

The Lady Brandolin ;

OR, THE LOST PATRIMONY.

CHAPTER V.—(Cont'd)

I felt an enthusiastic admiration of Miss Wallraven; but it was precisely the sort of admiration one would feel at suddenly beholding some marvelous masterpiece of nature or of art—some richly, gorgeously beautiful creation, whose very existence seemed a wonder. "Queen of Egypt," "Cleopatra," "Night," "Starlight," all things darkly splendid, grandly beautiful, seemed parallels for her. Gazing on her, I caught myself repeating these lines of Byron, and thinking how strikingly they portrayed her.

"She walks in beauty, like the night,
Of cloudless climes and starry skies,
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes."

After supper we returned to the old wainscoted hall; more logs were thrown on the blazing fire, and we gathered around it. The evening passed pleasantly, with conversation, music, etc. At eleven o'clock we separated for the night, and Wolfgang himself attended me to my room. It was in the second story. In keeping with all in the house, it was an old-fashioned apartment, the two principal features being a large tent bedstead hung with dark-green damask, and a wide fire-place, in which burned and glowed that inevitable country blessing, a good wood fire.

"I will retort your question. 'How do you like my sister,' Fairfield?"

"Yes! that was friendly—was it not? You never mentioned your sister to me before; never prepared a poor fellow for the danger that lay before him—a regular ambuscade!"

I repented this flippant speech in a moment, when I saw how seriously Wolfgang took it.

"I am no egotist; I never was. I do not talk of myself and my family; I never did," he replied.

"Pooh! You mean to accuse me of egotism, because I have talked to you so much about my sister. Well! It is true I thought Regina the very chef d'oeuvre of nature until I saw Miss Wallraven! She has astonished me! She has taken away my breath with admiration; with wonder! Can beauty like that exist anywhere else than in the ideal world of poets and artists? Can such rich beauty really live and move and have its being in the actual world? be sensible to sight and touch?"

Wallraven looked really offended. "Come!" said he, "Constantia never set up for good looks that ever I heard; most certainly she has no pretensions to beauty; and, as to rivaling Miss Fairfield in that respect—pshaw! Fairfield. Constantia is no subject for jest, let me tell you! When I asked you how you liked my sister, I meant how did you like her as a pretty good girl, altogether?"

"And I tell you that she takes

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my breath away with her unparalleled, her wonderful beauty!"

"I marvel if you are crazy, or sarcastic!"

"I am in earnest—deeply in earnest—"

"When you say Constantia is good-looking?"

"When I say she is magnificently beautiful!"

"Heaven mend your taste! Why, she is too tall, too large, too dark!"

"So was that wondrous Queen of Egypt, for whom the demi-god, Marc Antony, lost the world!"

"Hum! Go to bed, Fairfield!"

"She is the only Cleopatra I ever saw, or dreamed of!"

"You have been reading poetry. Good-night, Fairfield! Daylight, breakfast, and a fox-hunt to-morrow, will set you right! Go to sleep soon as you can."

He left me, evidently sincere in his natural brotherly blindness to his sister's superb style of beauty.

I was in fact dreadfully wearied out, and, as soon as he had left me, I threw off my clothes, blew out the candle, and jumped into bed.

I could not sleep.

The blazing hickory fire in the fireplace illuminated the whole room with a dazzling brilliancy that would have left sleep out of the question, even if a female face, beautiful as a houri, had not gazed mournfully at me from the wall opposite the blazing fire. It was Constantia's dark face, with less of dignity and more of love, more of sorrow, more of religion, in its expression. "The eyes were shadowy, full of thought and prayer."

It was a Madonna countenance, and the longer I looked at it, the more I adored it. Yes! it was not a face to be passed over with mere admiration, however ardent that admiration might be—it was a face to be adored; and as I gazed upon its heavenly loveliness, something like religious devotion moved in my bosom, and almost impelled me to kneel before that image of divine beauty, love and sorrow. I fell asleep, at last, with my imagination full of that celestial countenance and my soul full of prayer.

Suddenly I awoke with a start! It seemed to me that I had been aroused as by the shock of a galvanic battery. I trembled even after I was awake as with a vague terror, of which I should have felt ashamed had I not ascribed it to hot supper and the nightmare. I looked around the room and upon the beautiful picture. The fire was burning down low, and the flame flashed up and down upon the opposite portrait, giving a convulsive emotion to the features, as of sobbing. I looked at the sorrowful sobbing face with a feeling of deep pity, as though it had been the living sufferer that it seemed. There was such an indescribable look of life, love, anguish, on the beautiful features, I felt a dreamy, mysterious, but intense desire to wipe away the tears from that pictured face. It was a good while before I could get to sleep. That beautiful countenance, silently convulsed in the firelight, fascinated me. If I determinedly closed my eyes, they would fly open again, and fix upon the pictured sufferer. Nay, even when my eyes were closed, the lovely face still present to my mind, and it seemed to me to be heartless to go to sleep with such an image of beauty, love, and sorrow before me. I was too imaginative. Well! the time, place, and circumstances, made me so.

At last I fell asleep indeed; but through my dreams still slowly moved the image on the wall—beautiful, good, loving, suffering, as I felt her to have been; and with her moved another being—a perfect specter, that might have been the consort of Death on the Pale Horse—an old, decrepid, livid hag, with a malign countenance and gibbering laugh, whose look chilled and whose torch froze my blood with horror. Suddenly a noise, a fall, a smothered cry, awoke me, and, starting up in my bed, I saw in the red firelight, between the chimney and the side of my bed, the very hag of my dream, livid! malignant! gibbering! struggling violently against Wolfgang Wallraven, who, himself an embodied typhon, with a wild, an-

gry blaze in his light gray eyes, held her.

CHAPTER VI.

Unobserved by him, I, after the first involuntary start, had fallen back upon my pillow.

The conflict was too unequal to last above a minute. It was a deadly, silent struggle. He evidently wished to secure without hurting her, or making the least noise. He quickly succeeded in mastering and bearing her out of the room.

Soon he came softly back. I was lying still; he evidently inferred that I was asleep; for, after throwing a quick penetrating glance at me, and looking hurriedly around the chamber, he silently retired, cautiously closing the door after him.

You may judge that I slept no more that night. I scarcely knew with certainty at what point to separate my sinister dream from the mysterious reality; and doubts, and even anxious fears agitated me. Who was that malign old hag? How came she in the dead hours of the night into my sleeping-room? What motive brought her there? How had Wolfgang known of her visit? Or, which had come first, and which had followed the other. Or, possibly, had they come together, and for what purpose? What meant that deadly struggle? What meant that look of agonized dread and terrible purpose upon the ghastly face of Wolfgang. The look of unutterable hatred and determined malignity upon the fiendish features of the beldame?

I am no coward, but I say that I turned ice cold with horror—not so much at what might have happened to either of the mortal foes, as at the passion silently raging in the bosoms of both.

All was dark and still in my room now. The lurid dull red glow of the smouldering coals on the hearth revealed nothing. Even the image on the wall was invisible in the deepening shadows of that darkest hour that precedes the dawn of day. I lay in the misery of an energetic, acutely anxious mind, fretting itself against the forced inactivity of the body.

At length the unknown sounds that usher in the earliest dawn of morning began to be heard.

I arose, drew on my dressing-gown, and taking some dry oak logs from a wood pile near the fireplace, threw them upon the smouldering coals, which soon kindled them into a cheerful and genial blaze. As, however, the room was yet too dusky, I went to the windows to open the shutters. I had some difficulty in hoisting the windows and in pushing open the shutters, for they were blockaded with snow and ice. When I did so, however, the frozen snow fell rattling down to

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the ground, and the sudden dazzling sunbeams flashing in, nearly blinded me with light.

When I could look out, however, I saw that the dark and heavy clouds of the preceding day had not fallen in a deluge of rain as had been predicted, but during the still and silent hours of the night had noiselessly descended in one of those tremendous falls of snow that furnish paragraphs for the marvelous department of the newspapers of the day, and make data in the history of a lifetime. All around stretched fields of frozen snow, the great depth of which might be partly guessed at by the tops of high gate-posts sticking a few inches above the surface, and making the site of a buried line of fence—fields of crusted and sparkling snow, which flashed off in undulating radiance to the circle of mountains that shut in this white, cup-shaped dell, and whose icy peaks scintillated against the cold, blue horizon. This vast snow-cup, snow-pit, snow-dell—flashing, sparkling, scintillating, dazzling, glanced brighter in the reflected rays of the morning sun than the winter sky above.

It was certain that we were immured in this snow-glen, within the confines of these closely circling and ice-cumbered mountains, for an indefinite number of days. There would be no fox-hunting that day, or that week. That was evident; that I did not regret. Not life without, but life within, the home-stead, absorbed my thoughts, and I turned from the flashing fields of snow and glancing peaks of ice, to look upon the beautiful portrait on the wall, that had so powerfully attracted me during the night. I wished to examine it, to test its powers of fascination by sober daylight. I turned and looked for it.

It was gone!
I gazed, doubting my own eyes! It was certainly gone! No sign of a picture ever having been there—no pin, screw, or nail, or even hole in the wall, was to be seen! I looked all around in an almost ludicrous state of bewilderment.

I half suspected the whole train of sister events of the past night to be merely the phantasmagoria of a midnight dream, or the creation of a morbidly excited imagination, and I began to make my simple morning toilet.

(To be continued.)

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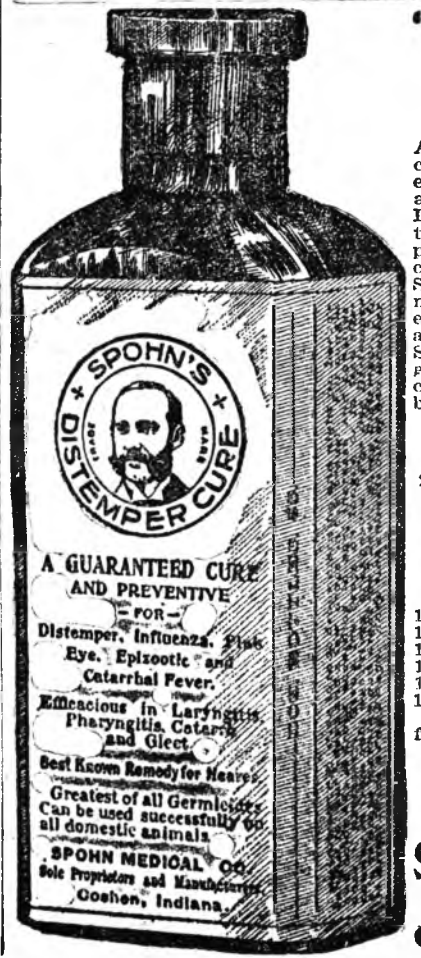
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