The Gates of Hope

BY ANTHONY CARLYLE

The Beginning of the Story.

Marcia Halstead, secretary to Mrs. Alden, is entrusted with some jewels while her employer goes out to luncheon with Kempton Rosslaer, his stepmother Lady Rosslaer and her son Gordon Ruthven. Marcia puts the jewels in the safe but fails to find the duplicate key. She consults a noted physician who tells her she cannot live longer than six months; then answers the call of a solicitor to find that she is heir to a large fortune on condition that she marries before she is twenty-one. Returning to Mrs. Alden's, she surprises Kempton Rosslaer (who is secretly married to Araby Trask) at the open safe. Gordon had stolen the gems and his step-brother is returning them.

CHAPTER VII.—(Cont'd.)

"Mr. Rosslaer, surely even you must see that any attempted denial of your reason for being here, with those jewels in your hand, must necessarily be quite useless? I find you here, in an empty flat, before Mrs. Alden's empty safe, with her jewels in your possession! Surely you must realize that it is quite useless to attempt to offer any sort of explanation!"

"But, I tel' you——"

"Please don't try to tell me anything! I couldn't believe it, in contradiction to the evidence of my own eyes, whatever it happened to be. You must see that!"

He made a quick gesture.

"I see it," he returned bitterly. "All the same, it isn't true, I mean, I wasn't stealing those jewels, I was putting them back."

He bit his lip even as he uttered the words. In a flash he realized that such an asservation, if believed, must lead to the implication of another—of two others—his stepbrother and Lady Rosslaer.

But it was not likely to be believed. He saw that in the look that flashed into the girl's eyes—a look before which he winced and set his teeth.

"Putting them back!" The coldness in her voice was more marked, her troubled face hardened. "That is a very absurd statement on the face of things, Mr. Rosslaer. I put them back this morning. One of Mrs. Alden's maids saw me do it. Both maids left before I did. I suppose you will tell me next that you found them—evidently—you found the duplicate key!"

For a moment her scorn got the better of her amazement and distress. Her words stung, and he stirred sharply beneath their lash. She went on inexorably.

"I understand now how it was I could not find the key! Mrs. Alden ran back to tell me that she had left it in the drawing-room. Her voice carries. Even though looking for a book she had offered to lend you, you must have heard her quite plainly. She left the key there. After you came out, when I went to look for it, it was gone."

She came forward a little, still holding her hand against her breast.

"All that is evidence against you, Mr. Rosslaer. Indeed, every scrap of evidence will be—must be—dead against you. You admitted to Mrs. Alden in my presence a few minutes previously that you were in desperate need of money. You saw the jewels, heard her tell me to lock them up and to take charge of both keys. You were in the drawing-room, the key within your sight. Need I say more?"

CHAPTER VIII.

"Good heavens!" Rosslaer turned suddenly away. The power of speech had momentarily deserted him. He felt helpless, hopeless, utterly dazed.

As she had said the evidence against him was damning. He clenched his hands until the nails bit into the flesh. Then, at a little exclamation from her he turned.

She was standing before the open safe. The pearl necklace still lay where he had placed it on its open case. The other case was empty.

Marcia turned and looked across at him.

"Mr. Rosslaer," she said calmly, "there were other jewels beside the pearl necklace. They are not there now."

The man smothered an exclamation. Involuntarily he slid his hand into one of his pockets. He brought it away clenched over a cascade of glittering jewels. Marcia looked at them—at him. And then she laughed.

It was a laugh which escaped her almost without intention. She had no desire to be cruel, to mock him. But she was over-wrought already; this was the culminating point in a day of strange happenings.

She felt just a little hysterical; but as she saw him draw back, the look of dumb pain and bitter resentment in his eyes, she controlled herself swiftly, biting her lip.

In silence she held out her hand for the jewels. In silence he gave them to her. She glanced at them, replaced them in their case and then stood with head bowed and brows bent.

Rosslaer watched her for a moment. Then he took a step nearer to her.

"Miss Halstead," he asked, "what are you going to do?"

The girl did not answer for a moment. Her face was full of trouble. When she looked at him her soft eyes were distressed, infinitely pitiful.

"I don't quite know," she returned. "There are only two things possible for me to do—to wait here with you until Mrs. Alden returns and leave the matter in her hands or ring up the police."

She heard him catch his breath, saw the gray agony of his face and her lips twitched for a moment. Then—

"Unless," she added slowly, "I lock those jewels up safely again, so that no one can possibly guess that they have been tampered with—and let you go!"

"Miss Halstead!"

There was a sharp ring of eager questioning, unbelief and hope in Rosslaer's voice. The strained look died for a minute out of his eyes. Involuntarily he stretched out his hands toward her; then he went across to her side.

"Miss Halstead, if you will do that, believe me, you will never regret it! I—great heaven, if you could only imagine, only guess what it would mean to me, to those who are dear to me, to my father, if—if this thing should become known!"

"I do know." The girl spoke quietly, steadily. "It would mean prison for you. In the face of such evidence nothing could save you. For those dear to you it would mean bitterness and shame. For your father"—

"For my father," Kempton interrupted grimly, not very steadily, "it would mean death!"

She looked up sharply, and as he met her eyes he made a gesture of his hands at once hopeless and appealing.

"He is old. He is not strong. And a shock such as this would kill him. I—the son he loves, honors, in whom lies all his pride—would not only be branded as a common thief condemned to a felon's punishment, accursed through all the rest of my life because of this one thing, but I should be my father's murderer as well!"

Marcia drew in her breath quickly. The words he had uttered had struck a chord in her memory: "A shock such as this would kill him."

It took her back to her own plight, the cruel mockery of her own position. For a moment she forgot Kempton, remembered only herself and all she had learned concerning herself—and that must be, and which might have been, had not fate chosen to make a mock of her, even in her extremity. Her mind swung back over the last few hours—and then, quite suddenly, her lips parted, her eyes grew wide.

It was as though a voice had whispered in her ear, a voice, clarion clear, mocking and challenging, too. She seemed to stiffen where she stood. Then she turned to face Rosslaer. Her eyes searched his, swept over him. A hot wave of color stung her cheeks and died, leaving her deathly pale. She began to speak, haltingly, jerkily, almost as if against her will. Something of desperation drove her.

"Mr. Rosslaer," she said. "I want you to listen to me for a minute very carefully. I have been ill. To-day I went to see a great specialist. He told me I might die at any moment, and that at most I have only six months to live."

He gave an exclamation of horrified pity, but she held up her hand.

"I have a mother—an invalid. She depends upon me. She needs more than I can give her. When I am gone she will have nothing. No—wait! To-day also I saw the head of a firm of solicitors. He told me that I had been left a fortune amounting to sixty thousand pounds a year on condition I married a man of good birth and position before or on my twenty-first birthday.

"My birthday is the day after to-morrow. My circle of male acquaintances is limited. Therefore it is impossible to fulfill the condition.

"I said is impossible. I should have said was! There is just the chance that after all I may make a bargain even with a man of birth and breeding and position—to—"

She stopped, then went on jerkily, breathlessly:

"Mr. Rosslaer, what would you give for me to do as I suggested—lock the safe, let you go and remain dumb forever concerning the fact that you were here to-night?"

"Give!" Rosslaer began, and then, as he met her almost fever-bright eyes, he stepped back sharply. "My God!" he whispered, "what do you mean?"

The girl flung out her hands, and let them fall. She spoke after a minute, breathlessly, defiantly, just a little shrilly.

"I mean," she said, "that I will do this—will keep silent, will let you go now, at once—if you will marry me within the next two days."

CHAPTER IX.

"Impossible!" The exclamation was wrenched from Rosslaer. There was amazement, almost scorn in his eyes.

Marcia met them steadily. There was a curious, flickering, thoughtful light in her own. Her hands hung rather limply on either side of her, her slender figure was drooped wearily. She did not speak, just waited; and after a minute the man went on, with a sort of smothered violence.

"Impossible! Great heavens, Miss Halstead! You—you can't realize what you are saying—what you are suggesting. Even if I were willing, even if I could bring myself to accede to such a request, there would be a thousand and one difficulties in the way."

He broke off. Marcia was smiling faintly, a small smile that had in it nothing of mirth, and yet was not mocking. The air of sudden excitement had left her; her voice was no longer shrill when she spoke.

"I don't agree with you. As far as I can see there should be no difficulties at all. There is a day in which to obtain a license, arrange the ceremony——"

He made a sharp movement of his hands, but she persisted gently and without haste:

"It could take place anywhere you choose, at any time. There would be no need for us even to meet again afterward except quite casually. I should ask nothing, expect nothing from you except your name—the right to call myself legally your wife.

"I would not even wish you to make our marriage public if you would rather not. There would be no need for anyone to know except those legally interested in the arrangement, and, of course, my mother."

"Not," she added, "that there would be any need for you to feel ashamed of me. Even your father, I think, could scarcely object to me as a daughter-in-law, since my mother and his wife happen to be cousins."

She ignored his start, his stare of half-incredulous amazement. Her manner was almost listless; the man became suddenly aware of how unutterably tired she looked, and a frown gathered between his brows.

He was beginning to get a grip of himself, of the situation. And he was beginning, too, to realize that the girl was in deadly earnest. He drew a slow, deep breath and slipped his clenched hands into his pockets. His mouth was set and white, his eyes had begun to gleam a little. He was thinking rapidly, a little desperately.

She watched him for a moment; then went quietly on:

"But I am perfectly willing for you to decide whether or not the affair is made public. As I have just said, there is no reason why anyone, except those actually concerned, should know anything about it at present, if at all. It is immaterial to me.

"I shall probably go away—abroad—almost immediately afterward, with my mother. As far as any claim I might make upon you is concerned, you will be as free as you are now."

"Free!" He laughed harshly, and the sound made her wince for a moment. Beneath the burning resentment of his glance her own dropped; she made a little, half-nervous movement and a quick, bright flush stained her cheeks. For an instant she seemed to shrink from him; then she lifted her head and met his eyes again.

"You forget," she said, "that the bondage would be light, and that it cannot last long! You forget—" her voice caught for an instant and shook—"that at the utmost I have six months to live!"

(To be continued.)

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Yon sturdy oak whose branches wide
Boldly the storms and winds defy,
Not long ago, an acorn small
Lay dormant 'neath a summer sky.

Use Minard's Liniment for the Flu.

Woman's Sphere

Mother's Return.

Do you remember how you went away
And left the bairns at home? And how one day
You sent a trumpet and a concertina
For little Bunty and for Baby Lena?

And were you angry that they found delight
In the new toys? And were not heard to say
They wanted you; nor clamored for your coming;
Nor grieved for you; but hugged the playthings tight
And even took them up to bed at night.

But when you came! They heard your taxi humming!
Down went the concertina! To the floor
The trumpet fell unheeded, while once more
The little loving arms were clining round you.
You felt the shouts of welcoming surrounded you.
They touched the hungry wistful soul of you.
They satisfied and reached the whole of you.
For now you knew
That you were more to them than all the joys
Of all the cherished sweetly-precious toys.

—Fay Inchfawn.

Choice Color Combinations.

When decorating a room the furniture and rugs should be used as a nucleus, as these are very seldom changed. Of course, if the furniture is old and scarred and is not to be refinished it would be best to use darker shades, otherwise all the defects of the furnishings would be shown up.

But it is not necessary to have any scratched and marred furniture when there are so many products on the market to-day which can be bought at a very nominal cost, especially designed to make chairs and tables look new and attractive.

A coat of stain with a couple of coats of varnish, after the old finish has been removed, will do wonders to any old article. Or a coat of enamel with a dainty design stenciled on a bedroom suite will make it a thing of beauty. What could be prettier than a bedroom set stained walnut, a light gray wall for a background, with pink drapes, white curtains, old rose and white rag rugs with a little touch of very pale blue here and there; or a bedroom suite stained oak with cream or ivory background, with either blue and yellow cretonne overdrapes or brown and cream drapes, ivory curtains and a nice brown and tan rag rug?

Of course, in combining the two or more colors, the shades should also be taken into consideration. For instance, a pale blue and pale pink are very pretty and one will offset the other, but if the shades are dark they will clash. Gray is a neutral color and almost any color will harmonize with it with the exception of brown or tan. Because of the handsome curtain materials, as well as upholstery now obtainable, it is far better to have plain wall tones.

Let Biddy Help Plan Your Menus.

Be it "company for tea" or "just the family," be it breakfast, supper, dinner, the housewife has a staunch and able ally beside her to help plan the menus. That is Mrs. Biddy.

Egg prices are tobogganing as usual at this time of year, and though they will not reach the lowest levels until spring, eggs are already far more economical than meat; also they are more digestible, and more easily prepared, and easier to keep fresh. So why not call in Mrs. Biddy to help on the bill of fare?

Breakfast—boiled, fried, poached, scrambled, coddled, shirred, omelet, a new way for every morning of the week, to say nothing of all the omelet variations. Beat them into pancakes, whip them into cereals just before serving, use them liberally in corn bread,—nothing makes corn muffins so delectable as plenty of eggs. It is the egg breakfast that sends the folks off to their various offices and schools with a whistle on their lips and keeps them up to par through a long morning.

For dinner—custards, blanc manges, tapioca cream puddings, any of them the finest kind of food for children, because they contain both milk and eggs. Nor can we leave desserts without a word for sponge cake, that wholesome and toothsome favorite of all boys—also of their fathers. Make it in the forenoon and serve it warm for dinner. Even three-year-olds can eat sponge cake, which makes it an ideal cake for the infant birthday parties.

What shall we have when they come in for supper. Again Biddy to the rescue. Creamed eggs, baked eggs, egg salad, cream soup and sauces with an egg whipped in at the last, just as they come off the fire—these are just a few of the simpler supper dishes. Any cook book gives a long list of the frillier ones, which make your mouth water, even while you read the recipes.

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