

# The Lady Brandolin ;

OR, THE LOST PATRIMONY.

## CHAPTER XI.

I threw myself suddenly upon her, cast my arms about her, but her struggles were so violent, and her maniac strength so great, that she must have escaped me, had not her screams brought the whole household from their beds and into the room.

The scene of amazement, horror, anguish, and despair, that ensued now, defies all description. In the stormy chaos, I saw old Mr. Wallraven sitting on the floor, with the form of the fast-dying Wolfgang drawn into his arms and pillowed upon his chest. I saw Constantia, half dressed, with her black hair streaming, kneeling by his side, wringing her hands.

I saw all this, while, with the assistance of Constant Wallraven, I was disarming and securing the maniac.

"Father! she was mad, father! Do not let her be molested; do not desert her. Protect her, father," faintly murmured the dying man.

"Unhappy boy! tell me one thing. You did not deceive her! You told her your position!"

"Father, no! I had not the courage! I thought to have got her to France, where—oh, God! I die!—where she would never have known—"

"Oh, wretched Wolfgang! I cannot reproach you now! This deception has cost you your life!"

"And her, her reason, father! I die by her hand! It is just! it is just! it is just! Oh! bring me near her! Let me see her again! Lay me at her feet! Let me die there!"

"Oh, Wolfgang! that you so terribly deceived that unhappy young lady!"

"I loved her so—I loved her so—that, for the brief possession of her love, I endure death. Father! she must not die! She must recover. Nay she will, when she knows her evil genius, her mortal foe, who loved her unto death, is dead! Take me to her! Lay me at her feet! Let me die there, looking upon her!"

Regina was now lying on the sofa exhausted by her frantic struggles. Old Mr. Wallraven beckoned Constant, and between them Wolfgang was lifted, brought near the sofa, and laid upon the carpet, with his head supported as before upon his father's arms. He looked up at her, but she did not open her eyes to look upon him. He feebly raised his hand and took hers. At the touch she opened her eyes, and as soon as they fell upon him, with a frenzied cry of anguish and despair, she bounded to her feet, foaming at the mouth, and went into the most violent paroxysm of madness. Constant Wallraven and myself seized and tried to hold her; and while she was struggling, plunging, and screaming in our arms, Wolfgang raised himself upon his elbow, gave one long agonized look upon the wreck, fell back and died!

The next day a coroner's inquest sat in the saloon, and the crowd, collected by the rumor of what had taken place, filled the house. I was the principal witness, and as soon as I had given in my testimony, and was permitted to retire, I wandered toward the chamber whence the terrible screams of the maniac bride still issued, filling all the air.

Constant, Constantia, and myself, were constant and unremitting in our attentions to my wretched sister. For two days and nights she raved in high delirium, and then sunk, under the united effects of nervous exhaustion and opiates, into a profound stupor.

During all this time, I could realize to myself nothing that had taken or was taking place. I seemed out of myself, in some unreal existence, and, sometimes wildly, desperately, hoped to wake and find it all a hideous dream.

That evening, when we returned from the funeral, I followed Mr. Wallraven to the library.

"Give me," said I, "some explanation of that which has wrecked all our happiness?"

"Be seated!" said the old man, himself sinking exhausted into a chair. I sat and waited for him to speak. He leared his forehead down upon his open palm, and, after a silence of a few minutes, sighed heavily, and said:

"I am unequal, now, to the task of giving you any lengthy detail. Listen then! I married my mother's maid. She was a quadroon girl, brought up at my mother's knee; a simple, gentle child, whose life of chamber seclusion had kept her unspotted from the world; a loving, religious child, whose faith in her Heavenly Father was like a babe's innocent trust in its mother. She had been taught in her childhood almost to worship her 'young master'—the mother's spoiled and willful boy—the idol of the household. She learned in girlhood to love him with all the blind and passionate devotion of her race. I had the power of life and death over her—yes, of eternal life and death—for her life hung upon my love—her integrity upon my honor. The alternative for her was ruined fame, a broken heart, and the grave; or the marriage ring and benediction. The alternative for me was sin without infamy, or infamy without sin—or so it seemed to me in my passionate youth. I chose the latter. I loved her, I married her, and lost caste, I and my children, forever! The whole community recoiled in loathing from us. The minister who united us was ungodly and degraded from his pulpit. Our marriage was declared illegal, and my mother, to oblige me to break the connection, made a will, just before her death, by which she left me Constance and her children, upon condition only of my never freeing them. Upon my attempting to break this condition, they were to become the property of a distant relative. Constance brought me three children—Wolfgang, unhappy boy! and then Constant and Constantia. But they could not be my heirs, because they could not legally hold property. At my death they themselves would inevitably become the property of others. And the more legal light I brought to bear upon my mother's will, the more decided was this fact. My other property—the land, negroes, bank stock, hall and mills—I inherited from my father, without restriction. I was unutterably wretched. Constance, seeing the misery of which she had been the innocent cause, fell into a deep melancholy, from which neither the affection of her children nor my own love and unremitting endeavors could arouse her. Her health failed, and she died when Constant and Constantia were but twelve months old. Again I consulted the ablest lawyers in the State, only to be more than ever convinced that there was no possibility of setting aside my mother's will. There was not in all Virginia a father so unhappy as myself. A thousand times I prayed for the death of my children. If one of them fell ill, I watched the progress of his or her illness with extreme anxiety, not fearing they might die, but fearing they might live. Conscience, and not a wish that they should survive, induced me to provide necessary nursing and medical attendance at such time. At last it suddenly occurred to me that I might easily evade the will. It is strange that this expedient never struck me until years of misery had passed; but so it was in my case, and so I have often seen it in the case of others. The remedies for what we conceive to be incurable ills often lie very near us unseen or neglected. It suddenly struck me that nothing hindered my sending my children, while they were mine, to a foreign country, and transferring my whole property thither. I resolved to do so. My sons were then at college, and my daughter at boarding-school in the North. I was in robust health, and of a race never subject to illness or sudden death; therefore I felt that there was no occasion for hurry, and I was not in haste to sell, and leave forever my native soil, while my children were receiving their education. I determined, however, to do it upon the first indication of declining health. Well, month slipped after month, and grew into years. Constant returned from Princeton, where he was educated, and commenced the study of divinity as a private pupil of Mr. Daventry. He formed an unhappy attachment, but Constant possessed

a strong mind and righteous heart. He struggled with, and conquered his passion, coming out as pure gold from the furnace of his trial. After this experience, I determined to guard my unhappy children from forming indiscreet attachments.

"When Wolfgang returned from Harvard, accompanied by yourself, I saw your sudden admiration of my daughter. I withdrew her from your presence. I warned Wolfgang against the society of young ladies. I knew nothing of your sister or I never should have consented to his visiting you at your own home. The first knowledge I had of Miss Fairfield was from the letter of Wolfgang that announced his engagement. Without literally telling me so, it was couched in such terms as, with other circumstances, to mislead me into the belief that she knew all! This was not unnatural. I thought to some his infinitesimal proportion of African blood might be no objection—while his many distinguished—pardon me! It was a father's dotage Wolfgang told me in his letter that his bride had consented to depart with him to France immediately after the marriage ceremony. This afforded me the opportunity I wanted to secure a fortune to my son, by settling it upon Miss Fairfield—to which there could be no legal obstruction. A few weeks before the marriage I received a long letter from Wolfgang, telling me that his Regina, willful as charming, insisted on coming to Hickory Hall, and being introduced to her father-in-law before her departure for France. In this turn of affairs, he requested me to send Constant and Constantia to him, and above all things, to imprison old Nell, whose very sight would appall Regina, and whose extreme boldness and malignity would assuredly instigate her to present herself before the bride."

"But what, then, is the ground of such malignity, and how could one so degraded be in any manner related to one so beautiful, so angelic, as was Constance, judging by your description of her, as well as by a portrait I saw and missed the same night from the walls of my chamber, and which I now suspect to have been hers."

"Yes—it was hers—old Nell stole it that night. She had long wanted the small personal effects of Constance, and had watched her opportunity of getting into the closed chamber. You left your door unlocked, and she entered the room, rifled the bureau, and carried off the portrait and had returned, it is likely, to rob you, when a slight sound of her steps attracted Wolfgang, who happened not to have retired, but was in the next room. He followed her into your chamber the last time, and arrested her at your bedside. You asked me the cause of Nell's malignity, and expressed astonishment at the idea of her relationship to Constance. She is, really, no blood-relation to Constance or my children.

"She was the step-daughter of Constance's father, and hence the claim to relationship, hence her presumption to a high degree of notice and favor, even while her extreme deformity and her disgusting habits and vices, made her very presence in the meanest capacity insufferable; and hence her envy, hatred, and demoniac malignity. She openly said and swore among her fellows that she would 'kiss her pretty niece.' Upon the night, therefore, that the bridal party was expected, we locked her up in her remote cabin, charging old John with her custody. She escaped, and concealed herself, evidently with the object of seeking and insulting the bride. This gave me only uneasiness, for I supposed Regina at least knew our position; but it filled Wolfgang, who knew, and his brother and sister, who had lately discovered, the illusion under which your unhappy sister had given her hand in marriage, with consternation. While we were seeking the hag elsewhere, she had effected her entrance to the house, and found her way to Mrs. Wallraven's presence! You were there! You know better than myself what followed. It is necessary to repeat, however, that there, for the first time, I discovered the concealment that had been used toward the ill-fated lady. I have nothing more to tell. If I have sinned against the conventional usages of the society in which I was born and lived, my whole life has been one long and terrible expiation."

I took his hand and pressed it, and silently withdrew from the room.

In the course of a week, I discovered that there was no one who possessed the least moral control over the maniac girl except Constantia. Mr. Wallraven prayed that she should remain at Hickory

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Hall, when I talked of removing her. In truth, the change from their affectionate though sorrowful care, to that of a lunatic asylum would have been a most unfortunate one for the victim. She had the best medical advice that the country could produce, or wealth could purchase. For more than a year, her malady has constantly increased until it has left her the ruin you see.

I, also, Mary, was nearly blighted when you met, pitied, loved me.

The reading of the manuscript had occupied the whole night. It was sunrise when I folded it up, and began to make my simple morning toilet. Before this was completed a low tap was heard at the door, and, to my "come in," Mary entered, apparently just returned from her nightly visit.

She sat down by the fire. "You have been to see Regina Fairfield, at Hickory Hall," said I. "Yes," she replied. "And she—"

"Died at one this morning—died in her senses—reason had returned at the approach of dissolution. She died forgiving all who had a hand in her betrayal and wreck, and praying forgiveness for herself. She died upon Constantia's

bosom." We attended the funeral of Regina Fairfield, which was conducted with great simplicity. We left Cedar Cliffs soon after. Upon our return from Virginia we lost sight of the Wallravens of Hickory Hall for many years. We heard frequently by letter from Mary Fairfield and knew that the health and spirits of Ferdinand were gradually improving. In one of her letters to me, Mary mentioned that old Mr. Wallraven had sold the property of Hickory Hall, and left the State, accompanied by his two children. This was the first and last time that Mary ever mentioned them in any of her letters.

THE END.

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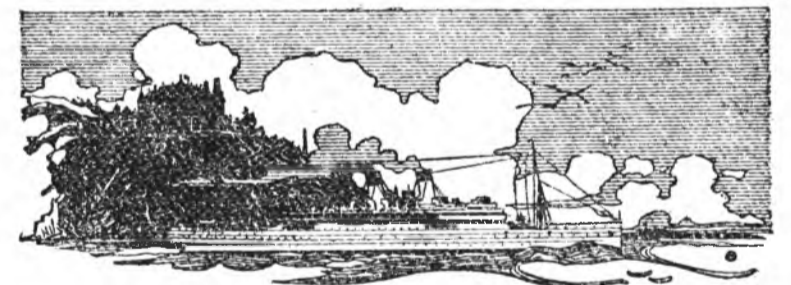
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