CARRIED BY STORM.

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SYNOPSIS.

For the benefit of those readers who may not have seen the earlier chapters of this story, we give the following outline of the plot so far as it has developed itself:—

In the opening chapters of the story we make the acquaintance of little Olga Ventnor and her cousin Frank Livingston, who have been "set apart" for one another by their parents. Olga gets lost in the woods, and is found by a wild Italian gypsy known as "Sleaford's Joanna,"—Sleaford being a good for nothing vagabond, who appears to have some hold upon, or share some secret with, Mr. Abbott, the owner of Abbott Wood—a coarse braggart and rich upstart, whom wife despises and snubs him. She is the mother of two children, Geoffrey Lamar, by her first husband, and Leo, her daughter, by her present husband. Geoffrey takes a deep interest in Joanna, who is, he discovers, the possessor of a magnificent voice, and uses his influence with his mother to have her come to Abbott Wood to take lessons. Mr. Abbott assents, but on hearing who it is, flies into a fury and declares that none of Sleaford's will ever enter his house. Sleaford hearing of this, pays a visit to Mr. Abbott, and by virtue of the link between them, forces him to give his consent, and Joanna commences her lessons at Abbott Wood. She becomes a glorious singer and pianist, and is much sought after in society; but the double life she lives—half the time at Abbott Wood, the other half at Sleaford's (who won't give her up entirely) is making her unhappy and dissatisfied, and she is even contemplating suicide, when George Blake—who has long loved her—suggests that marrying him would be much better; and she promises to think about it. In a moment of anger, and under great provocation, she strikes Dan Sleaford, and leaves him for dead. George, kindlier out, and tenderer by far than ever before, comes to her and tells her to go to London with him and be married, to which she consents as the only means of escape. But her heart rebels against the mockery of such a marriage, and she leaves the hotel where George has brought her, and, wandering through the London streets, is picked up by "Ted," a newsboy and bootblack, who brings her to his mother's humble home.

CHAPTER IV.—(CONTINUED.)

IN WHICH JOANNA CAPS THE CLIMAX.

There is no mistaking this time. Her voice rings with scorn, and she turns to leave the kitchen.

Dan Sleaford leaps to his feet like a tiger, and seizes her by the arm.

"Say that again, hang you!" he cries, hoarse with passion, "say it again!"

She looks at him unflinchingly, her eyes flashing fire—literally flashing fire.

"I wouldn't go to save your neck from the gallows," she says, between her teeth, "where it is due!"

He writes for no more. The array of horse whips from which Giles was wont to select for her benefit is still there.

He seizes one, blind with fury and drink; there is a sharp hissing through the air, and it descends. It rises and falls again, quick as light. Then, with a scream of passion, pain, rage, that those who hear never forget, she rushes upon him.

In that moment a mad power possesses her—she is stronger than he. She wrenches the whip out of his grasp, lifts it—the butt-end this time—and brings it down with all the force of fury across his head. It lays it open—the whip has a heavy handle; a rain of blood pours over his eyes, and blinds him. He relaxes his hold, staggers backward blindly, and falls.

There is a simultaneous shriek and rush. Joanna flings the whip into the midst of them, and flies.

She is beside herself—she knows not what she has done, or whither she is going. She rushes on like a mad thing, headlong of all obstacles, and falls prostrate at last on the edge of Black's Dam.

As a hunted animal flies instinctively to its lair, so her feet have carried her here, and here she falls, panting, spent, for the time being perfectly insane.

All Sleaford has often predicted that she will murder some of them, and Alf's prediction seems to have come true at last.

CHAPTER V.

IN WHICH JOANNA RUNS AWAY.

How long she lay she cannot tell. A panic of terror and despair so herself and the deed she has done fills her. Has she murdered him? She has threatened often enough to kill some of them in her ungovernable bursts of temper if they will not let her alone—has she done it at last? It is not sorrow that seizes her, nor even a panic of darkest despair and misery such as in all her miserable life she has never felt before.

She crouches there in the snow, feeling no cold, numb soul and body. A burned, step-crushed over the frozen ground—there is an exclamation—a hand touches her shoulder, and strives to lift her head.

"Joanna!" a breathless voice says. "Joanna, what is this?"

It is a friendly voice. She lifts her stricken, despairing eyes to a friendly face. The sight breaks the temper of agony, she springs to her feet, and flings her arms around his neck.

"George Blake!" she cries, with a choking sob; "George Blake! George Blake!"

The young fellow holds her to him—pity, terror, blank consternation in his face.

"Joanna, what is all this? What have you been doing? What has that—that brute being doing to you? Do you know they say that you"—he chokes over the words—"that you have killed him?"

She gives a gasp, and still clings hold of him. The whole world seems slipping away; she seems to stand in the universe alone in her desolation, with only this single friend.

"I have been to the house," he goes on; "all is confusion there. All has gone for a doctor; there is blood on the floor, and on the whip-handle they say you struck him with. He is lying, bleeding still, and stunned, on the settee in the kitchen. The girls say you have killed him. Oh! Joanna, speak and tell me what it is."

She tries to do so. Her words are broken and incoherent, but he manages to get at the story—the provocation, the attack, the reprisal. His eyes flash with honest indignation.

"The brute! the cowardly scoundrel! You served him right, Joanna—you acted in self-defence. Even if he is killed, which I don't believe, you have served him right. But he will not die. A beast like that stands a great deal of killing. Don't shake so, my dear; don't wear that haggard face—it will be all right. I tell you this only what you ought to have done long ago. The black, civilian dog! to take his horsewhip to you!" He grinds his teeth. "I hope he will bear the mark of your blow to his dying day!"

She slips out of his arms, and sits down on a fallen log, her hands clasping her knees, after her old fashion, that miserable, hunted look never leaving her eyes.

"I knew you would come here," the young man goes on, seating himself beside her; "it is always your sanctuary in troubled times, my poor Joanna. Oh, my dear! my dear! my poor, ill-used, suffering girl! if I could only take your place, and endure all this for you!"

She holds out her hand to him silently. He is so good, so kind, her only loyal friend and knight. Great, slow tears well up, and soften the blank anguish of her hopeless eyes.

"I will tell you what I will do," he says, after a pause. "I feel sure the fellow will not die—these venomous reptiles are so tenacious of life—still, we both feel serious. If you will wait here, I will go back to the house and find out. I will return and tell you the truth—the worst certainty is better than suspense. Only promise me"—he clasps the cold hand he holds—"you will not do anything—anything rash while I am gone."

He looks toward the pond, lying dark and stagnant under the evening sky; then his troubled eyes seek her face.

"Promise me, Joanna," he says, "you will stay here until I return."

"I promise," she says, and he knows she will keep her word.

He rises instantly, and without a moment's delay starts off on his mission.

She keeps her word to the letter.

She sits as he has left her, never even stirring until he returns. The last opal-tinted gleam of sunset died away, the frosty January stars come thickly out, the night wind rises bleakly, the frogs croak dismally down in the fetid depths of their slimy pools. She does not stir; apathy succeeds agony; she hardly feels; she is benumbed, stupefied—time neither crawls nor flies longer.

Presently, but it is a long time, too, the footsteps crunch once more over the frozen snow, and George Blake comes rapidly forward. One look at his face tells his news—it is bright, eager, smiling; his step is alert and buoyant.

"All right, Joanna," he calls, gayly. "It is as I said; the fellow is going to live to grace the gallows yet. It is an ugly gash, and has let a lot of blood—as much as if he were a bullock, but it is bandaged up now, and he's asleep. I heard the doctor tell him," says George, laughing, "it was the best thing that could have happened to him: it had probably saved him a fit of apoplexy, and that he ought to keep you as a sort of family leech, to break his head at intervals. 'It is very bad blood,' says the doctor, 'and you're the better for looking a gallon or two of it.'"

George's laugh rings out boyishly; the relief is so unutterable.

But the dog not look glad, the dog not speak, the dog not smile.

She sits quite still, looking straight before her, at the pale, snowlit, starlit landscape.

His face, too, grows grave as he regards her.

"And now, Jo," he says, resuming his seat beside her, "what next?"

He has to repeat the question before she seems to hear, then the blank gaze turns to his face.

"You cannot go back there," he says, and he sees her shrink and shudder at the thought. "You cannot stay here. Then what are you to do?"

She makes no reply.

In all the wide world, he wonders, as he watches her, is there another creature so forlorn, so homeless as this?

"Perhaps you will go to Abbott Wood?" he suggests.

And at that she finds her voice, and breaks out with a great despairing cry.

"Oh, no, no, no! Never there. Never there any more! Oh, what will Mrs. Abbott say? Oh, me! oh, me! oh, me!"

He sits in silent distress. Great sobs tear and rend their way up from her heart. She weeps wildly aloud. He has never seen Joanna cry before—few ever have—and the tortured sobs shake him through and through.

"Don't Joanna!" he says. "Oh, do not! I cannot bear to hear you. Don't cry like that!"

As well ask the tide not to flow. Repressed nature will have its revenge; she must weep or die. She sobs on and on, until the paroxysm spends itself, and she stops from sheer exhaustion.

A jealous pang wrings George Blake's heart—how she loves this Mrs. Abbott! But still the question is unanswered—what is it be done, and the night wears on.

George's watch points to ten. He holds it out to her in silent appeal.

"Wait," she says. "Let me think. Let me think!"

The hysterics have done her good; her apathy is swept away; she is fully aroused to a sense of her situation—to the importance of that question—what next?"

She sits and thinks. Impossible to return to Sleaford's—horror fills her at the thought. More impossible still to go to Abbott Wood after this terrible deed. Besides, even if she could, even if Mrs. Abbott would consent to overlook her almost being a murderess, Giles Sleaford would never let her stay. She would be brought back to the farm by force—then, what is to be done?

She looks up at last; her black eyes turn to the face of her companion, and fix there in such a long, searching stare that he is disconcerted.

"What is it, Joanna?" he asks. "You know there is nothing in all the world I would not do for you."

"Nothing?" she tersely repeats.

"Nothing that man can do."

"You asked me the other day to marry you. Will you marry me now?"

"Will I?" His face lights up with quick joy—he catches both her hands. "Will I! Oh Joanna!"

"Will you take me to London to-night, and marry me to-morrow?"

"Sharp work," he says, "but even that may be accomplished. I will take you to London, and I will marry you. Joanna, Joanna, how happy you have made me!"

"If" she says mournfully. "I make anyone happy! Oh, George Blake, you will hate me one day for this! I ought not to ask it—I am a wretch—almost a murderess—not fit to be any good man's wife. And you are good. Oh, I ought not! I ought not!"

"You ought—you must!" he exclaims, alarmed. "What nonsense you are talking Jo. Murderess, indeed! The pity is you did not give the cur twice as much. Ah, what care I will take of you, Joanna, how happy I will make you! You will forget this wretched life and these miserable people. You shall have my whole heart and life."

"And your mother," she says, in the same mournful voice, "what will she say? And your aunt—good Miss Rice? Oh, you foolish fellow! Take me to London, but do not marry me. Let me earn my own living—I am young, and strong, and willing, and used to hard work. I will be a kitchen maid—anything. No life can be so hard, so sordid, as the life I lead here."

"I will marry you," he says. "I refuse to release you. You said you would be my wife, and you must—I cannot live without you. Oh, Joanna," the young fellow cries out, in a burst of passion, "you torture me! Cannot you see that I love you?"

She shakes her head.

"No," she says, "I cannot see it, nor understand it. What is there in me—plain, red-haired, ill-tempered Joanna, to love? And I do not care for you."

"That will come in time. I will be so good to you, so fond of you, you will not be able to help it. Say no more about it, Joanna. I claim you and will have you."

"Very well," she answers, resignedly. "Remember, whatever comes, I have warned you. Now settle all the rest yourself. I trust you—I am in your hands."

And I will be true to your trust," he says, fervently, "so help me heaven!"

He lifts one of her hands, the brown, work-hardened hands, to his lips. And then for a little they sit in silence.

It is a strange betrothal—the hour of night, the glooms scene, white snow, black woods, dead silence, starry sky, and Black's Dam, cyll and ominous, at their feet.

All George Blake's life-long that picture stands forth distinct from all others in his memory—he and this strange girl who fascinates him, sitting there, the only creatures it seems, left in all the world.

"Let me see," he says, returning to the practical, "there is no up-train to London before five o'clock. That is the one I generally go by, when I spend a night in Brightwood. It is now past eleven. How are we to get through the intervening hours? You will perish if we stay here."

"And I must have something to wear," says Joanna, glancing at her dress. It is the grimy, well-worn old alpaca. "Let me see. They are not likely to sit up to-night with him, are they?"

"Not in the least likely, I should say. He is all right; was snoring like a grampus when I left. Why?"

"I must get into the house, and get something to wear. I cannot go to London like this."

He sees that she cannot, but still he looks anxious and doubtful.

"It is a risk," he says.

"Not at all, if they do not sit up. I can always get in, and once in bed I am not afraid of that family. They sleep as if for a wager. It is a risk I must run. I must have a better dress, a shawl and hat. And I can wait indoors until it is time to start for the station."

"An hour will take us," Blake says. "Come, then, Joanna, let us be up and doing. I shall get into a fever waiting, if we stay here."

They go—starting on the first stage of that journey that is to lead—who can tell where?

It is nearly midnight when they reach the Bed Farm. No sign of recent tragedy is there—quiet slumber evidently reigns. It is better even than they had dared to hope.

"Where will you wait?" the girl asks. "It will be cold for you."

"I'll walk about," he answers. "The night is mild, and my overcoat is proof against frostbite. Only do not be caught, Joanna, or change your mind, or fall asleep. I will never forgive you if you fail me now."

"I will not fail," she says, firmly. "Before four I will be with you."

She leaves him, and admits herself after her old fashion—bolts and bars are few and far between at Sleaford's.

All is still!

Now the question arises—what shall she wear? She does not want to disgrace George Blake. Nearly all the things Mrs. Abbott has given her are in her room at Abbott Wood—Liz and Lore immediately confiscating to their use anything attractive she brings home with them. She has absolutely nothing of her own fit to put on.

No but the other girls have! Joanna has not the slightest scruple in the matter. They take everything of hers; it is a poor rule that will not work both ways. She will help herself from Lore's wardrobe. They are of the same height. Lore is a "fine girl," and stout enough to make two of such a slip as Joanna, but fit does not signify.

She softly opens the wardrobe, and begins operations. It is a small closet adjoining their bedroom, and dark as a pocket, but she has brought a candle and with her from the kitchen.

She lights it now and sets to work.

As well take the best when she is about it! There hangs the new black dress, got up expressly for New Year's Day, and worn on that occasion only. She takes it down from its peg. Here is Lore's Sunday hat, a black velvet beauty, with black crimson roses and navy plume. To twist out this latter appendage is the work of a second—the red roses for the present must stand. Now she wants a wrap. Here is a cloth jacket handsomely trimmed; she unhooks it. Then, as she is moving, a last article catches her eye. It is a crimson wool shawl, a rich and glowing wrap, and the pride of Lizzie's soul.

Some faint spirit of diablerie, more than actual need, makes her add this to the heap.

She returns to the kitchen, her arms filled with her spoils. She has already secured one or two little gifts of Mrs. Abbott's and Leo's. A gold breastpin, a pearl and ruby ring, her very last New Year's gift—a little gold watch and chain—the watch Mrs. Abbott's present, the chain Geoffrey's, the ring Leo's. And now in the warm kitchen she arrays herself deliberately in pilfered plunder, with a sort of wicked zest in the tremendous upset there will be to-morrow.

Dan's mishap will be nothing to this—Liz and Lore will go straight out of their senses.

"It is not stealing," the girl says to herself. "I have worked for them all my life. I have earned these things ten times over. And they have taken lots of mine—Mrs. Abbott's gift. I have a right to take what I want."

Whether or no, they are taken, and will be kept. Once dressed, she seats herself and waits impatiently for the clock to strike four. She is eager to be off, to turn her back for ever upon this hated house, these hated people, to begin the world anew.

A new life is dawning for her. Whatever it brings it can bring nothing half so bad as the life she is leaving.

London! The thought of that great city and its possibilities dazzle her. Of George Blake she thinks little. He is perforce part of that new life, but she would rather he were not. She does not care for him; he tires her with his boyish fondness, and insipid lovemaking. Still she cannot do without him—so Mrs. George Blake, wilfully, it seems she must be.

One, two, three, four! from the old wooden clock.

She draws a long breath of relief, rises, makes her way out, as she made it in.

The night has changed—the morning is dark, damp, dismal.

George Blake is waiting, poor faithful sentinel. He comes up, his teeth chattering, white rime on moustache and hair.

"At last," he says, wearily. "Give you my honour, Joanna, I thought the time would never come. What a night this has been! Shall you ever forget it?"

She does not speak, she looks back darkly in the house she is leaving.

"Good-bye, you dreary prison," she says. "I may be miserable in the time that is to come, but I can never again be as miserable as I have been in you."

"You shall never be miserable. Can you not trust me, Joanna?" he says, reproachfully.

"Come!" is her only answer.

He draws her hand through his arm, and they are off, walking briskly, and in silence, along the bleak, windy road.

It wants a quarter of five when they reach the station.

It is quite deserted, but there is a fire in the waiting-room.

He takes her in, and sees for the first time the silken robe, the velvet hat, the crimson shawl.

"My word, Joanna," he says, laughing, "how smart you are! 'As a bridegroom cometh out of his chamber!' Where did you raise all this superfine toggery?"

"It belongs to Lore," answers Joanna, in the most matter-of-fact tone possible, "all but the shawl—that belongs to Liz! The watch and brooch are my own. I did not want to shame you by being shabby."

He stares at her, then bursts out laughing, but he is not best pleased, either, at these vague notions of meum and tuum.

There is no time, however, to remonstrate. The train rushes in almost immediately, and the instant it stops, the runaways are in it.

"Now, then!" George Blake exclaims, "we are off at last—let those catch who can! In three hours we will be in London."

It is a silent trip.

The young fellow is lost in a happy dream. He will marry Joanna—they will lodge in the city for a little, then his mother will "come round," and his wife can live with her, while he will run down three or four times a week. By and by his salary will be raised, he will become an editor himself, he will take a nice little house over Islington way, with a garden, a greenhouse, some rose trees and geraniums, and he and Joanna will live happily for ever after.

That is his dream.

For Joanna, what does she dream of as she sits beside him, her lips compressed, a line of pain between her eyebrows, her eyes looking out at the grey, forlorn dawn? Nothing bright, certainly, with that face.

They reach the city. The noise, the uproar, the throng, the stony streets, bewilder her. She clings to her protector's arm.

He has decided to take her for to-day to an hotel, and not present her to his landlady—an austere lady—until he can present her as his lawful wedded wife. So he calls a cab, and they are driven off to an obscure hotel.

"Is it always as noisy as this?" she asks, in a sort of panic. "My head is splitting already."

"Oh, you will get used to it," he laughs; "we all do. You won't even hear it after awhile—I don't. Here we are. Now you shall have breakfast, and then I will start off, and hunt up a clergyman."

He squeezes her hand, but there is no response. She withdraws it impatiently, and goes with him into one of the parlours, where George engages a room for his wife, and registers boldly as "Mr. and Mrs. George Blake."

Mrs. Blake is shown to her apartment, where she washes her face, smooths her hair, and straightens herself generally, and then goes down with Mr. Blake to breakfast.

"Now, Jo," he says, when that repast is over, "you will return to your room, and I will go out and get you something to read, to pass the time, for I may be gone some hours. Try not to feel lonesome. In a few hours you will be my wife."

Joanna does not look as if there were anything in this prospect of a particularly rapturous nature, but goes to her room, and later accepts the magazines he brings her, to while away the hours of his absence. But it is a long day.

She turns over the pictures for awhile, then throws herself on a sofa, and falls asleep.

It is late in the afternoon when she awakes. George is there to take her to dinner, waiting impatiently.

"It is all right," he tells her. "The Reverend Peter Wiley is my friend. I have explained to him as much as is necessary, and have obtained by his aid a special licence. We can be married almost immediately, but not so soon as we thought. But you won't mind waiting a few days for me, darling? I shall want someone to do my work for me for awhile, so after dinner I'll run down to the office, if you don't mind being alone a little longer, and get one of our fellows to do it."

They dine, and George again departs. Joanna once more returns to her own room. And now it is drawing awfully near—this great change in her life—she is about to become George Blake's wife. As she sits here alone, her face buried in her hands, her whole life seems to rise up before her—her whole dark, loveless, most miserable life.

A dreadful feeling of sullen, silent anger possesses her as she sits alone here, her hands clasped around her knees, her eyes staring straight before her, after her usual crouching, ungainly fashion.

All the wrongs of her lifetime rise up before her, a dark and gloomy array. Fatherless, motherless, what had she done to be sent into the world banned at her very birth? Hard fare, hard words, hard blows, oaths, kicks, cuffs, constant toil, half naked, half frozen, jeers, scorn, for ever, and for ever! There it stands, the bitter, bad catalogue, never to be forgiven.

A long lifetime of reprisal will be too short to wash white the score her memory holds against almost every human creature she has known.

And yet, stay! Not quite all—not George Blake, poor foolish fellow, who has run away with her, or rather with whom she has run away. The tense line of brow and mouth relax a little. It is too bad to have made him do it; he will never know what to do with her all the rest of his life. He will be sorry for it presently—she feels that; although, perhaps, he does not just now.

But she has not thought of him, only of herself. It has been her one chance of escape from that earthly hell, and she has taken it. What is she that she should spare anyone?

After all, George Blake has asked her once; let him "dree his own weird," she will alter no plan of here out of pity for him; he is useful to her, and when his day comes let him—he can escape.

A quick footstep passes the door—a man's step, a man's voice whistles a gay air. Both are familiar; they strike on her heart like a blow.

She springs up and flies to the door. Down the long passage a tall figure goes. A lady passes him, that whistle ceases, he uncovers as she goes by; then he, too, is gone.

For a moment the stands stunned, her face quite white, her eyes all wild and wide, in a sort of terror, her heart beating thick and fast.

Then she darts to the window, and but just in time. He is passing out, the last light of the evening sky falling upon him—handsome as usual, carelessly elegant as usual—the dazzling image that has always appealed so powerfully to this wild girl's imagination—that has made him from the first, in her eyes, unlike any other man she has ever seen.

What is the charm? He is only a well-looking, well-mannered, well-dressed young gentleman, the type of a class that in after years she meets "thick as leaves in Vallambrosa," and yet, to the last day of her life, something stamps Frank Livingston as a "man of men" among them all. In one darting glance, those quick eyes take in every detail of face, and figure, and dress, even to the rosebud and geranium leaf peeping out from under his dark paletot, the white tie, the kid gloves.

There is but little time for a glance. He lights a cigar, beckons a hansom, springs in, and is gone.

She sits down as she has been sitting before, but in a dazed sort of fashion that frightens even herself. She tries to take up her train of thought where she has dropped it—in vain. A swift, incomprehensible revulsion begins within her. She will never marry George Blake—no, no! never, never!

She springs up again, and put out her hands as if to keep even the idea off. She will never marry George Blake—she will die first! How has she ever thought of such a thing? Why has she ever come here? Why is she staying here now?

If she stays he will come back, and make her marry him. Make her! She laughs—a scornful little laugh all by herself—at the thought.

But then his pleading face and wistful boyish blue eyes rise before her. And he is so fond of her—so ridiculously fond of her.

"Pshaw!" she says, aloud, impatiently, "he is a fool to want me. He will get over it."

But she must not stay; it will not do to meet him. She must have been mad with misery ever to think of marrying him—him!

Also for George Blake! The haughty head erects itself, the straight throat curves. In one moment her mind is made up, beyond power of change. And all by one fleeting glimpse of Frank Livingston going to the opera.

She puts on her hat—Lore's hat—pulls it well down over her face, throws the heavy crimson shawl over her arm, and is ready to go. She writes no line or word of farewell—what is there to say? And she is not romantic. George will see that she has gone—that is enough. Where is she going?

She does not know—only—not to marry young Mr. Blake. She opens the door, walks quickly down the long corridor, her head, defiantly erect, prepared to battle George Blake should they meet.

But she meets no one. A moment later and she is out, under the sparkling New Year stars, alone, homeless, penniless, in the streets of London.

CHAPTER VI.

IN WHICH JOANNA SEEKS HER FORTUNE.

The yellow-tinted twilight has given place to silvery dark, lighted by a broad, full moon. All lamps in the great thoroughfares are alight, window lights are blazing like great jewels.

Her spirits rise, the fresh night wind is like strong wine, the old gipsy instinct of freedom awakes within her.

It is well!

She is strong, she is free! Oh, blessed freedom, boon beyond all boons of earth! And one whole day and night she has thought of resigning it for life-long bondage to George Blake! Free to do what she chooses, go where she chooses. The world all before her, a great city full of infinite possibilities is around her. No man is her master, and no man shall ever be!

She walks on and on, her blood quickening, her heart rising. She could sing aloud in this first flush of her exultation.

She is free! Her old life lies behind her, with its shame, its pain, for ever and ever.

She is here in the city of her desire, the world all before her where to choose.

How brilliant the scene is to those country eyes. How the lamps shine, how the great windows flash out!

But the roar, the rush of many people and vehicles dizzies and bewilders her.

Will she indeed ever get used to it as George Blake says? But she puts away the thought of George Blake. A hot, swift pang of remorse goes with it.

How cruel, how ungrateful he will think her, and "ingratitude is the vice of slaves."

She will not think of him. It is all she can do to keep from having a vertigo, amid all this light and noise.

Presently she becomes conscious that curious eyes are watching her. She does not know it, but she is a conspicuous object even in Regent street.

Her great amazed black eyes, the unmistakable country stamp about her, something out of the common in her eager face, the brilliant shawl, render her a distinct mark in the moving picture.

And then all at once she realizes that she is being followed, that a man is close at her elbow, has been for some time, and is looking down at her with a sinister leer.

He is a big, burly man, with a red face, a mangy, purple moustache, all nose and watch chain, like a jew.

She glances at him angrily; he only returns it with a smile of fascinating sweetness.

"You was waitin' for me, my dear, wasn't you?" he says, insinuatingly.

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Mrs. Blake is shown to her apartment, where she washes her face, smooths her hair, and straightens herself generally, and then goes down with Mr. Blake to breakfast.

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She turns over the pictures for awhile, then throws herself on a sofa, and falls asleep.

It is late in the afternoon when she awakes. George is there to take her to dinner, waiting impatiently.

"It is all right," he tells her. "The Reverend Peter Wiley is my friend. I have explained to him as much as is necessary, and have obtained by his aid a special licence. We can be married almost immediately, but not so soon as we thought. But you won't mind waiting a few days for me, darling? I shall want someone to do my work for me for awhile, so after dinner I'll run down to the office, if you don't mind being alone a little longer, and get one of our fellows to do it."

They dine, and George again departs. Joanna once more returns to her own room. And now it is drawing awfully near—this great change in her life—she is about to become George Blake's wife. As she sits here alone, her face buried in her hands, her whole life seems to rise up before her—her whole dark, lovless, most miserable life.

A dreadful feeling of sullen, silent anger possesses her as she sits alone here, her hands clasped around her knees, her eyes staring straight before her, after her usual crouching, ungainly fashion.

All the wrongs of her lifetime rise up before her, a dark and gloomy array. Fatherless, motherless, what had she done to be sent into the world banned at her very birth? Hard fare, hard words, hard blows, oaths, kicks, cuffs, constant toil, half naked, half frozen, jeers, scorn, for ever, and for ever! There it stands, the bitter, bad catalogue, never to be forgiven.

A long lifetime of reprisal will be too short to wash white the score her memory holds against almost every human creature she has known.

And yet, stay! Not quite all—not George Blake, poor foolish fellow, who has run away with her, or rather with whom she has run away. The tense line of brow and mouth relax a little. It is too bad to have made him do it; he will never know what to do with her all the rest of his life. He will be sorry for it presently—she feels that; although, perhaps, he does not just now.

But she has not thought of him, only of herself. It has been her one chance of escape from that earthly hell, and she has taken it. What is she that she should spare anyone?

After all, George Blake has asked her once; let him "dree his own weird," she will alter no plan of here out of pity for him; he is useful to her, and when his day comes let him—he can escape.

A quick footstep passes the door—a man's step, a man's voice whistles a gay air. Both are familiar; they strike on her heart like a blow.

She springs up and flies to the door. Down the long passage a tall figure goes. A lady passes him, that whistle ceases, he uncovers as she goes by; then he, too, is gone.

For a moment the stands stunned, her face quite white, her eyes all wild and wide, in a sort of terror, her heart beating thick and fast.

Then she darts to the window, and but just in time. He is passing out, the last light of the evening sky falling upon him—handsome as usual, carelessly elegant as usual—the dazzling image that has always appealed so powerfully to this wild girl's imagination—that has made him from the first, in her eyes, unlike any other man she has ever seen.

What is the charm? He is only a well-looking, well-mannered, well-dressed young gentleman, the type of a class that in after years she meets "thick as leaves in Vallambrosa," and yet, to the last day of her life, something stamps Frank Livingston as a "man of men" among them all. In one darting glance, those quick eyes take in every detail of face, and figure, and dress, even to the rosebud and geranium leaf peeping out from under his dark paletot, the white tie, the kid gloves.

There is but little time for a glance. He lights a cigar, beckons a hansom, springs in, and is gone.

She sits down as she has been sitting before, but in a dazed sort of fashion that frightens even herself. She tries to take up her train of thought where she has dropped it—in vain. A swift, incomprehensible revulsion begins within her. She will never marry George Blake—no, no! never, never!

She springs up again, and put out her hands as if to keep even the idea off. She will never marry George Blake—she will die first! How has she ever thought of such a thing? Why has she ever come here? Why is she staying here now?

If she stays he will come back, and make her marry him. Make her! She laughs—a scornful little laugh all by herself—at the thought.

But then his pleading face and wistful boyish blue eyes rise before her. And he is so fond of her—so ridiculously fond of her.

"Pshaw!" she says, aloud, impatiently, "he is a fool to want me. He will get over it."

But she must not stay; it will not do to meet him. She must have been mad with misery ever to think of marrying him—him!

Also for George Blake! The haughty head erects itself, the straight throat curves. In one moment her mind is made up, beyond power of change. And all by one fleeting glimpse of Frank Livingston going to the opera.

She puts on her lore's hat—pulls it well down over her face, throws the heavy crimson shawl over her arm, and is ready to go. She writes no line or word of farewell—what is there to say? And she is not romantic. George will see that she has gone—that is enough. Where is she going?

She does not know—only—not to marry young Mr. Blake. She opens the door, walks quickly down the long corridor, her head, defiantly erect, prepared to battle George Blake should they meet.

But she meets no one. A moment later and she is out, under the sparkling New Year stars, alone, homeless, penniless, in the streets of London.

CHAPTER VI.

IN WHICH JOANNA SEEKS HER FORTUNE.

The yellow-tinted twilight has given place to silvery dark, lighted by a broad, full moon. All lamps in the great thoroughfares are alight, window lights are blazing like great jewels.

Her spirits rise, the fresh night wind is like strong wine, the old gipsy instinct of freedom awakes within her.

It is well!

She is strong, she is free! Oh, blessed freedom, boon beyond all boons of earth! And one whole day and night she has thought of resigning it for life-long bondage to George Blake! Free to do what she chooses, go where she chooses. The world all before her, a great city full of infinite possibilities is around her. No man is her master, and no man shall ever be!

She walks on and on, her blood quickening, her heart rising. She could sing aloud in this first flush of her exultation.

She is free! Her old life lies behind her, with its shame, its pain, for ever and ever.

She is here in the city of her desire, the world all before her where to choose.

How brilliant the scene is to those country eyes. How the lamps shine, how the great windows flash out!

But the roar, the rush of many people and vehicles dizzies and bewilders her.

Will she indeed ever get used to it as George Blake says? But she puts away the thought of George Blake. A hot, swift pang of remorse goes with it.

How cruel, how ungrateful he will think her, and "ingratitude is the vice of slaves."

She will not think of him. It is all she can do to keep from having a vertigo, amid all this light and noise.

Presently she becomes conscious that curious eyes are watching her. She does not know it, but she is a conspicuous object even in Regent street.

Her great amazed black eyes, the unmistakable country stamp about her, something out of the common in her eager face, the brilliant shawl, render her a distinct mark in the moving picture.

And then all at once she realizes that she is being followed, that a man is close at her elbow, has been for some time, and is looking down at her with a sinister leer.

He is a big, burly man, with a red face, a mangy, purple moustache, all nose and watch chain, like a jew.

She glances at him angrily; he only returns it with a smile of fascinating sweetness.

"You was waitin' for me, my dear, wasn't you?" he says, insinuatingly.

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