

The Lady Brandolin ;

OR, THE LOST PATRIMONY.

CHAPTER X.—(Cont'd)

Regina looked in surprise from the brother to the sister, and then, with her habitual self-possession and politeness, lowered the blaze of the solar lamp so as to throw a soft light upon the table, and, taking up an engraving, made some critical remark upon its merits, submitting it to Constantia's judgment.

But Constantia was pale, trembling, and distraught, and gave some reply wide of the mark.

Constant, however, with a deferential "Permit me, madam," took, and with Regina, examined the picture. Constant was pale and stern, and seemed to have mastered the betrayal of some strong emotion.

They criticised the picture, which was "The Writing on the Wall."

Regina, Constant, and myself, might have passed a tolerable hour, had it not been for Miss Wallraven's increasing and extreme distress. She looked like a second Cassandra, and would start and shudder, pale and glare, as though in momentary expectation of some appalling sight. Her anxiety became so intense that apparently she could endure it no longer, but touched the bell, and at the entrance of a servant, ordered chamber lights, and, turning to Regina, said,

"Mrs. Wallraven! the clock is on the stroke of twelve, and you have had a fatiguing day. I am ready to show you to your chamber."

Regina arose, and, slightly bowing her "Good-night," left the room, followed by Constantia. I soon after arose and retired to my own, which was on the same floor with that of Regina.

I know not what prescient suddenly overcame my mind, but, oppressed with a vague and terrible anxiety, I sought to sleep in vain.

Finally I returned to the drawing-room. Constant was gone. It was empty. The room was so large that the light upon the center-table barely served to make darkness visible, except in its immediate vicinity. I put up the light of the lamp, and walked up and down the floor, restlessly expecting, but without connecting that feeling with my unaccountable gloom, the return of Mr. Wallraven and Wolfgang. I know not how long I might have been waiting there, when the door swung noiselessly open, and Regina re-entered the room, her hair in disorder, and a dressing-gown hastily thrown on. I turned wonderingly to meet her. I saw then that her fair face was blue-pale, and that she trembled with a nervousness I had never seen her betray before.

"My dear sister! What is the matter?" asked I, leading her to an easy-chair, into which she immediately sank.

"I do not know! Perhaps a dream! Perhaps something real. Listen! I went to my chamber attended by Miss Wallraven only, and her dressingmaid. Miss Wallraven assisted me to disrobe; but every few minutes, with a corrugated brow and straining eye, she paused to listen or to watch. Finally she concluded her task, and when I was in bed she drew the curtains, and was about to leave me. Suddenly she turned back and advised me to bolt the door behind her, and then left the room. I did not get up to bolt the door, because I should have had to get up a second time to open it, but I fell asleep, wondering what negro might be on the point of death, or what other trouble had called the Messrs. Wallraven so abruptly from the house. Well! I had no sooner fallen into a deep sleep, than I awakened as by the shock of a galvanic battery, just in time to see the most diabolical-looking old hag that ever nightmare created stooping over me, gazing into my opened eyes with a grin of malignity that seemed to freeze all the blood in my veins. I started violently forward, and she vanished. I was instantly bathed in a cold sweat. I thought this might be a dream, and resolutely composed myself to sleep again—only to be started out of my sleep again by another and a more violent electric shock, and to

see again the same eyes of demoniac hatred gazing into mine, to make another instinctive bound, and see the terrible night-haunter vanish as before! It was impossible now to sleep, or think of sleep. I hastily threw on my dressing-gown, slipped my feet into slippers, and came down here to await the gentlemen. I have heard of nightmares, but this is the first time I ever was attacked with it, and it was very natural that my excited imagination should then create the illusion of the old hag, after your telling me of what you saw or fancied! you saw in that chamber the first night you slept there—There! I feel truly humiliated at these tremors, which I cannot control—Ferdinand! there she is now!"

This last sentence was spoken in a tone of discovery and announcement, as one might use upon finding out an imaginary phantom to be an ugly old woman. I turned and saw, standing within the door in the full light of the candle she held above her head, the hag of my night-vision. She was the most loathsome specimen of humanity I had ever seen, as she stood there some seconds, examining us with the same leer of insult and malignity. There she stood, chuckling with a fiendish grin at the very loathing she excited—repaying the extreme of disgust with the extreme of hatred.

"What do you want?" I asked. "Hik-hik-hik-hik!" she answered, with her low, wicked laugh, passing me, and going toward Regina.

"Leave the room!" said I, intercepting her.

She did not heed me, but went on.

"Will you leave the room?" again I asked.

"Yes, when I have kissed my pretty niece," she replied, nodding her head at me with a demon grin.

I stepped quickly up to Regina, with the intention of leading her from the room, and from the revolting presence of what I now supposed to be some gibbering and malign lunatic.

I drew Regina's arm within my own, and we were coming down the length of the room, my sister, with an expression of disgust amounting to pain, contracting her beautiful features. We passed to one side, in order to avoid meeting the hag; but she knew our purpose, crossed the room, and intercepted us.

"Out of our way! Off with your self instantly!" exclaimed I, angrily.

"Yes! when I have kissed my pretty niece!"

"Begone!" said I, turning off to the other side.

"Yes! I will, when I kiss my pretty niece!" she persisted.

I did not wish to hurt, and I could not have brought myself to touch the filthy creature. I took up a parasol that lay upon the table, and, placing one end of it against her chest, bore her gently off. She left, and, retreating, planted herself within the doorway. I came on with my weapon, half laughing at the Quixotic figure I cut, charging upon a mad, old negro woman with a parasol, and placed the end of it, as before, against her chest, saying,

"Come! Be good! let us pass!"

But suddenly she raised her talon hand, clutched my weapon, threw it behind her, and elevating the streaming tallow candle with the other, gazed upon Regina with a countenance of curiosity, hatred, and expected triumph. My sister drew her arm from mine, and retreated.

"Hik-hik-hik! my pretty niece, you are very fair and very proud; but pride goeth before a fall, and a haughty temper before destruction."

"Off with yourself this moment!" said I, losing patience, "or I shall be tempted to contaminate myself, and put you out!"

"I dare you to touch me!" she said.

"I shall certainly do so if you do not move in one minute."

"Yes! in a minute, but let me kiss my fair, pretty niece first!"

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"You are mad! That lady is Mrs. Wallraven!"

"I know it! My nephew Wolfgang's wife!"

I still thought her crazy; nevertheless an icy pang shot through my heart.

"Who are you?" said I.

"Nell! Old Nell! Yellow Nell! Slave Nell! Hugh Wallraven's sister-in-law! Wolfgang Wallraven's aunt—his mother's sister! Regina Wallraven's near relative! Yes! fair lady! proud as fair! you are my niece."

I turned to look on Regina! to behold a body petrified, as it were, to stone—from when the light of reason had fled instantly and forever!

"Come! let me embrace my niece!" and, laughing hideously, she advanced toward my sister.

Regina turned, stepped upon a footstool, thence upon a chair, finally upon the centre-table, and seated herself upon a pile of books with an air of mad majesty and dominion.

"Order out the guards! To prison with the traitors! To the rack! to the rack with the beldame! Ourself will preside at the question!"

I hurled away the hag, and went to my sister.

"Regina!"

"My Lord Chancellor, let the Prince of Darkness be immediately arrested upon our own charge of high treason!"

"Regina! my dear sister!"

"Let there be no delay! Summon the council! Our life and crown are no longer safe! Traitors lurk in our very bed-chamber, assassins hide in the very shadow of our throne! Already one of the ladies of our bed-chamber—our beloved Regina Fairfield—lies dead before us! The shaft that pierced her heart was aimed at our own sacred life!"

"My God! My God!"

"To the rack! to the rack with the beldame! Strain every limb and nerve and sinew to cracking, until she confess herself the tool of the Prince of Darkness!"

"Oh, heaven!"

"To the rack! to the rack with the hag! We will ourself preside at the question!"

"Regina!"

"Order out the guards! Summon the council! To prison! to prison with the traitor!" she exclaimed, rising in a sort of mad majesty, her form elevated and dilating, her eye blazing with the fire of insanity, her unbound golden locks rolling in fallen glory to her waist, her left hand folding her rich dressing-gown about her as though it were the ermine purple, her right hand extended in a gesture of high command—a moment—and then lowered with the finger pointed to the door, as she said, "Lo! where the traitor Prince obtrudes himself into our very presence!"

I turned to see at a glance Wolfgang Wallraven enter the room, and the hag shake her clenched fist at him, saying,

"Now is my hatred glutted! Now is my revenge complete. Look to your fair wife!"

Wolfgang's lightning glance caught the whole state of affairs instantly. Rage, grief, and despair, stormed in his face. With the bound of an unchained demon he sprang upon the hag, and, with his hands round her throat, bore her down to the floor, placed his knee upon her chest, and nearly strangled her before I could prevent him. Rising, he spurned the beldame with his foot, and turned toward us. His typhoon of anger had subsided; despair, sorrow, tenderness were all to be seen now, as he approached Regina.

"Off, traitor!" she shouted, seizing from the table an antique dagger, that lay there as an article of rare vertu.

He drew near her.

"Off, I say!" she exclaimed, unsheathing and brandishing the dagger. "You come to death!"

"I know it," said Wolfgang.

"Off, traitor! you desecrate our very throne! Nay, then, it shall become your scaffold!" exclaimed

she, furiously, shaking the dagger.

"Let me die so," he said, and stepped upon the footstool thence upon the table, and threw his arms around her.

With a savage cry she raised the weapon; the blade gleamed in the lamp-light an instant, and the next was buried deep in the breast of the wretched man, who, without a groan, fell backward, and rolled upon the floor. In the extreme frenzy of mania, Regina bounded from the table, brandishing the crimsoned dagger.

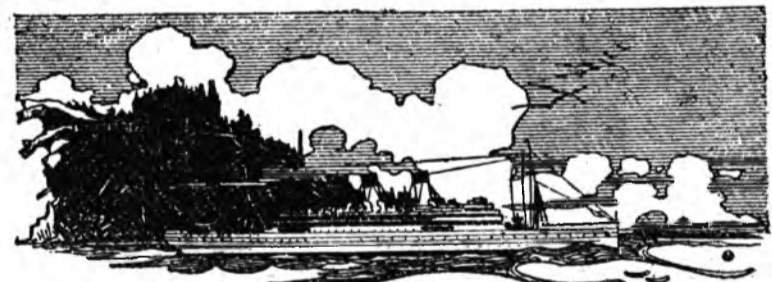
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