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## For Weal or for Woe;

Or, A Dark Temptation

CHAPTER XVII.—(Cont'd)

A few moments later the carriage dashed away, and the two sisters, accompanied by Chesleigh, returned to their guests. Grace and Mr. Chesleigh were in a spirited discussion over the events of the evening. Ione alone was thoughtful.

"It's a clear case of mutual attraction between handsome Percy Granville and myself," she mused delightedly. "He will write me in spite of Evelyn. I will pay her up for trying to prevent it if I live—the mean, hateful thing!"

Suddenly Harry Chesleigh turned to Ione with a thoughtful face. "How is our little Nell progressing?" he asked quickly. "I have not seen her since the fever abated; it is really unkind of you, Ione, to refuse to take up my card and ask her to see me. She ought to know that I feel greatly interested in her. I cannot understand why she chooses to make such a mysterious recluse of herself. Grace tells me she has changed so greatly. I would hardly know her."

"Ione Leighton flushed angrily. It would never do for him to find out that she had suppressed the rare bouquets and the polite messages he had sent to Little Nell, as Gwynell was called.

"You shall see her to-morrow, Harry," she said carelessly; meanwhile she was telling herself, with a cunning smile, "that many an event might happen between that time and the present to completely thwart his hopes in that direction."

The guests had not missed them from the ballroom. When they returned the mirth was at its height; but during the remainder of the evening the fairy bride did not reappear, and at twelve o'clock, when the masks were laid aside, curiosity ran high as to who she could have been—the sylph-like Circe who had flashed like a dazzling meteor in their midst, and like a meteor had been so soon lost to sight.

"I cannot imagine who she could have been," declared Ione Leighton, as much mystified as any of the rest. "I suppose I shall never know, until she chooses to reveal her identity, who the unbidden guest was."

Grace Leighton enjoyed immensely the curiosity and the mystery Nell's presence at the masked ball had aroused. She could barely restrain herself from exploding with laughter as she listened to the flattering comments.

"Ah! how desperately angry Ione would be if she knew who it was," she thought, drooping her merry mischievous, dancing blue eyes.

It was far into the wee sma' hours when the grand ball broke up and the last guest took his leave. Grace flew up the broad staircase to Gwynell's room two steps at a time.

The door was unfastened, and she popped her curly head in with a giggling laugh, but she instantly checked her mirth as she noted that Nell was apparently asleep. "I will tell her to-morrow what a sensation she created," she thought, popping out of the room again as noiselessly as she had entered it, and going on to her own room at the other end of the corridor.

gram called him away so suddenly, and how all the gentlemen, Harry Chesleigh included, had fairly raved over the little beauty of the ball.

"Indeed, I did not think there would be any harm in it," faltered Gay, tremulously, terrified at what she saw in Miss Leighton's anger-distorted face.

Ione turned on her heel with a cruel sneer. "We will settle this matter to-morrow," she said ironically. "Papa shall know what sort of a person he has been harboring, and he will turn you away from the house at once. Now that I come to look at these things closely, I wonder that they belong to my sister Grace. I wonder that I failed to recognize them before. You must have stolen them from her wardrobe."

Gay shrunk with a gasp of horror, but no sound came from her white lips to refute the awful accusation.

"You know you did it!" exclaimed Ione Leighton, gliding across the room to the white couch, and grasping Gay tightly by the white arm and shaking her roughly. "Before Gay could utter the retort that sprung to her lips—that the costume had not only been loaned to her, but had been urged upon her by Grace herself—Miss Leighton went on scathingly: "You need not attempt to deny it. No wonder you did not stay until the time for unmasking came. You dared not! Papa shall turn you from Leighton Hall with the morning's light, I say."

"You need not wait for to-morrow's light to turn me from your door, Miss Leighton," sobbed Gay. "I will go of my own accord this very hour—now!"

"So much the better," declared the haughty beauty; "you cannot leave Leighton Hall too soon to please me." Without a word poor Little Gay rose from the couch where she had fumed herself an hour before—and had cried herself to sleep—and robed herself in her street clothes with cold, trembling hand, and heart that was nearly bursting.

"I am ready now, Miss Leighton," she faltered tremulously, "I forgive you for your unjust suspicion, because your roof sheltered me in my hour of need. I am grateful to your kind father, your sister, the good old housekeeper, and yourself; as well as to the noble young man who found me by the roadside that morning and brought me here. Tell them this for me."

Without another word, poor Gay, who was tossed about so pitifully by the cruel hand of fate, turned and fled like a storm-beaten swallow down the dark corridor, and out of the house into the darkness of the night.

Alone, friendless, homeless, helpless, penniless, adrift on the cold, merciless world, was ever a young girl's fate more pitiful?

Gay sped on through the pitchy darkness, little heeding whither she was going, until at last she sunk down, weak and spent, upon a mossy log to rest.

How long she sat there she never knew; the sound of voices near at hand aroused her.

She heard Tremaine crush out an imprecation from between his white teeth, saying impatiently:

"We may as well take a turn down the road for a mile or so; it will be a good half-hour before we hear her whistle." And the handsome villain, who had so deliberately stooped to such a diabolical scheme, strolled leisurely away, closely followed by his companion, who carried the lantern.

How long Gay stood there clutching desperately at the thorny branches, she never realized; time seemed to slip by with the rapidity of lightning.

It scarcely seemed a moment until the far-off shriek of the train, as it sped on toward the fatal bridge, warned her of its approach.

"Oh!" cried Gay, wildly, "what shall I do? Oh, Percy, my love, my love! you must not, you shall not die the horrible death your mortal foe has marked out for you! I will save you, or I will die in the attempt!"

The far-off shriek of the on-coming train roused her as nothing else in the world could have done.

For one instant Gay turned her face up to the star-studded sky, holding out her white arms to the fleecy clouds.

Brave, dauntless Little Gay had decided upon her course of action.

"If I die," she sobbed faintly, "my love will never know that his name was on my lips as I faced death itself for his dear sake. He will never know that I blessed him with my last breath."

"He married me on the impulse of the moment; but he never cared for me," he cast me off—out of his heart, out of his life; yet perhaps, if I die to save him, he may come some day to kneel upon my tomb, part the long grass and whisper my name, and I should hear my love's voice—even in my grave, I almost think, I love him so."

Quick as thought Gay rose from her knees where she had flung herself, and with a face as white as death, dashed madly toward the little bridge that spanned the black stream below.

Three of the rails had been torn from the track, and the dark water yawned below as though anxious to swallow the prey that was soon to be hurled into it.

It was for life or death; the thought seemed to lend wings to Gay's feet as she neared the fatal spot. With a terrible cry she sprang forward, throwing herself into the middle of the track, gesticulating wildly as she waved her white handkerchief to and fro to warn the engineer of his great peril. The sound of her wild, agonized voice was lost, drowned, in the roar and thunder of the coming train.

Would the engineer see her—would he hear those piteous, exciting cries, or would the iron monster in its mad fight crush her and carry its burden of human souls on to destruction? It was an intensely thrilling moment.

Gay stood upon the track with a death-white face and lips set, facing the horrible peril of death for her love's sake.

On thundered the locomotive, now scarcely a dozen rods ahead of her, and its headlight threw its bright white glare over the lovely white, upturned, agonized face and the slender girlish figure standing like a marble statue directly in the path.

"Percy, my love, my love," murmured Gay, "I have to die—the engineer does not see me, but it is to save you, if I were to fly, you would be swept on to the fatal bridge."

The prayer she tried to utter died on her young lips; already the misty steam enveloped her like a death-shroud—the terrible glare of the head light dazzled and dazed her—the rails on either side of brave, heroic noble Little Gay shook and trembled like an electric battery; but the girl never stirred—scarcely breathed.

Would it be life or death for Little Gay? only the white angels watching the terrible scene from the star-studded sky overhead could have foretold what her fate was to be.

She was so young, so fair to meet each a tragic death.

The train was twenty minutes late—the fireman heaps more coal into the furnace, watching covertly out of the corners of his eyes the engineer, Jim Hale, who stands just as he has stood ever since the train left the depot, gazing thoughtfully out of the window, with his hand on the lever, while the train, puffing and panting, dashes on through the darkness of the night.

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change off to-night, yet nothing has happened," he added triumphantly.

No answering smile broke the gravity of the engineer's swarthy face.

"We are not there yet," he answered gloomily, "and I shan't breathe freely until we slack up at the Hackensack Depot. I've been running on the road night into twenty years now, and we old rail-roaders know what signs mean when we see 'em. You can talk about superstition and all that sort of thing as much as you like, but when an engineer sees a black sheep leap across the track before he reaches the first station, let him look out for his train—a terrible accident follows."

A cold shudder ran over the fireman's sturdy frame; although he laughed and ridiculed the idea stoutly, somehow the solemn words of the engineer impressed him strangely.

"There's another reason I have for feeling sort o' down in the mouth," went on the engineer slowly. "When I was about to start away from home to-night, my wife clung to me, crying like a baby. 'Don't go on your train to-night, Jim!' she pleaded. 'I have had such a horrible dream. Do get a substitute just for once—oh, do, Jim! I dreamed that a hump-backed dwarf was the first person to board your train.' And, by the Lord Harry, her dream came true! A hump-backed dwarf was the first to board my train to-night."

"Is there a sign about that?" asked the fireman, laughing outright at the notion.

"That's the worst I ever heard of—'There's many a conductor who have prevented such a person from entering his car first, if it cost him his position—there's just that much to it," replied the engineer, sighing; "and when I saw the hump, old sheep I said to myself, 'Jim Hale, old boy, I fear you're making your last run on the train to-night—look out for yourself.' But I didn't get a substitute; I didn't try. I'll stick to the old engine to-night, come what may."

"I guess I'll shake the railroad business after to-night," said the fireman, nervously. "Good gracious! you've worked me up to such a pitch, I'll get to be a raving lunatic dreaming of black sheep and hump-backed dwarfs after this night's run. Run slow and keep a sharp lookout, and I guess we'll pull through all right, Jim!"

"I've run so slow that I've lost twenty minutes already," retorted the engineer, "and I must turn on more steam at once." And as he spoke, the engine whirled with lightning like rapidity round an abrupt curve in the road.

There was a hoarse cry from the engineer.

"My prediction has come true!" he panted. "There's a woman on the track! She'll be crushed—mangled—beneath the wheels!" cried the old engineer, great drops of perspiration starting out on his face in beads.

With an effort born of intense horror, he whistled down breaks.

Would it be too late? All the agony of a lifetime was crowded into the awful moment that followed.

He had done all that human power could do to stop the train, but it must pass a rod or more over the spot where the slender figure stood ere its speed would slacken.

In that moment of fearful ordeal, his presence of mind aided him. With iron will and nerves of steel, he sprang out upon the iron fender.

A moment of breathless suspense followed—the white angels looking down upon the thrilling scene must have wept for joy.

The engineer had clutched the girl's upraised arm, drawing her by main force upon the rail beside him quick as a flash of lightning, and the great iron monster thundered panting over the spot where Gay had stood but an instant before—panted—trembled—and then stood still, barely escaping the spot where the toes had been torn from the track, by a single hair's-breadth.

With a great, hysterical, quivering cry, Gay pointed to them.

"I discovered it!" she gasped. "I—I meant to save your train—or—die!" The great, dark, velvety eyes closed—the white lips parted—and utterly protected by the fearful ordeal through which she had just passed, Gay fell back in the engineer's strong arms in a deep swoon.

He realized the import of her words at once—the lovely young girl lying in a dead faint in his arms had saved the train from a horrible catastrophe at the risk of her own life.

(To be continued.)

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