

A LITTLE CHILD'S PRAYER

OR, THE DUEL IN THE GLEN.

CHAPTER XX.

"His remorseful cries were terrible to hear in those last days:—'She should have told me the man was her brother,' he would cry, as he paced the floor night and day. 'When there are vital secrets between man and wife, trouble comes of it sooner or later, as sure as the sun shines.'"

The story had made a deep impression upon Irene, especially the closing words. "It was a dastardly crime," commented Frederick, "it might all have been avoided if, as the old lord said, there had been no secrets between them:—yes, trouble comes of it sooner or later."

Happening to glance casually at Irene's face, he saw that it was white as death. In a single instant great, dark circles had crept beneath her large, dark eyes and her hands were trembling like aspen leaves.

Before he could take one step forward, she had dropped at his feet in a deep swoon.

Esmond bore her quickly to her apartments; the signora who had related the story to them, following in apprehension.

There is no class of women who have stronger nerves than English women, this one seems to be an exception, however, she thought.

"The signora is very delicate," she said, in her mellow Italian voice, as she bent sympathizingly over her; "but this is something more than a mere fainting fit, I feel sure; you see the maids cannot bring her to."

"Let the doctor be summoned at once," said Esmond, distractedly, looking in alarm at the grayish pallor stealing slowly over the lovely face lying so still and white, against the pillow.

His order was executed at once. The young Englishman had plenty of gold, and was lavish in "giving tips" as the servants phrased it, and they hastened to obey his command.

It seemed to Frederick the physician an age in coming, and as he bent over the still form his face grew grave; there was a look on it that struck terror to Esmond's heart.

"Is she in danger, doctor?" he cried; "tell me at once—I cannot bear suspense."

The doctor shook his head thoughtfully to and fro, he was not a man to answer rashly; and there was something about this fair young woman, stricken down so suddenly, who lay before him that warned him her's was no common illness. When he had administered restoratives, and the dark eyes had flashed suddenly open, there was a look in them he did not quite like, he read in them acute terror.

Esmond touched his arm with a trembling hand. "You do not answer me, doctor," he said, "is it a malignant fever—a fatal disease?"

"No," responded the doctor, shortly, "nothing of that kind; the mind is diseased rather than the body. She has suffered a mental strain which has overpowered her at last; I believe she has been fighting hard against this insidious foe for long months. Have you any clew to the cause of her deep depression?" he asked, turning to the wondering young husband.

"Depression!" echoed Esmond, "why you must be mistaken, doctor. What in Heaven's name is there to depress her spirits? We have been married but a short time; and since he has been married, she has never known one wish unfulfilled, we have been exceptionally happy, I thought."

The sage old doctor made no reply; but his face grew graver, more thoughtful. That some great, hidden sorrow preyed upon her mind, which her young husband knew not of, he firmly believed.

The next few days were painful ones indeed to Esmond, for Irene had grown much worse. Dr. Ricci and two experienced nurses were in constant attendance now. Brain fever had set in and her life was despaired of.

Esmond scarcely ate or slept, his soul was in such a tumult of agony.

Hour after hour the doctor would sit quietly at his patient's bedside, listening abstractedly to the senseless babblings that fell from her lips.

"Such odd notions as the poor young lady has," the nurses would exclaim, laughing to each other, "she is always crying out about some dark, revengeful face which she fancies has suddenly come between her and her young husband, shutting him out from her gaze, forevermore."

One day as the doctor entered the sick room quite unexpectedly, his footsteps making no noise on the thick velvet carpet, he found both of the nurses bending over the patient with rapt attention.

He was just about to speak when the words that fell from their lips held him transfixed with curiosity.

Both had their backs turned toward him, consequently neither saw him.

"We will not disturb her," whispered one of the nurses; "while she sleeps I will make an examination of this little white hand which lies like a snow-flake on the coverlet. Much of one's life and temperament can be gleaned from the hand."

Some little time elapsed, still the nurse was studying the white, slim, restless hand she held, intently.

"Well," asked her companion at length, "what do you see there? To me it is nothing more or less than a very lovely white hand, but you appear to look grave over it."

"And well I may," returned the other, slowly. "I have read the lines of life on many hands, but I never saw them so strangely marked as they are in this. Do you see that line?" she said, pointing to a delicate line that was like a vein on a rose-leaf. "That is a fatal line; it is an abrupt ending of the marriage line, the same one, mind, goes on to the other end

of the hand which means the end of life; and what puzzles me the most is following close beside it is another marriage line when there is no line of death across the first marriage line. As both lines are well to the left of the hand, that indicates the marriages will take place early in life. I should imagine the events had already taken place. If she has remarried, and the first husband is not dead, there are two conclusions: the poor girl has had recourse to the divorce court.

"Mind, this is not mere fancy; it is reading aright the lines of true science as I find them here. As some people make a study of human faces, so I have made a study of human hands. She will not have a happy life of it. There is dark and bitter trouble ahead of her; and as sure as the sun shines, it will end in a tragedy. Those peculiar points at the end of the finger tips indicate it. Heaven forbid that many people should have such marks on their hand.

"Anne Boleyn, the ill-fated queen, had them; and one day, when she was a very young girl, a scolding phrenologist saw them and predicted what her future would be. She threw her pretty head back and laughed aloud; but, when the hour came when she was led forth to the gaze of the breathless multitude, and that beautiful head laid on the block, she thought of the old phrenologist's prediction. The lines on one's hand foretell the future as sure as fate; and I find plainly enough just what I have told you written on this one."

The doctor quietly retreated; he did not care to have the nurses know that he had overheard their remarks. He paced up and down the corridor some minutes, his brows knit in deep thought, and as he paced the strange notion that appeared to haunt his beautiful brain's brain, came to him; of the dark, revengeful face that floated before her, shutting out her young husband's face from her gaze forevermore.

The doctor believed he held the key to her fatal illness at last; but he was as far from helping her as ever. The secrets of her life were her own; no one had a right to pry into them.

Long and earnestly one of the nurses pondered over what her companion had told her.

"It is an ill wind which blows nobody good," she muttered, when she found herself alone; "why shouldn't I make capital out of what I have heard, if it can only be true? I have nothing to lose anyhow; I may as well try, she has wits cleverly together planning for this one end. 'She is just rolling in gold,' she would often mutter as she paced the floor of her room—'why shouldn't she divide with me, if it be true that she has a secret to keep. If I could but stumble on the truth by some lucky chance."

She was a diplomatic woman; she bent all her arts to one aim—to ingratiate herself so completely in young Mrs. Esmond's favor, that when she left Italy, she should accompany her as her maid, and this object she readily accomplished.

"Of course you shall have your own way about it, my dear," said Esmond, some weeks later, as they were about to take their departure for England. "You may go, but in this case, I hope you will stop and consider a little. I cannot say that I am favorably impressed with her. I do not like these low-browed women who creep about stealthily, casting furtive glances about under their lashes. Many a time when I have supposed we were alone together, happening to turn abruptly around, I have found that woman standing at my elbow."

"You exaggerate it, I am sure, dear," said Irene, laughing. "If a woman is no longer quite young or pretty, men see all her faults and but few of her virtues; remember she saved my life—or rather helped to save it—that alone should be a deep claim on your gratitude."

"So it is, Irene returned her husband—continuing. "If you wish to engage her, I shall offer no objections. And so Marie Montalti was engaged as maid, and Irene had cause to rue it all the years of her after life; for as the serpent crept into the garden of Eden, so bitter we entered the household as this woman crossed the threshold.

CHAPTER XXI.

From Italy, they journeyed back to England, and took up their abode in their elegant town house in London.

There was one thing, however, that puzzled and annoyed Irene, and that was the great change in the demeanor of the maid she had brought with her from Italy.

Marie was no longer deferential to her wishes; there was a look in her black eyes that Irene could not comprehend, and there were occasional hints of secrets she had discovered in the lives of many of the dainty ladies who had employed her, and her words were always accompanied by a cunning smile and a peculiar nod that almost made Irene's blood turn cold as ice.

"Can she suspect? Ah, no, surely not," Irene assured herself over and over again; yet the very thought terrified her.

The girl's manner was becoming intolerable to her, and she concluded to dispense with her services at once.

Marie Montalti received her dismissal with a sneering smile.

"I have something to say which may change your views, signora," she said, and Irene was more than surprised to see the girl glide swiftly across the room and turn the key in the lock.

"Why do you do that?" asked Irene, indignantly.

"Because I have had to say to you which must be said—and listened to without interruption."

Irene glanced up with haughty displeasure. "You behave very strangely," she said. "I do not like it," and she looked fixedly at the girl, whose face was not pleasant to see. There was a lurid light in her eyes, an air of cringing, yet of defiance in her whole manner.

"You must listen to me, Mrs. Esmond, whether it pleases you to do so or not," she said, impudently, continuing in a shrill whisper:—"I hold a secret of yours signora, and it is not well for you to make an enemy of me. Intended to leave your service long ago, but I shall not go away empty handed—you must pay me well if I keep your secret!"

Irene recoiled with a startled, terrified cry; for one moment the room seemed to whirl around her; she recovered herself by a violent effort, she turned slowly and faced the girl, and no one who witnessed her calm face would have dreamed that her heart was beating in great, strangling throbs.

"You can know no secret of mine," she returned, bravely, but the shrewd maid detected the terror in her voice. "How dare you intimate such a thing!"

"But I do," persisted the girl; "I could easily convince Mr. Esmond that it was a very dark secret, too. If you want it kept from him, you must pay me two hundred pounds for it."

"You have taken leave of your senses,

girl!" cried Irene, clutching nervously at the marble mantel, her lovely face paling. "You will find, on the contrary that I was never more sane in my life, Mrs. Esmond. Let me tell you what I have to say."

Irene leaned heavily against the cold marble and looked at her. Had this girl found out, in any way, the terrible secret that was wearing her life out; that secret of the past which she could never summon sufficient courage to reveal to Frederick Esmond, but which seemed to have been eating her heart out ever since like blighting cancer a thorn in her side. Ah, no! surely not! she had been too careful, too guarded for that.

"I suppose I must listen," said Irene, "but let what you have to say be said quickly, that this very unpleasant interview may be over as speedily as possible." The maid rose from her chair and glided up to her. "I made the discovery of your secret when I was nursing you in Italy, signora; when one is delirious they babble many things that they would give their life almost to recall. It is not always nonsense they talk, but of things which weigh most heavily on their minds."

Irene started, and her face paled to a dead white. "Go on," she said, as the girl paused abruptly, looking at her with glittering triumphant eyes.

In the still hours of the day and in the dark watches of the night I listened to you; there was always a secret cry on your lips, miladi,—of two husbands, and that dark, revengeful face that always came between you and Mr. Esmond."

Irene uttered no cry,—no moan fell from her lips,—but the desperate horror on the white face looking up at the maid was pitiful to see.

She had fancied that story of the past so safely secure, and now, oh, Heaven help her!

"There is no use in repeating all," continued the girl, actually, "suffice it to know all and quietly scandal it would make to be sure—Mr. Esmond would feel it so keenly. I do not wish any harm to come to you, Mrs. Esmond," she added, quickly; "give me the money I ask for and I will go quietly away. Not a word of it shall ever pass my lips. You can trust me."

It was a bold move on the part of the maid; true she had heard her patient murmur of some secret which must be kept forever locked in her own breast and of the face that haunted her and had wrecked the past, and when the other nurse related the tale of two husbands, meaning two husbands, discernable on the pink palms, with clever strategy she had put this and that together, working up quite a little mystery about it.

If she accused Mrs. Esmond of concealing an unwholesome secret, and there was nothing to be done but to be discharged and she was sick and tired of England anyway.

If there was anything to it, she would show terror at once, and would accede to any terms.

The terror plainly discernable on Irene's face had betrayed her. Marie knew, though she had shot at random, she had hit the right mark; this dainty lady was henceforth and forever in her power.

Irene would have died before she would have acknowledged the truth of what the girl had stated.

"I had rather would rather that I should come to you first," the girl went on. "Mr. Esmond would have—"

"Stop!"

The voice that broke the sunlit silence was like nothing human, more like the moan that one sometimes hears among the trees.

"Stop!" cried Irene, again, though this time there was the recklessness of despair in her tone. She felt that she must temporize with this girl at whatever cost. "I—I will give you the money you ask for," she said, speaking with an effort. "But do not breathe a word of this to any one. I have ever done that, the world could accuse me for; I—I do not admit that there is a secret; but I do not wish such an absurd story circulated. You may remain until to-morrow," she said; "I will give you what you ask for, then."

"You are wise, miladi; I knew you would take a sensible view of the matter," returned the girl, and the covert meaning in her words made Irene's eyes flash and her cheeks glow with hot anger.

She pointed to the door, and without another word the maid glided from the room, leaving Irene staring after her.

The moon shone in all its rounds since first the flight of time began, surely never fell upon a sadder sight than that beautiful woman, standing alone in that luxurious room.

"Let me try to realize what has happened to me," she gasped. "While I rested secure, believing myself safe, I was silently tracking me down; my doom was being darkly around me, like a funeral pall. Let me try to think clearly what has happened to me."

"The world will soon know. My husband will soon know that I am not what I am—before I wedded Frederick, I was a convict's bride!—and—and—his—widow!"

What a savory morsel the scandal mongers would make of it! But for this she cared little, her sole thought was of Fred. You are wise, miladi; I knew you would take the very natural question that would spring to his lips:

"Why in Heaven's name have you kept this from me?"

"How could she answer him; what could she say that would palliate what she had done?"

If Frederick ever found out that past, in that moment she would lose him forever; his love for her would die, then and there. And standing there, in the drifting sunlight, the memory of the night when Frederick Esmond had asked her about her marriage, came vividly back to her, and how, standing there by the fountain she had debated with herself whether she should tell him or not; when, he, himself, had settled the matter by saying if she had ever had any other lover—even though he had died, he (Frederick) would never have asked her to marry him, believing, then, that other lover lay in his grave his memory would always come between them. Ah, how indeed could she have told him the fatal truth, after hearing that; and when she was so sure, too. That dark past which had always seemed to her like some hideous dream, was buried in Leon Forrester's grave.

And now, it would all come to light, if she made an enemy of this girl; her fate was in the maid's hands; hereafter she would never know one happy hour; she would feel as though a sword hung over her head, suspended by a thread, expecting it to fall any day—any hour—and slay her.

Better, far, better, had she told Frederick all then; and if he had not loved her sufficiently to have wedded her in the face of it all—to have parted from him then and there even though her heart broke.

And now, the sin of keeping this dread secret from him had found her out after all.

CHAPTER XXII.

According to her promise, on the morning Irene gave the maid the money which was to purchase the girl's silence forevermore, as she believed, and on the same day, much to Irene's relief the girl took passage on an outgoing steamer bound for Italy.

"Farewell for a time, miladi," the girl muttered, as the blue line of shores faded from her view in the distance. "You think you have looked your last upon Marie Montalti; ah, so you have while the gold lasts; after that you shall see me soon enough."

For many a long day after her departure, Irene had been haunted by the apprehension that the girl might return;

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but when weeks lengthened into months and months stretched out into years and she did not hear from her, fear at last died out of her heart.

Those years which had drifted by had brought great changes to the Esmond household. The spacious rooms echoed with the sound of childish laughter, and the spacious corridors with dancing childish feet.

A lovely romping child of four, with a merry laughing roguish face, eyes like blue pansies, and a head tumbled over with short, fluffy flaxen curls, calls Irene mamma, now, and Frederick Esmond, papa. Little Ruby is the darling and the pride of the entire household, and the delight of both her father and mother's heart.

The years that have passed have touched Irene but lightly, adding to her beauty; to the depth and lustre of her eyes—to the perfection and grace of her figure. They have crowned her with magnificent womanhood, for Irene is three-and-twenty now.

Every one who went to Rose Lawn, as their beautiful place was called, and who saw or knew Frederick Esmond and his young wife, laughingly declared that theirs was one of the happiest marriages in the world. They had been married five years and were lovers still; and Frederick Esmond declared they should always be lovers.

On the morning when this, the second part of our story opens, Irene was sitting alone in the apartment known as the oak room—a large, square, oak panelled room with an immense window which occupied one entire side of it, that looked out on the lawn, there was hardly such another window in England; round it grew white

jasmine and white roses, with the lovely purple wisteria.

To sit in the deep recess of that grand window was always a pleasure to Irene. She liked to watch Ruby at play on the lawn with the tame doves and the peacocks; she liked to watch the sun shining over the trees and the flowers.

Irene was sitting, so lost in thought, in the deep recess of the old multi-paned window, watching the wind-stirred jasmine, that she did not hear her husband as he entered. Her eyes had travelled out on the lawn; no wonder the picture she saw there caught and held them.

Little Ruby—the spoiled darling of the household—was sitting on one of the garden chairs beneath a blossoming lime tree, her chubby, dimpled fists dug deep into her eyes "doing her best," as nurse Nannette often phrased it, "to get up a good cry." Nannette stood some little distance from the child doing her utmost to coax her into good humor. "Now, Miss Ruby," she said, coaxingly, "if you are a very good child, this afternoon perhaps your mamma will let me take you to see Humpty Dumpty."

"I don't want to see Humpty Dumpty. I want to go riding with mamma," sobbed the spoiled baby, stamping her foot.

"But you don't know how nice it is going to be," persisted Nannette; "lots of little monkeys, riding on the backs of trained dogs; parrots saying the oddest things; and oh, so many wonderful funny men. Now, Ruby, do be reasonable, you can't go riding with your mamma; there's no room in the victoria. I heard her say only a little while since that it would be quite impossible to take you with her to-day."

(To be continued.)



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