

# FORTUNE FAVORS THE BRAVE; OR, A LOOK INTO THE PAST

## CHAPTER XIV.—(Cont'd)

Mr. Crawshaw jerked his head in the direction of Nancy, and then, with an evil look in his black eyes he turned and lounged towards the girl just as Mrs. Fairfax glided up to Derry's side.

"Here you are at last," she said, with a sigh of relief; "where have you been to? Oh, there is Miss Hamilton, also. Shall we join them?"

"I prefer to remain here, if you have no objection."

To all appearances Mr. Darnley was only very languid, very tired, and rather dull.

"I am delighted—delighted!" cried Mrs. Fairfax, with enthusiasm, and speaking the honest truth. "I have been dying for some congenial society all the day."

"Scarcely flattering to my cousin and her guests."

He was smiling, but his ears were listening for those tones once again. She was surely very silent. He did not dare look, for if he did it meant fresh torture.

"Oh, you know what I mean," cried Mrs. Fairfax, setting herself in a luxurious chair and glancing up at him coquettishly, feeling that her complexion must look well in the moonlight; then her smile went, and she frowned.

"Oh, they are coming to disturb us, just when we are so comfortable! How grave they all look!" She leaned back in the chair and unfurled her fan. "Are you discussing state secrets, you four young people? How silent you are!"

They, none of them, answered her, though Miss Chester evinced a desire to giggle, which she managed to check with difficulty.

As they reached the steps Dorothy turned to Crawshaw.

"You must forgive me, Mr. Crawshaw, if I spoke rudely to you," she said, coldly, drawing Nancy's trembling hand through her arm; "but please understand that Miss Hamilton is my dearest friend, and I resent an insult to her as I should resent an insult to myself."

Mrs. Fairfax shut her fan and sat bolt upright. This was going to be amusing with a vengeance!

Derrick Darnley only leaned still closer against the marble pillar; his face had grown curiously set and stiff, and his eyes were fastened on that slender, shrinking form before him.

Acting or no, there was such a look of pain and anguish written visibly on her white cheeks and quivering lips, that it awoke his pity.

Crawshaw smiled almost insolently.

"You are young and hasty, Miss Leicester, and so I will pass it over this time," he observed. "Wait," he added, as Dorothy drew herself up with flashing eyes, "we shall come to a more satisfactory conclusion if we refer to Miss Hamilton herself, as being the supposed aggrieved party."

He threw away his cigar, and, with great deliberation, he turned to Nancy.

"Did I insult you just now?" he asked, shortly.

She tried to speak, to meet his gaze. Surely he would spare her the pain of this publicity! She lifted her eyes to his, but at the determination and triumph written in his they fell again.

Dorothy broke in hurriedly before she could find her voice:

"Miss Hamilton does not desire to hold further conversation with you, Mr. Crawshaw," she said, with trembling lips.

"Does she?" Crawshaw gave a short, sneering laugh. "Is that correct, Miss Hamilton? Come, don't be shy. Why not speak up, and tell Miss Leicester as you don't find fault with a man taking a kiss from his future wife," and, with a flash of his black eyes, and another short laugh, he bent forward deliberately and touched the girl's cheek with his lips.

Dorothy started back.

"Nancy!" she cried, and a whole volume of astonished horror was

expressed in that one word, her hand slipped from Nancy's arm, she seemed positively stunned at this blow.

Nancy stood alone, for the Hon. Maude had run away, overcome with sudden jealousy, surprise and disappointment.

Dorothy's eyes were fixed on her downcast face.

"Nancy, is this true?"

Mrs. Fairfax was intensely interested, she had not been so much amused for years. She forgot Mr. Darnley for the instant as she leaned forward eagerly.

The moment had come—the fatal moment for which her long vigil during the past few hours was to have prepared her. Dorothy's voice seemed to scatter all her strength, to crush out all her courage; she could not speak or move.

But if she were feeble, Crawshaw was not; with an air of proprietorship he took Nancy's hand.

"Miss Leicester seems to doubt my word," he said, in a voice that betrayed his anger, yet in which his triumph still rang, "perhaps she'll believe you, Nancy."

Dorothy pushed him on one side, and snatched Nancy's two cold hands in her own.

"I will not believe it! I will not!" she said, in tones of such pain that pierced Nancy to the quick. "Nancy—Nancy, say this is not true!"

The girl rested her hands in those two gentle ones for one instant. There comes a limit even to suffering, and her limit had come. A sense of numbness was creeping over her aching heart, a dignity born of despair slowly filled her every limb; the happy past was dead; she had cried for help, for deliverance, and none had come, now she must rivet the chains that were to bind her henceforth to one whom she knew to be beneath the very beasts of the field—a man without heart or honor.

She dimly felt that Darnley was near her, and, unconsciously, this gave her strength, she let her eyes meet Dorothy's, and her pale lips opened.

"I can't deny it, dear," she said, quietly, "for—for it is true."

"You—you are not going to marry this—"

"Oh, don't mind me!" sneered Crawshaw, as Dorothy's voice broke. "You don't seem pleased at Miss Hamilton having chosen me, Miss Leicester."

"Pleased!"—Dorothy forgot everything, her duty as hostess, the ordinary conventionalities of society, everything but this hideous fact—that Nancy, her dear, true Nancy, was about to give herself to such a brute as Thomas Crawshaw.

"I cannot—will not believe it!"—tears were coming to her eyes, and a lump rose in her throat. "Nancy, you must be mad! What has come to you, darling—don't we make you happy—do you want to leave me? No, no, it is only a joke, or"—Dorothy turned suddenly to Crawshaw—"or, if it is true, you have made her promise by some unfair means. Yes, yes, I feel it; I know it. She would never have done this of her own free will!"

Crawshaw's face darkened.

"I thank you for your good opinion of me, Miss Leicester!" he said, savagely; then he put his hand on Nancy's shoulder. "Speak out!" he muttered. "Don't stand there like a dog! Don't you hear what is being said, Nancy? Miss Leicester gives me one insult after another, and you must set her right."

"Don't listen to him, darling, listen to me!" cried Dorothy, throwing her arms round the girl's trembling form. "Is—is this awful thing forced upon you, or do you mean to marry him of your own free will? Nancy, you must answer me."

Nancy reared her head, her eyes went across to those of the man she must call master. At the cruel, wicked look in his face she flinched; she seemed to see her uncle alone, deserted, perhaps dying, for she knew Crawshaw would give him no mercy.

"I marry him of my own free will," she said, slowly and deliberately.

Dorothy's arms slackened in their hold, and she stepped back.

"Then," she said, in trembling

tones, "then there is nothing left for me to do but to offer my sincere apologies to Mr. Crawshaw, and—and to wish you happiness, dear."

Derrick Darnley had not moved through this short, strange interview, but at Nancy's cold, curt words he started, and moved forward.

As she was unmerciful in her strength, so he would show her he had no mercy.

"Of course you do, Dolly," he said, speaking very easily and clearly; "and so do we all. Come, Mrs. Fairfax, where are your congratulations?"

"Here, and at Miss Hamilton's service," was the prompt reply. "My dear, I congratulate you most sincerely. You will be the envy of half London, and the manor house is a positive dream. While as to Mr. Crawshaw"—the keen-witted little matron held out her hand with a graceful gesture—"it is fortunate for me that I am a married woman, or there is no saying what injury I might not have done Miss Hamilton for forestalling me in his affections."

Mrs. Fairfax was well versed in tiding over awkward moments, and her tact certainly did good service now; but though she was outwardly so easy and unsuspecting, she was inwardly consumed with curiosity.

"Something very like a tragedy. I don't particularly like the girl. She is too outspoken, and much too pretty; but she is also much too good for this brute."

She kissed Nancy with a show of warmth—and then it dawned on her that perhaps she had better go indoors.

"Nearly half-past eleven!" she cried, with a little shriek, as she glanced at her watch. "We shall get no beauty-sleep. Good-night, dears," to Dorothy and Nancy. "Good-night, you lucky man," to Crawshaw. To Darnley she gave a coquettish smile.

"Good-night, Sir Derrick," she was beginning, when he interrupted her:

"I will escort you to the foot of the stairs, fair lady, with your permission. Dorothy, what are you going to do?"

"I will accompany you," answered Dorothy, and without a glance, a word, to Nancy, she mounted the steps to the terrace, and then passed into the hall with the other two.

The girl then left understood her action only too well. It was the outward expression of the hard thoughts that every one would harbor against her henceforth. She stood branded in the world's eye as a manoeuvring, mercenary adventuress, who would sacrifice her youth, beauty, everything, for the sake of the luxury Thomas Crawshaw's money would bring.

She stood with her head erect, and her arms hanging nerveless by her side, and Crawshaw gazed at her with savage joy shining in his black eyes.

"So we're quits at last, Nancy, are we?" he said, with a sneer. "I swore to bring you to my feet; I swore I'd make you my wife; and you see I've kept my word."

And then turning on his heel, he lounged to the room which Sir Humphrey, with his boundless hospitality, had placed at the disposal of the millionaire whenever he felt inclined to use it.

Nancy watched him go with dry, hot eyes, then with a shudder she walked across the lawn.

She could not go indoors yet; she could not bear to meet Dorothy's face, full of pain and undisguised contempt.

Just as she reached the edge of the lawn she saw two forms coming toward her, carrying something between them, and evidently making for the plantation.

She stopped till they came. She had guessed their errand.

"The dog is dead, Foster?" she said, questioningly, her voice low and constrained.

"Yes, miss, she were in such agony we was obliged to give her poison. Poor Zoe! Well, she's out of all further hurt, miss. She can't get no kicks now. You'll forgive me, miss, but I'd sooner serve under a savage nor be a servant of Mr. Crawshaw's."

Nancy made no reply, and the men passed on. For an instant she stood motionless; then she stretched out her hands with a gesture of despair.

"If—if I could only die as Zoe has died!" she moaned.

Alas! for her the end of her misery was not to come yet.

The tidings of Miss Hamilton's engagement to the millionaire were received first with incredulity and then with amazement, tempered in some cases with excessive annoyance. Lady Burton could not con-

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congratulations to either party; while as for the Hon. Maude, a trol herself sufficiently to offer her severe and very unusual headache kept her confined to her room for many hours.

The Countess of Merefield was disagreeable about the matter, Mrs. Darnley indifferent; while as for Lord Merefield and Sir Humphrey, they were, to use their own terms, "simply flabbergasted!"

But every one kept their opinions to themselves when either of the affianced couple were present, and in a very short time Nancy found that she was treated with a marked show of deference by the very people who had tried previously to snub her and taunt her with her dependency on Sir Humphrey's bounty.

Derrick Darnley had been called away to London on private and sudden duty early the morning following on his return from transacting his mother's business.

No one knew why he had gone save one person, and she had the knowledge buried deep in her heart of hearts, never to be revealed.

(To be continued.)

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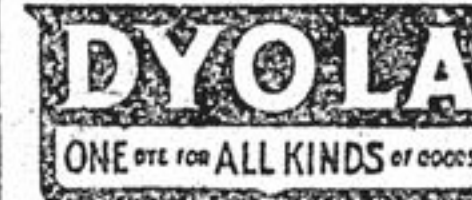
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