

A WOMAN'S VENGEANCE

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satisfied with one of them, and has gone to see about it, for which circumstance let us be thankful.

"Dulcie, you are an awful girl! Have Berta and you been quarrelling?"

"No, indeed!—with a shrug and a doubtful smile. "For what do you take us?"

"I take you for a dreadful quiz, my dear, and I don't think I am far wrong."

"The dresses were in Mrs. Hardinge's private sitting-room; it was quite crowded with the long packing cases in which those precious garments had come from town. They were handsome dresses, and it is to be presumed they were fashionable, or Mrs. Hardinge would not have chosen them. One, in particular, looked like a queen's robe. It was a black velvet, with a low bodice, trimmed with rare old lace, falling downward from the shoulders, and had lace ruffles, soft and cloudy. But the wedding dress! Dulcie lifted it out almost reverently, and spread it over the couch. It was white, of course—white, pure and unadorned. The lace across the bosom and skirt was mixed with trails of orange blossoms, genuine—hour de Paris, so real looking that one would expect them to drop and fade at a rough breath."

"And there is a wreath," Dulcie cried, ecstatically—"a real wreath! See, is it not perfect?"

"The sight of all this made Esther realize as she had never realized it yet—that the day was actually close at hand now, on which she would take the vows of a wife, and the bride, and begin the new life that their love was to make so very happy up to the very close. The color came and went in her cheeks, her lips trembled. It was not so much the beauty of the dress as the beauty of the life that would begin for her the day she should wear it that made the girl's heart beat, and her veins throb, and that rush, as of keen pain that was almost intolerable, sweep over her."

Dulcie guessed it all, and turned away to pick out fresh treasures from the cases. Her heart ached, oh, so horribly! She could hear sad down in the midst of all this bridal finery and cried some of the bitterest tears of her life. But that would never do. Instead of that she smiled and talked, and bustled about like a gay little courtesan. At last she came to the bridesmaids' robes, genuine Orléans, dainty quaint, bewitching."

"Now, I call that real good of your sister," sweeping over to the glass to fix one on. "She knew my weakness for them, but I never expected her to humiliate me. Shall I look nice?"—turning round to give Esther a view of her face, with the cap set definitely on the crown, bright curves of the cheeks.

"Do let me look at it. Berta told me about them, and I was afraid they were not to be nice."

"Nice!" Dulcie cried. "They are far beyond nice."

But when everything had been examined and admired, they still came back, with undiminished admiration, to the wedding dress itself.

"It is almost too grand to put on, don't you think, Dulcie? I shall feel so odd with all that lace about me. Shall I be smothered?"

"I hope not! My cap might not be noticed in the confusion, if you were to make a sudden 'exit' like that. But you ought to look lovely in that dress. It's an awful pity you can't see you in it right off. I'm sure that high body looks as if it would fit like a skin."

"What is to prevent my trying it on?"

Esther cried, getting up on the instant, all eagerness.

At that moment a servant knocked at the door.

"Mr. Stanhope's compliments, Miss Esther, and could you come down to him, please?"

"Don't touch the dress," Esther called out at the door as she swept down stairs to see him.

She was not many minutes away, and when she came back she hurried Dulcie by insisting on putting on the dress.

"Oh! Eddy, darling, don't do it," Dulcie cried, starting up from her knees, where she had been smoothing out the plaiting on the shining skirt. It's so awfully unlucky! Do listen to reason. No one ever did such a thing!—solemnly—"But did not come to grief."

Esther smiled.

"Now, Dulcie, I gave you credit for common sense. Are you not always boasting how practical you are? What grief could I come to for trying on my own dress? Why, I should not think of putting a common house dress away without first seeing if it fitted me."

"But this is different. Indeed it is. Anyone will tell you that. Do be guided by me this time, dear," pleading.

"But I have promised to go down in it. He is so anxious to see it."

"Never mind that. It could never make you more beautiful in his eyes, I know!—wistfully. No dress could do that, dear. Tell him your reason for not liking to do it, and then he won't mind."

But Esther could not be turned from her purpose. Laughing and blushing and trembling a little in her shy, nervous haste, she put the dress on, and Dulcie, with something like a throb of dismay at her heart, helped her to do it. She tied back the long train and

buttoned up the tight sleeves, which looked, when they were closed, as if they had grown on to the round, plump arms. Then she went down, because Esty would have her go, and saw the look of rapturous admiration that came like a flood of sunshine into Percy Stanhope's blue eyes at the sight of this white vision that lingered in the shade of the doorway for a second, as if afraid to enter and face his gaze.

Poor Dulcie! There are such things as looks that hurt worse than blows, just as there are words that cut deeper than knife blades! A shade of the agony she was enduring fell over her face.

Percy Stanhope, looking past his eyes and on her lips, and understood it. But it was only for an instant. One cannot try out when one's hurt in this world of grown-up men and women. The next moment she was smiling and shaking hands with him, in the most nonchalant manner possible.

"Do you know, Mr. Stanhope, that I am very angry with you both; you for asking, and Esty for granting such an unreasonable request. Have you never heard that it's unlucky to try on a bride's dress before the wedding day?"

"I never heard it, Miss Levesque, but I had I should not have heeded. I should still have braved the ill-luck, and felt myself well rewarded."

"There was no mistaking the tenderness in his voice as he said it. Dulcie was far too keen to mistake it. This 'white love' of his, as he often called her, was so beautiful that his heart thrilled at sight of her; so beautiful that he longed for the hour to come that should make her his own so that she might win him forever from his other love, that only lived in his heart to tear it and wound it with vain passion."

"Well," Dulcie laughed, "I have warned you both, but, since you will not heed my warning, I shall waste no more of my valuable time upon you."

Then she ran up-stair to get ready for her walk with Julian Carre. When she looked at herself in the glass, she was startled to see how pale she was.

"Flattering for him, but not very nice for me," she thought. "What a fool I am, to be sure! My face is getting rather too much of an 'open book,' and assuredly Percy Stanhope must think it is a book 'bound in calf.'"

She rubbed her cheeks with her soft little palms, and slowly the bloom came back to them.

"That's more like yourself, Dulcie. If you go about with waxen cheeks like those of the new convert, you will make 'tracks' like the old one. It behooves you to be careful now, you know."

CHAPTER XV.

A lurid sunset over Brierton Wood. The birds were twittering restlessly. There was the low complaining "sough" of the trees to be heard over the fret and dash of the river. The light stream was brimmed to the top of its banks, and swept by in a gentle mood, to make its way over the face of the old weir.

The light was low and brooding, with more of a sullen glare than brightness in it. All the freshness had died out of the air.

Dulcie Levesque, standing upright as a dart on the plank bridge which was little more than a foot wide, across the water, noted those signs of a coming storm with keen impatience. She was not afraid of the storm itself, but of the remarks it would occasion if she were out in it. Opposite to her stood Percy Stanhope. She had come to the wood that afternoon to meet Julian Carre, and to her deep chagrin, she had come face to face with her lover instead. And he was in no very pleasant mood, either. He was inclined to take upon himself to lecture and dictate to Dulcie. He had seen her that past day with her head on Julian Carre's shoulder, and he was wrath indeed with her for it.

"It is not prudent," he said. "It was not even ladylike."

"What right have you to talk to me like that?" Dulcie cried out at last, roused to indignation by his reproaches. "What is it to you what I do, or with whom I walk? I consider you are very impertinent."

"You will let me call me that," was his bitter retort. "Do you think you are nothing to me? Do you think that as long as I live I shall ever forget what you once were to me?"

"I think you had better."

As she stood she rested her gloved hand on the wooden rail, and he put his hand down upon it.

"If's of no use, Dulcie; I can't stand this any longer. I will not try to give you up."

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or be able to endure my existence. If you were to be in the same house with me. It would kill me in a month."

"Thank you."

"But where are you going?" he asked. She had moved away from him to the edge of the trail, swaying plumply the river flowed rapidly past, so rapidly that her eyes, sickly feeling steady round her heart and made her head swim. The sky had turned from a dark blue to a dark cobalt. The birds had ceased to twitter, and, save for that turbid, swirling water, the place was intensely still.

When Dulcie looked up to answer that urgent question, some of the gloom of the gathering storm had settled on her. Her eyes were dark and misty; her cheeks and even her lips were pale.

"I am going to be married to Julian Carre."

Her voice did not sound like her own as she said it. No blush came into her face, no smile into her eyes. She looked dead and spoke like a woman half dead. The harsh laugh that answered her made her heart throb.

"I wish him joy of his wife, then."

There came a low growl of thunder, and a patter of big rain-drops. Dulcie started, and turned as if to step off the bridge, but he put out his hand and would not let her stir.

"Listen to me, Dulcie Levesque. I swear you shall never be this man's wife. What there is breath in my body, I will stand between you and him. I will suffer enough. Let other people take their turn now. I don't care how he loves you—I care for nothing! I only know that you are mine, and that I will never give you up. I will die first."

The rain was falling heavily now. The wind, which had been hushed so long, was rising. It mingled with the roll of the thunder and the roar of the water. It caught the boughs of the trees, and tossed them aloft like signals of danger.

Percy Stanhope never gave a thought to the storm. The very fire of madness was working in his brain; his blue eyes gleamed fiercely; his lips, under his heavy blonde moustache, grew white with the passion that was mastering him, slowly and surely, as passion had never mastered him in all his pleasuring life before.

"Dulcie, do not go on, but her heart failed her at sight of that threatening face. What might he not be capable of in his jealous fury? If Julian Carre came past at that moment—and he might pass at any moment on his way to or from the place of meeting at the weir—she dared not answer for the consequences."

"Oh, if I were only at home," she thought. "If I were only safe at home."

"Percy," she said, trying to steady her voice, "I don't think you mean to be cruel to me, but you are. Can't you see that we are going to have an awful storm? I shall be drenched though before we reach home, as it is. Don't keep me here any longer."

"Cruel to you, my darling! Have I been cruel to you? Then be sure I never meant it. I would shed my heart's blood for you, Dulcie."

His hand came down heavily on her shoulder, and he drew her to him with a kind of sob.

"Why, the trial to forget you, to love Esty only and forget you, has killed me. Do you think I could be cruel to you?"

He drew her face to his breast, and stroked her cheek with fond, trembling fingers.

"What fools we have been, he burst out, presently. "What awful fools we have been! Dulcie! What ever possessed us to think we could live without each other?"

The thunder was fainter now; the storm seemed to be passing off, after all, as that other storm had done before, but the rain did not abate. Dulcie, with her cheek against his wet coat and her eyes lifted to his face, listened to him in silence. Her heart was beating with a fierce joy. She felt a hungry longing for this man's love, for the sound of his voice, the touch of his hand. What was all the word to her or to him? He was right; they could not live without each other. She felt as if it would be easier to die in his arms than to turn away and leave him to Esther. All the love with which she had ever loved him rushed back now.

"If it be a sin," she said to herself, as she lay in the close clasp of his arms, "I cannot help it. I have no strength in me to give him up."

For a brief space there was silence between them; such silence as had been well called "golden." Again and again her soft lips pressed little furtive kisses on the breast of his coat, she thinking he did not know. Again and again her eyes looked up into his, only to drop again under the weight of their heavy tears.

"I loved him first," she thought. "I must love him best. Esty would not ask me to give him up, if she knew."

For so sorely was she tempted that even her love for Esther paled.

"Dulcie," he said, presently, "You must not keep this to ourselves an hour longer. Who shall tell Esther, you or I?"

"Oh, I could not! I dare not! Oh, Percy, must you know? What other reason have I to give her for not—"

But he never finished his sentence. A flash of blue flame leaped out of the cloud above them, and scattered the boughs of an alder tree not many yards from where they were standing. Dulcie screamed in terror.

"Come away, Percy! Come away! I am so frightened!"

Then, for the first time, he awoke to a sense of his own want of judgment. Assuredly, Brierton Wood was not exactly the place one would choose to be in during a storm such as this promised to be. It was dangerous to stay where they were; almost more dangerous to walk along any of the narrow paths, where the trees meeting overhead were so many lightning conductors. At last he bethought himself of a shed that used to be somewhere in the vicinity. For what it had been built, no one exactly knew; perhaps as a shelter for the keepers in old Harvey's time. It was a gruesome, tumble down place; but at all events it was better than no covering at all. Taking Dulcie's hand, he drew her at a venture down one of the side paths, and fortunately for them they found the shed was close at hand. There they sheltered, while the storm raged in all its fury.

Lord Harvey had been right in his surmise, that the preceding storm had been but the prelude to this mightier one. A wild wind howled through the woods, sweeping twigs and broken boughs before it. Sheet after sheet of lurid flame lightened the sky, and played fitfully about the tops of the high trees. The thunder scarcely ceased for an instant; now low and far off, now loud and close at hand, it shook and rattled and rolled with an awful persistency. Dulcie was crying quietly, her eyes hidden against Percy's arm, her hands clinging to him, as peal after peal shook the rotten joists above their heads. He did all he could to calm her fears. He soothed her as one soothes a frightened child. And only to be near him, to hear his voice, low and tender, speaking to her in the old familiar way, was a rare joy to Dulcie. All her life long she never forgot that storm. All her life long the hour she spent in that old shed, her head on Percy Stanhope's heart, his arms about her, lived in her memory as a time that had the pang of a bitter sweet joy in it. When at last the storm was over, Dulcie looked ruefully at her wet clothes, and said:

"Now I must go home; and I'm just afraid to meet that Mrs. Hardinge. She'll be sure to have something unpleasant to say about my being out in such a down-pour."

"The storm will be your excuse. Tell her you were sheltering, and never heed what she says; we must learn to be 'all in all' to each other, darling. You and I will have to face worse than Mrs. Hardinge will say to you. But we can face a 'world in arms' together, sweet."

Dulcie sighed. Already some of the thorns were beginning to prick her fingers. Already some of the roses in this forbidden Eden of hers had the shade of decay upon them.

When they had left the wood and come out upon the common, they found the sky one blaze of shifting clouds, which glowed and deepened about the setting sun. Tears came into Dulcie's eyes. Something in that changing sky, in the sweetness of the freshened earth, touched her.

"How beautiful the world is!" she said, softly.

Percy Stanhope, looking at her, smiled, yet a sudden swift pang made her heart ache. She could not forget how lately he had called another woman "his love," while she had been forgotten. When they were near to the Elms he left her. He was going back to the city by the evening train.

"I will write and tell Esty everything. Trust me, I will be as gentle as can be; but she will understand and forgive us both, when I tell her all."

Dulcie's lips quivered, and she clasped her hands about his arm in sudden intolerable remorse and pain.

"Oh, my poor Esty! Dare we ever hope to be happy again after hunting her so cruelly? Could nothing save her from such pain as this will be to her?"

"Nothing," he said, almost angrily; "but your death or mine. The day I saw you in that fellow's arms I knew I could not live without you. I knew I never could marry Esther."

His face had a curious gray pallor upon it; his blue eyes had a cold gleam in them; his lips were set and stern. The beauty of this face, which Dulcie Levesque thought the bonniest of earth, was dimmed just then, as he held his little sweetheart's hand in his, and answered her with such blunt directness.

When he had gone, she walked quickly down the lane, and in at the gate of the Elms. Mrs. Hardinge was looking out of the drawing-room window. She felt curious to know when Dulcie came in, and if any one came up the lane with her. No one did come with her, so far as she could tell, and that pacified her a little. Still it was with something very like a sneer that she turned to Esther.

"Here is Dulcie at last, looking not very much unlike a little tramp in wet, dragged clothes. I wonder what that girl can go about in all weathers, as she has taken to do lately."

CHAPTER XVI.

While Dulcie changed her dress, Esther sat on the edge of the low white bed, and talked to her.

"I was so uneasy about her wet hair, and fasten it up tight to get dry. I have gone after you for the rain till I tell, only Berta would not hear of it. Where were you while it was thundering?"

"In an old shed, near the bridge."

"Oh, I know it! How terrified you must have been! It would not have been so bad if you'd had some one with you."

A dull red crept into Dulcie's white cheeks, and her eyes fell.

"Who do you think has been here, Dulcie?"

"I'm sure I don't know"—listlessly.

"Mr. Carre. He was on his way to the station, he told us. He had had a telegram calling him up to town. You could not have been gone ten minutes when he came. He seemed sorry to have missed seeing you. I fancy you've made an impression in that quarter."

As Dulcie stood, her back was to Esther. But Esther, by bending forward a little, could easily see her face in the glass. She was looking at it as she spoke, and the quick change that flitted over it surprised her.

"Dulcie"—getting up with a smile—"Is it possible that I've found out your secret? Are you in love with him?"

"With him? With whom? What are you talking about?" Dulcie stammered, turning round with a white, frightened face.

"This handsome Julian Carre. To be sure, is he to be the happy man?"

Dulcie was looking at Esther with hollow, sorrowful eyes. At the first glance at her face, at the first sound of her voice, a kind of horror had fallen upon her. The thought of her treachery to this poor soul made her brain reel! The baseness of the wrong she had wrought her, in her headstrong folly and passion, stood out asked before her now, and appalled her. She had secured a woman's vengeance! What should she do, and what could she do, to atone?

"I am not well. I—I am very miserable," she said, and then, with a kind of sob, putting her hands up to her eyes, as if to shut out the light, and beginning to cry in a quick, nervous way that frightened Esther. This was so unlike Dulcie. Something must have hurt—

sorely to make her high spirit break down like this.

"Tell me all about it, darling," drawing her down onto the bed beside her, and holding her head against her bosom. "It must be something very bad if you and I together can't find a cure for it."

Dulcie had nothing to tell. She moaned a little, and shivered once or twice, yet her cheeks and hands were burning.

"You have taken cold, dear, and that horrible storm has upset you. Don't try to come down-stairs to-night. We'll have a cozy tea up here, by our own two selves, and you'll see you'll feel better after that."

"No, no!" Dulcie said, starting up and going on with her dressing, in nervous haste. "I don't want to stay up here! I am all right. You must not heed my nonsense."

Esther was watching her gravely. She did not like the look of her eyes. The pulsing color in her cheeks, or her dry, strained voice, which had something so unnatural in it.

"I do hope she is not going to be ill," she thought. "I should not like to go away and leave her with Berta if she were."

Dulcie knew she was watching her and winced.

"Go down now," she said. "I shall be after you in five minutes."

But the five minutes passed, and she did not go down. At the end of half an hour, Esther came up-stairs to fetch her, and found her bedroom door locked.

"Are you ill, Dulcie? Let me in."

A very low, tired voice answered her. "I am all right, but I don't care for any tea, and what's to go down again, I think. Let me rest, please! I shall be better alone."

If Esther could only have seen her as she said it! She was lying on the floor by the side of the bed, stretched out at full length, with her face buried in her folded arms. She had not put a dress on in place of the wet one she had taken off, and her bare, plump shoulders gleamed white against the red and gold of the rug. She was not crying. She had sobbed out all her passion, till she had no strength to sob any more. Yet the pain was there still, the cruel aching pain that seemed to be tearing at the roots of her life. Would it ever go away? Would she ever again feel glad, and carefree, and happy, as she had once felt? It seemed impossible. The agony that she had suffered before, when she had first lost her lover, had not been half so keen as this agony she was suffering now, when she had won him back again.

It seemed to her that she dared never to show her face as Percy Stanhope's wife, as if all the world would know how false she had been to the truest friend woman ever had, and hate her for it.

"Oh, that I never had come here!" she thought, turning her throbbing head from side to side in a vain search for cause. "Everything would have been right if I had only stayed away! O, Esty, Esty!"

She could hear the crows outside her window, holding their nightly convulse! The low, sweet cry of the cuckoo came up from the rain-washed fields. Inside the house all was quiet. Now and then a door would slam, and once Mrs. Hardinge, passing across the hall, called out something to Esty; save for this, everything was very quiet. The stillness was terrible to Dulcie. She lay and listened for some sound to break the hush, till she felt as if she were going mad. As she lay there, the pale evening light fell upon her, upon the dusky head and the white, bare arms and neck and shoulders. She burned and shivered by turns. One moment her cheeks were milk white, the next they were crimson. Her head was throbbing so much that she could not think clearly; she could only suffer. Strange fancies came into her brain, and she knew quite well that they were unreal, fantastic, and yet they tormented her.

"I am never to know peace again," she whispered to herself in a kind of despair. "This is how I shall be tormented all my life, because I was false to Esty."

Old days were back with her, days when she had tumbled in the bay fields with Esther and Lyan Durrant, her brother. Lyan had been dead years, and she knew it; yet that did not hinder her seeing him exactly as she used to see him. She was sitting in the spacious old parlor at the farm, and Esty's mother was piling her plate with homemade cakes. She was lying in the big white-curtained bed in the room above the pantry, and her cheek was close against Esther's cheek, and she felt her gentle breathing as she slept. Her eyes smarted with tears, she felt as if she were choking. And all the time she knew that these were but memories; that that dead past was over and done with. It had nothing to do with the changed, miserable present; it never could have anything to do with the future. The most trivial things came to her remembrance, and held her fast, so that she could not think of the one thing of which she wanted to think.

"My brain must be going wrong," she said to herself at last, "or I never could lie here and bother my head over such silly fancies, while this sorrow is coming upon Esther. I must be doing something. I must think of something to save her yet."

She got up and bathed her face in cold water. That seemed to clear her brain and refresh her. Then she flung a shawl round her, and sat down on the side of the bed to think. She remained there a long time, a creature tossed and torn between two master-passions. Her whole soul cleaved to Percy Stanhope with a love as strong as death. It frightened her, this wild, intense passion; she had never dreamed she could feel anything like it. There was more pain than pleasure in it, more dread than bliss.

"It would kill me to give him up, I think," she said to herself, looking out at the gathering night, with fever-bright smarting eyes. "Yet how could I endure to make her suffer, as I suffered when I first came here?"

She could not forget Esther; she could not get the thought of her anguish out of her mind. Between the two loves her heart wandered to and fro, and could find no rest. As she sat there she heard a clock in the lower part of the house striking ten o'clock. The sound sent a thrill through her. All at once—without her having had any former thought of doing such a thing—it struck her that she should just have time, if she

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