, I tell you. I can't stand it. I was enraged when I witnessed your affection for him. I didn't do it cold-bloodedly, either. I first told him who I was, and he gave me the lie, and some hot words followed."

"You told him you were my—my——"

"Husband! Exactly! And he wouldn't believe it, said you had just told him I was dead. The thrust was made before I knew what I was doing. It was done in self-defense. It was my life or his after the first blow was struck."

"But how did you escape? The doors were locked."

"I got out of the window and into the next room—the empty one in which I was hiding when you were in there with him. Not a soul was in the hall, although I heard talking in the basement—and went out, as you did, by the back entrance."

He told the story so plainly she knew it must be true. He did not appear to care very much, years of dissolute living had so hardened him. She paused a long while before replying.

"Do you realize that you are a murderer—that you are liable to be hung?"

He started.

"The authorities are all astray. They don't suspect [Pg 225]that I did the deed," he cried; "they don't know, and you won't dare to tell."

"Why not? Do you know that an innocent man is now being tried for this crime?"

"The jury won't convict him. It is rarely done on circumstantial evidence."

"He may be convicted. What then?"

"He will not be convicted, I say. I have heard the trial, so far, and I looked the jury over carefully. They haven't backbone enough to convict him—in the first degree. And what does it matter to us if he is sent up for a few years? His friends will soon have him pardoned. He's rich, I've heard."

She shivered at his words, every one of which cut her like a knife. If he knew the truth, knew that Cross loved her, and that she loved him—loved him more than she had loved Chesterbrook—more than any one else in the wide world, now that she was sure he was innocent, in spite of the web Jack Hull had woven around him.

"You would let an innocent man's reputation be forever blasted?" she said slowly.

"See here, Maud, that isn't a fair way to put it. I did the deed, true enough, but in self-defense, I tell you; and you surely don't expect me to give myself up to the police for it. Nobody would believe my story. It's that chap's own fault if he doesn't manage to clear himself. He has money enough to hire the best lawyers in the State, and obtain half a dozen trials, if he needs them."

"All that isn't to the point," she responded coldly.

"Well, you won't dare to give me away," he said [Pg 226]recklessly, and with a low laugh. "If you do, I'll tell everything about myself, yourself, Chesterbrook and all. How will you relish that, with that old father of yours sitting in a front seat, listening—eh?"

She shrank back. He had touched her where she was most sensitive, and he knew it. He paused for the poison to work, and then continued: "So you might as well say nothing; get that five thousand in cash for me, say good-by, and let the future take care of itself."

"Never!"

She uttered the word so resolutely that he jumped as if stung by a viper. He glared at her.

"You won't get the money for me?"

"I will not."

"You shall!"

"I say I will not. I will tell all, no matter what the shame, before I will allow Henry Cross to suffer the loss of his good name."

He sprang at her, as if to force the words down her throat. But she caught up the lantern and waved it at him threateningly.

"Do not approach me, Dick Harley."

"You shall first promise me to keep silent."

"I will promise nothing to a murderer."

"Then listen to me: Your exposure will gain you nothing, for to-night I shall leave Lakeview, never to return. And who will believe your story then? They will say that you are mad, that you are merely trying to save that man—I understand he is a warm personal friend of the family—and there the influence of your story will end."

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"You shall not go."

"I will go, and you shall not hear from me until this matter is settled; and then"—his tone turned from deep earnestness to light sarcasm—"then I will again open negotiations for that five thousand dollars. Perhaps, by that time, you'll be better able to pay me."

He backed toward the doorway. She put up her hand appealingly.

"Stay!"

"Not unless you will swear to keep my secret."

"That I will never do."

"Then I am going. I might be violent with you, but it's not my usual style. Remember all I have said. After this matter of the murder is settled, and you have realized the wisdom of remaining silent, you shall hear from me again; not before."

He made a mocking bow and passed out. She cried to him to stop, but he would not; and running outside, she saw him hurrying up the beach in the direction opposite to that of Lakeview.

She thought to run after him, to seize him and cry for help; but ere she had gone two rods he was out of sight around a bend where the woods ran down almost to the water's edge.

For a short time she remained on the sands, eagerly watching for his reappearance, hoping he would return. But not a sign of a human being appeared; then, sick at heart, her brain in a mad whirl, she staggered homeward.

How she managed to gain entrance without arousing suspicion, she never knew. But there she was, [Pg 228]locked up in her own room, trembling from head to foot, her face the picture of woe and utter despair.

"A murderer, and I am wedded to him!" The thought was agony; it was enough to drive her mad. But, then, there were others who were involved. She thought of Cross, and what he must suffer if she remained silent. And, after all, it might be as Harley had said—they would not believe her sensational story and then what? They would point the finger of shame at her, and Cross would still be adjudged guilty.

But there was a chance; he might be acquitted; and, as a drowning person catches at the proverbial straw, so she clutched at that faint ray of hope. Oh, if they would only bring in a verdict of not guilty, or even if they would disagree!

A hundred thoughts ran through her brain as she lay awake the whole of that long night. She wanted to do her whole duty—and yet every fiber of her being shrank from that terrible exposure. Who could blame her?

The light of day found her in a fever, turning and tossing like one on the rack of the inquisition. Her father came in, and, finding her ill, at once sent for a physician.

The medical man immediately saw that something extremely serious had transpired, but he asked no questions. He opened his case, brought forth some powders, and gave her one in a little water. She took it without a murmur and dropped into a troubled sleep that lasted far into the afternoon.

Her father remained at home, seldom leaving her side, save to get his meals. In the evening she attempted [Pg 229]to get up, but another powder was administered, and she dropped into sleep again, and did not awaken until the following morning at seven o'clock.

"Oh, father, father!" were her first words, and, half rising, she buried her face on his shoulder.

"There, there, Maud, try to be calm, my dear. I knew you could never endure the strain of that trial. You must keep quiet. Nancy will soon bring some breakfast to you, and then you must take another powder."

"Oh, father, if you only knew!" she sobbed. "If you only knew!"

"Yes, yes, Maud, I know all about it. But you must brace up."

"Will they—have they found him guilty?"

"The case has been given to the jury. They went out last night. Folks say it looks like a disagreement," he added kindly.

She caught at his words. Oh, that they would disagree, that Henry Cross might have another chance, and she have time to think of the best course to pursue!

The colored woman appeared with a tray, and, to please her father, she ate a little of the food.

"Now you go down, papa," she said. "I will take the powder when I have finished."

So he went below, and a few minutes later Nancy followed, leaving the sufferer alone.

Maud sat for some minutes without moving. The powders had clouded her brain so that she could not think clearly; but she eagerly took up the one on the stand beside her. What blessed sleep it produced, [Pg 230] sinking all her troubles in deep oblivion! If such a sleep might only last forever!

Then she thought of Henry Cross, awaiting the verdict of the jury. Did he still think of her as a guilty woman? Ah, how could it be otherwise?

She heard the sound of wheels on the gravel path below. She knew what they meant—that John was returning from the town with the paper and the morning mail.

She heard him enter the house and go to the dining room, where the colonel sat eating his breakfast. Then his footsteps sounded through the wide hallway as he walked to the rear of the house.

At once an eager babble of tongues came to her ears. She caught the words "judge," and "quickly settled" and knew they were talking about the trial.

She leaped from the bed and tottered down the hallway. The babble continued, but suddenly ceased as the colonel came in, closing the door after him.

"Hush, all of you. Remember that my daughter is not to know that Henry Cross has been found guilty."

There was a wild cry above, a heavy fall, and instantly the household was in commotion.

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**CHAPTER XXV.
A MAN WITHOUT HONOR.**

"It is terrible. I never thought he looked like a man to commit such a deed."

And Violet Harding laid down the paper with a long sigh.

"What is so terrible, Violet? What are you talking about?"

"I have just been reading about the great Cross trial. They have found him guilty of murdering poor Mr. Chesterbrook."

"Indeed! I've been reading about that, too. But didn't you just say something about the man? Is it possible you knew him?"

Violet Harding's face flushed. "Yes, I knew them both," she said simply. "You know, I used to work in Lakeview, before I came to Factorytown."

"Oh, yes. And you knew them both?"

"Yes, although I was more intimate with Mr. Chesterbrook than with Mr. Cross."

"It was a terrible deed."

"It was. But I must be off to work; it is nearly nine o'clock already. I won't be home to lunch today, Mrs. Canberry."

"Very well, my dear. I know how busy they are at the woolen mill—and, no doubt, the operatives are thankful for it, too, after such hard times."

In a very thoughtful mood, Violet Harding walked to the office in which she was employed. What a [Pg 232]fortunate escape she had had from the clutches of that detective, and all through the fact that she had gone that morning on an errand of mercy, and could, consequently, prove an alibi! It made her shiver, even yet, to think of it. She was very glad that Lakeview and all of its terrors had been left behind.

She was sorry for Henry Cross, for she had always esteemed him as a thorough gentleman. She had met him several times at the office of the Land Improvement Company, and he had been kind and had done her several small favors, and a girl in her circumstances was not likely to forget these so easily.

Her walk took her almost to the end of the town in which, but two weeks previously, she had obtained a situation. She entered the place briskly, and soon she was so absorbed in her work that she had little thought for anything else.

It had been intensely cold, but toward noon it began to moderate, and there were evidences of a change. By three o'clock it was snowing, and when the long, shrill blast of the whistle

announced that the day's work was over, both in the office and in the factory, the flakes covered the streets and the walks to the depth of several inches.

"I'll just get home as soon as I can," thought Violet. "And Mrs. Canberry and I will spend a nice, quiet evening together. I am very glad I found such a good place to board." And she lost no time in putting on her hat and veil and sallying forth among the hundreds of mill hands pouring out of the main entrance.

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She had walked a little over a block, and had become separated from the others in the crowd, when some one tapped her on the shoulder. She turned, wondering who it was.

"You!" she gasped.

"Exactly," was the reply of the man who had stopped her. "You did not expect to see me here, did you?"

His face was thin and haggard—more alarming than ever before. He wore a faded ulster, and his soft hat was pulled far down over his bleary eyes. Evidently fortune had not dealt kindly with him since their last meeting—there on the bluff, beyond Lakeview. She shrank back, wondering how he could have traced her after she had taken such care to elude him.

"I found you by accident," he continued, as if guessing her thought. "I got into this place yesterday, and I saw you at the typewriter when I passed the mill office. I didn't expect to tumble into such good luck."

"You have no right to follow me about," she returned indignantly. "You have caused me enough suffering. When I left Lakeview I hoped never to see you again."

"I suppose so. But, then, you see, I'm like a bad coin—bound to turn up every time." He had been drinking, and laughed rather loudly. "Come down this side street, and let us have a little talk."

She did not desire to go—she wanted to leave him, then and there; but this was impossible; and, as several persons were staring at them curiously, [Pg 234]she followed him to a spot where the unpaved street was, in this storm, practically deserted.

"It was a mean trick to run away from me," he said reproachfully.

"I have a right to go where I please."

"Don't you care at all for me?"

"No. Haven't I told you so a hundred times?"

"But you cared for me once, Violet. You said you did when we both boarded in that place in New York."

"I was foolish then; I had just been thrown on my own resources, and then even your companionship was acceptable. And you were different, too. You said you had given up drinking."

"I did, for a time, and I wouldn't have taken to it again if you hadn't cast me off. Come back to me, Violet; marry me, and I'll reform, I swear it," he earnestly pleaded.

"No. You are nothing to me. I wish I had never seen you. I want to be rid of you forever. Oh, why do you follow me about like this?" she cried, angrily stamping her foot.

"Because I love you," he answered.

"You lie. There is no love, no honor in your false heart. You are a gambler and a drunkard, and worse, for all I know. I have never known anything but lies from you. But you shall not wreck my life. I tell you I will have nothing to do with you. I hate and despise you."

She grew more and more excited, her voice was incisive, scornful, but to the dissolute wretch who stood before her words were mere sound. He rather enjoyed these bursts of anger. They inflamed him, [Pg 235]and made him more eager to force this beautiful girl to yield. Love her he could not; it was not in his nature; but he gloated over her beauty as a miser does over his gold, and he was determined to possess it. She must marry him. He would force her to it.

He had followed her and pleaded for years, and now he was growing desperate. No one else should have her. He had found her again, and this time she should not get away. He had but to put forth his hand and grasp her. She must promise to be his wife, or he would close his fingers about her throat and strangle her.

These thoughts floated before his whisky-sodden mind as he stood looking into her face. He shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. Once he put forth his hand, but she stepped back and evaded the touch.

"Don't be afraid," he said, with a sinister grin.

"I'm not afraid of you," she replied firmly.

"I wish you would believe me, Violet; I can make a man of myself yet."

"Go on and do it, then, but don't come near me."

"But, Violet, I have a chance of becoming rich soon; I told you so before. We could go away—out West—and I would turn over a new leaf—I swear it—and I'll love you better than—"

An angry gleam came into her eyes. She could endure him no longer. Her dainty hand came up, and in a twinkling she struck him a sharp blow across the mouth.

"Now, don't you dare to follow me," she cried. [Pg 236]"Don't you dare—or I will hand you over to the police."

She sprang away and started up the street as fast as her feet could carry her.

She crossed the main street of the town, still full of working-people, and ran into another side street, which would take her by a short cut to her boarding house. In the snowstorm no one noticed her or the man who was following her. The wind blew the thick flakes directly into her face, but this she did not mind. Her one thought was to escape her tormentor without creating a scene.

The young woman's path led across a mountain stream which divided the town into two parts, and furnished power for many a busy loom. At the end of the street she was traveling there was a narrow foot bridge across this stream, connecting the two mills of a corporation. Onto this bridge she dashed, with the man close at her heels.

"Stop!" he called out. "Stop! I'll not hurt you!" and the next instant his hand was on her arm.

She struggled to free herself, for she saw that in his eyes which greatly alarmed her. His love was turning to hate, as a passion that is foiled often will. She tried to shake off his grasp, and shrieked loudly for help.

He quickly stifled any further outcries, as he clutched her by the throat, and with his other arm about her waist, he threw her roughly against the bridge railing; his eyes were flashing with a savage glare, and his drawn mouth showed his teeth like some ravenous, snarling beast.

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"Try to escape again, would you, my pretty bird?" he yelled. "Oh, no; never, never again. I love you, and I will have you. Give me your promise. Come and live with me—be my wife. Do you hear? My wife! Ha, ha!"

He laughed wildly, and in his drunken frenzy shook her violently.

"I'll have your promise now, once for all. Say yes, and I'll release you. Say yes, or I'll hurl you to your death in the river below."

"Never, you brute!" she groaned.

Though struggling and fighting wildly for her life, yet she was no match for his strength. Her answer maddened him beyond control. With a savage curse he raised her to the railing; he held her almost suspended over the river; trying to loosen her hold upon him lest she drag him with

her, his whole weight was thrown forward; there was a tearing, grating sound, as of posts and hand rails dragging from their supports. Another instant, and they would be precipitated into the seething waters below.

The girl's shrill cry for help had been heard, however, and a man, running like a deer, now made his appearance upon the bridge. Taking in the situation at a glance, he leaped forward and dealt the murderous wretch a terrific blow in the face, and the next instant Violet was dragged back from the bridge.

With a cry of furious rage, the man sprang upon his assailant. They grappled, and, between muttered oaths and fierce blows, they struggled and [Pg 238]swayed to and fro, unheedful of the danger of their position. With a sudden lurch, the two men came with a crash against the bridge railing, which, already severely strained, gave way, and, headforemost, they went down, down to their death.

During the fight Violet had looked on, trembling, half-crazed with fear and thankfulness at her rescue, watching the combatants. As she saw them disappear over the bridge she gave a wild shriek of horror, and, looking down, she saw them as they struck upon some black, jagged rocks, which, at this point of the river, seemed numerous, and caused the swift current of the stream to foam and roar.

They had separated now, and as she watched one of the bodies float on and on, until lost in the darkness, gone forever from her sight, she noticed a boat with a single occupant that had just put off from the opposite shore.

The man was one of the night watchmen at the mill. He had been a witness to the fight, and, while doubting whether he should interfere or not, he had seen them pitch headlong into the river. Leaping into the boat, he determined to save them, if possible. He had not noticed the first dark object as it sped past his boat, within arm's reach, until it was too late, and as he turned to look for the other, he saw that its progress had been fortunately stayed by catching against a rock.

A vigorous stroke or two sent him bounding in the direction. Then pulling in the oars, he waited till the man, who had been caught again by the current and was rushing toward him, should come within reach. He made a desperate clutch at the [Pg 239]man's garments, and soon had him dragged into the boat.

Violet Harding had watched this scene with clasped hands and terror-stricken face. As she saw the boatman nearing the shore, she seemed to come to a realizing sense of her position. Her first impulse was to fly. She might escape, and no trace be found to connect her with this awful tragedy. But what if this man who had been saved was the one whom she hated so? If he were to recover, what miserable fate might yet be hers at his hands?

Scarcely waiting to analyze the consequences of her acts, however, she made her way hastily down to the shore, where the watchman was now dragging the boat as far up as he could. She shuddered as she approached and saw a dark form lying motionless in the bottom of the boat.

"Oh, sir," she asked faintly, "is he—dead?"

"There's life in him yet, I think. Ye'd better run for a doctor if ye wants to save him, while I carry him into the mill here."

"I know of no doctor," she panted. "I am almost a stranger here. Take him to the mill, and I will care for him while you go for a physician. Get the first doctor you can find, and I will pay the bill and reward you."

The man was already on the way. The mill was close at hand. A light was burning dimly in the office. With a kick of his boot the workman burst open a side door, entered, and placed the dripping form on a bench.

"I'll get Doctor Harrison; he lives close by," and [Pg 240]away the man went, running as fast as his burly form would permit.

Violet Harding heaved a sigh as the man disappeared. Now she was alone with the dying. Who was he? She turned toward him. The sufferer upon the bench stirred and gave vent to a long, low moan. His eyes opened slowly.

Timidly, and with a throbbing heart, she approached him, and gazed into the face, now so ghastly white, and upon which the flickering light of a lamp that was burning low in the office cast a fitful gleam. As their eyes met, her very heart seemed to stand still; then throwing up her hand, with one wild, despairing shriek she fell upon her knees beside the dying man. He made an effort to rise, but was either too weak or too stunned as yet. Then he whispered hoarsely:

"Violet!"

She raised her head. Again their eyes met.

"Richard—you—" she gasped.

Then quickly recovering herself, she gently raised his head and pillow'd it upon her arm, and with a tender touch she brushed back the wet hair from his pallid brow and gazed earnestly into his face.

"You, sis—and that man—fiend—who was he?"

She told him in a few words his connection with her life.

"Thank Heaven—I—saved you."

"And you, Dick? How came you here? I thought you were far away."

"Yes, sis. I promised never to cast my shadow across your path again," he murmured feebly.
"I'm [Pg 241]no good, never have been, but I saved your life, didn't I? It's the only good deed I ever did. I'm dying, sis. Will you kiss me, and say you forgive me?"

"Hush, you are not so bad, Dick. Yes, I forgive you," and she bent over him and imprinted a kiss upon his lips.

A faint smile flitted over his face, and the hard and cruel vice-drawn lines softened under the tender kiss of forgiveness.

"Yes, I am bad; worse sins have been added to my lot than that which parted us years ago. I must live till I have made a confession. Send a message to—to—"

His voice was very faint; he whispered a name. As Violet heard it she started.

"I had been laying around Lakeview for some time," he began again. "When I learned you were there, I got away as quickly as I could; I didn't dare to meet you."

At this point the man returned with a doctor and the sufferer was quickly aided. The medical man shook his head as he saw the extent of the injuries.

"I know I'm a goner, doc, but keep me alive a few hours, if you can; it's life and death to others," he whispered.

After doing all that was possible for the moment, the physician left, saying he would have a stretcher and men sent to remove him. An hour after he had departed, the injured man was removed to Violet's boarding house. She never left his bedside [Pg 242]for an instant, save to scribble a few words and ask the landlady to have the telegram sent at once.

Then she sat beside him the long night through, clasping his hand in hers, and watching the labored heaving of that troubled breast, whence a soul was so soon to take its flight to "that bourn from which no traveler returns."

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CHAPTER XXVI.
CONFESSON AND EXPIATION.

"And now you know the whole truth, papa—everything! Do you not hate me—despise me?"

It was Maud Willowby who spoke. She sat up in bed, propped by numerous pillows, her thin, white hands clasped together and a strange, exciting fire burning in her sunken eyes. It was

several days after she had fallen almost lifeless at the top of the stairs, and she had been hovering between life and death ever since, and sometimes praying that the latter might be her portion.

The colonel did not answer immediately. It had been a keen blow to him, a stab to the very heart, and nature was rebelling against it.

For nearly an hour he had listened, suppressing his wrath from time to time, and occasionally pacing the floor in a spasmodic way that told only too well of the rage that filled his breast. But she had not faltered; in a dull monotone she had told her dreadful secret, not, however, daring to look at him until now, when the last word was spoken.

Outside the ground was covered with snow, and even yet the wind dashed the little particles against the windows, as if seeking for some crevice by which to enter. Father and daughter were utterly alone. She had ordered it so.

"Maud!" his voice trembled so that he could hardly speak. He was going to say that he would [Pg 244]rather have seen her in the grave than have listened to that tale of deceit and misery. But a look at her aroused his pity, and the latter words were unsaid. Again he restlessly paced the silent chamber.

"And he—your husband—is the man who killed Allen Chesterbrook?" he said slowly.

"Yes."

Again there was a silence, broken only by the shriek of the rising wind and then the slamming of a door below. She hid her face in the pillows, and began to sob.

"Then you have been punished enough, my child," he said softly, at last. "There is no need for me to—to—"

His voice died out in a breath of tenderness. He bent over her and stroked her golden hair. This sudden act of kindness, of sympathy, made her sob the louder, and he had hard work to soothe her.

"Oh, it is fearful, papa. Think of it! I do not believe you can fully realize it. We are married, and he is a murderer. And then think of Roy, papa—my Roy—such a manly little lad—the son of a murderer. Oh, I could bear my own trouble and disgrace—at least, I would try—but think of the disgrace for him!"

"He does not know his father; he never must know him," interposed the colonel hastily. "You must keep the boy out of the way. Send him to some asylum."

"And I must part with him—my own flesh and blood?" Her head quivered in agony, as the tears started afresh.

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"Yes, you must part with him. And we must get that old woman out of the way, too. Money will do it." He began to pace up and down again. "Yes, money will do it—it must do it."

"And then, papa?"

"The wretch must be found. The detectives must be set on his track. Not such blockheads as that Hull, but men who know their business. They will soon track him down—and Henry Cross will be vindicated."

Ah, yes, Henry Cross would be vindicated—that was true. But what of herself—what would the cold, cruel world say and think about her?

"You must be strong, Maud; you must do your duty, no matter how humiliating. You owe it to the law, to Cross, to yourself. You must do your duty, be the consequences what they may."

"Oh, papa, I would rather die!" She leaped from the bed and threw herself at his feet. "Think of the everlasting disgrace. I will be the widow of a murderer, of a man who closed his career in the electric chair. No one will speak to me. I shall be shunned. The girl who was once the belle of Lakeview will be ostracized, despised."

He took her hands and embraced her. "We will go away. We can go to South America; and the boy—"

A tap at the door interrupted the conversation. It was one of the servants.

"A message for Miss Maud. The man as brought it said it wasn't to be delayed under any circumstances, and was sorry it couldn't have been [Pg 246]delivered late last night, as it should have been but for the storm."

The colonel took the envelope from the servant's hand.

"Is the man waiting for the answer?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. Go and make him comfortable. This is not a nice storm for any one to be exposed to."

The servant departed, and Colonel Willowby turned toward his daughter.

"Give it to me—quick, papa; it may be from him."

"Not likely, Maud. Here, I will open it for you." He tore open the envelope and handed her the single sheet folded within. She glanced hastily at it. "I have had an accident and am dying. Come to me at once, or it may be too late. Am at twenty-seven Mill Street, Factorytown."

That was all, but it was enough. "Look, papa! What strange act of Providence is this? We must go at once."

She sprang toward her dressing-room closet, while he took the note over to the window.

"Humph! An accident, and dying!" The colonel looked out of the window. "It is a fearful day, Maud—"

"What of that, papa? I would go, no matter what the weather. Will you send Nancy up to me and order the machine? How can I get to the place the quickest?"

She flew around in a frenzy of haste. He looked [Pg 247]at her, and realized that it would be useless to argue with her. But she should not go alone.

"That place is a hundred miles from here by boat and rail. I will go with you," he said.

She murmured her thanks, but that was all; she was too busy arranging her toilet. He went below to send the messenger away and to order the big touring car.

A quarter of an hour later they were plunging at top speed through the snow, sending the machine rocking from side to side. It was just a few minutes to boat time, and the colonel had given orders that the boat must be caught.

And they did catch it, although they were the last passengers on board. Soon the craft was puffing along down the lake on her way to Mackanack Junction.

Together the father and daughter consulted a time-table, and learned that at the Junction they could make close connection with a train that would take them to their destination.

"I am glad of it," said Maud; "I—I must see him before he dies."

The journey took nearly four hours, and it was dusk when the train came to a halt, and they got out. The messenger was in sight, and he volunteered to show them the way to the house where the dying man lay.

No coach was in view, and they tramped the distance, Maud clinging to her father's arm. When they reached the place the landlady, Mrs. Canberry, admitted them.

"If you are the lady he is waiting to see go [Pg 248]right up, ma'am. The room in the back. The other lady—"

The woman did not finish. A door above had opened, and now Violet Harding came out on the landing above. She was weeping bitterly.

"Go to him, Miss Willowby," she said, in a low voice. "He is waiting for you. And be kind to him—for my sake."

Maud started back in astonishment. Who was this woman—what did she mean by that strange speech? She was about to ask some question, when Violet brushed past her, went out of the front door, and hurried down the street, out of sight in the snowy twilight.

"No time to spare, ma'am—he's sinking fast, the doctor says." It was the voice of the woman who had let them in; and Maud turned and sped up the stairs, followed by her father.

The sufferer lay on a low bed between the door and a window. His forehead was bandaged, and his face looked pale and haggard. Maud ran to his side, but he motioned her off.

"Don't come near me—it wouldn't be right," he muttered, in a voice so weak they could scarcely hear him. "Sit down over there. That's your father, I suppose."

"Yes, I am Colonel Willowby." Conflicting feelings kept the old man from saying more.

"I am dying. The doctor says I can't live the night out," went on the sufferer. "I—I fell from a bridge, and went over the dam, and it has finished me. I've been waiting for you, Maud, and [Pg 249]I know just what I want to tell you. Does your father—"

"He knows all, Dick!" The young woman was crying. "Are you not sorry—"

"Yes, I am sorry. But I am more sorry for something else—something that made me send for you. I didn't want to die with two great crimes on my soul, hardened as I am. Did you see Violet? She just went out."

"Yes; we saw the young lady that just left you."

The sufferer gave a long sigh. "She is my sister. There! don't start, Maud—you don't know it all yet. She is one of the best and purest girls in the world. She is all alone, and I want you to promise that you will be her friend henceforth. Don't think because I'm bad that she is. She is broken-hearted, I know; she has tried to forgive me, bless her. Now—a drink, quick!"

The sufferer gave a short gasp for breath. Maud could not move, so overcome was she by what she had heard. The colonel seized a glass of water which stood on a table and pressed it to the dying man's lips. The cooling beverage revived him somewhat.

"Violet has gone out for a lawyer, who is to take down my confession. I shan't involve any one in it but myself, so no one shall suffer but me. And now listen closely: I can't say much, and I want to tell you before that lawyer comes. I have been a thorough villain from the start. I was never

your husband; my name is not Dick Harley; it is Dick Harding, and Dick Harley and I were first cousins. We always looked alike, and [Pg 250]but for the same Christian name would have passed for twins.

"I did not kill Allen Chesterbrook because of you, but solely on my own account; we differed about a money matter. Anyway, he was not as good as you thought him. I followed him to Lakeview; I had been drinking, and was in desperate circumstances, and I thought he ought to give me a roll of money, just to keep quiet about certain things I knew. I watched my chance, and, entering his room on that wedding morning, I asked him for money. He wouldn't give me any; then I told him I was your husband. That angered him more; we fought, and, in the struggle, I killed him. Water, more water—quick!"

Again the colonel, upon whose face now rested a calmer look, placed the glass to his lips. Maud had advanced, and was close beside them both.

"Before I killed him, I overheard all that passed between Chesterbrook and you." His eyes rested on the young woman. "I knew you were talking of poor Dick, who was dead, and I learned of Chesterbrook's doubts. That talk and the scene in the courtroom, gave me an idea. I determined to palm myself off as my Cousin Dick, and, if I got no money out of him, I thought I might squeeze some money out of you in some way, even if I had to play the rôle of husband, and then clear out. Now you know it all. Your forgiveness is all I ask."

Maud caught his hand and tried to speak. There were footsteps on the stairs. She pressed his hand warmly. "For poor Dick's sake, I forgive [Pg 251]you," she murmured, with an effort. She could say no more. The revelation had stunned her.

An elderly gentleman entered, carrying a roll of legal cap and writing materials, all in readiness. "I am wanted to take a confession——" he began.

"Yes; sit down, and write quickly." It was Dick Harding who spoke. The lawyer seated himself, while a sudden hush fell on the little group.

"Write this." The sufferer's voice could scarcely be heard. "Being about to die, as the doctor tells me, I hereby confess and swear, as I hope for pardon from God in the world to come, that I killed Allen Chesterbrook, of Lakeview, this State." The lawyer started, but his pen kept scratching away. "I killed him in self-defense, for he had struck me several times—although not without cause. I entered his room by the door. We quarreled, and I stabbed him with a dagger that was lying on his bureau. I escaped through a window to an adjoining room. I make this confession to clear my soul and save an innocent man, Henry Cross, from the chair."

The sufferer's voice died out utterly. "Water, water! and raise me up so I can sign it. I—I—can't see! Give me—me—the—the pen. Violet, where are you? Violet!"

A form by the doorway, a form shaking with sobs, came over to his side and caught his arm, that almost lifeless arm, the hand of which now held the pen.

"Put my hand on the paper where I am to sign. The room is so dark—I can't see anything." [Pg 252]The pen made a big blot on the sheet, but that was all. "I can't do it—I can't! God have mercy on me, a poor sinner. Oh, Violet, Violet! Forgive!"

He clung to her convulsively, the pen still in his hand. She looked into his face.

"Try to sign, Dick—for the sake of that innocent man. And, remember, I love and forgive you."

The dying man took a new grip on the pen. The hand sought the paper; the trembling fingers scrawled the name—Richard Harding. A shudder convulsed his frame; the pen dropped; there was a rattle in the sufferer's throat, and the murderer of Allen Chesterbrook was dead.

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CHAPTER XXVII.

AFTERWARD.

It will not take many words to bring our narrative to a close. The sensation in Lakeview the next day, indeed, throughout the entire country, was tremendous. Here was a condemned man not guilty at all; a man whose name had never once been connected with the murder had done the deed, and he was already dead. The newspapers printed long comments upon the case, and published sharp editorials on the instability of circumstantial evidence, and in every store and public place the case was vigorously discussed.

There was one man who was thoroughly disgusted with both the news and himself, and that was Jack Hull. He had woven an elaborate web about Henry Cross, and that was brushed aside as a broom might clear away the web of a spider.

He tried to reason the matter in a way to lighten the cloud of contempt which he felt he had brought upon himself, but public feeling had gone over to Cross in a great tidal wave. Even the prosecuting attorney would not listen to him, and he never learned the true significance of the slip of paper he had found addressed to Maud Willowby.

Henry Cross himself could not, at first, realize his good fortune. He had spent days in his narrow cell, waiting for his sentence, which he knew could be but one thing; and when they threw open [Pg 254]the door, and said that a man had confessed the murder, and he would be free just as soon as the necessary papers could be signed, he sat like one dazed, refusing, at first, to believe that his ears had not deceived him.

There was no trouble in bringing forth evidence against Dick Harding, now that he had confessed. Half a dozen people remembered him at the race track; and one man had seen Chesterbrook thrash him with a carriage whip; and still another had seen him in the vicinity of the bachelor apartments on the morning of the murder. All these things strengthened the confession, until it stood as it was meant to stand.

On the day after his release, Henry Cross received a note from Maud Willowby.

"I am glad, from the bottom of my heart, that you are free," she wrote. "Some day I mean to tell you all—but not now."

His heart leaped with pain when he thought how he had sometimes thought she might be guilty. He went up to the Willowby mansion a week later, but found that the colonel and his daughter had gone South, and would not be back until the following spring. Later on he heard that they had taken Violet Harding with them, and also a little boy, whom nobody seemed to know.

Cross tried to settle down to work on the proposed new railroad line, but that seemed irksome. He tried it for two weeks, and then gave it up. Three days later he, too, went South, after having been very particular to worry Nancy Motley into giving him Maud's address.

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The two met in an orange grove in Florida, and while Violet Harding went off with little Roy, and the colonel dozed away in an easy-chair on the veranda, numerous explanations ensued, which must have been entirely satisfactory to both parties, for when they came back from a long stroll beneath the palms it was arm in arm—heart to heart—and each face was beaming with smiles.

"Yes," Maud was saying, "Violet is to stay with me as a sort of companion. She has had a good education, and I have induced her to become Roy's teacher. He has been much neglected, and needs some one to help him along constantly."

"And I'll take a hand at that, too," was the reply of Henry Cross. "Oh, we'll all get along famously when you and I are—"

"Hush!" she whispered, blushing deeply. "Somebody might hear you, and—and—I'm not quite prepared yet, you know."

"Never mind, darling," he made answer. "I think I can well afford to wait—a little."

THE END.

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