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For Weal or for Woe;

Or, A Dark Temptation

CHAPTER XXIII.—(Cont'd)

Then Ione Leighton knew that she stood no chance of ever being friends with the girl whom she had so bitterly wronged.

"No doubt the little upstart beggar is quite as proud as a peacock now," flashed out Ione, tearing the note into minute shreds and flinging them in the fire. "Oh, if I could but pull down her pride, trample her in the dust of humiliation for this! I think I could do it too, if I were to search her past history. I am sure there is some terrible, disgraceful secret in that girl's past life, and if I live I will ferret it out."

"Take care," warned Grace, "depend upon it, as sure as fate such a scheme will recoil upon your own family in time, if not upon your own head. Take care! Beware! Remember well the significant lines:

"The mills of the gods grind slowly,
But they grind exceedingly fine."

before she could give him the slightest tap with her gold-mounted riding-whip, Satan was dashing down the paved road with the velocity of the wind.

The groom looked after her with a troubled face.

"Goodness!" he exclaimed under his breath, "the mischief is in that horse today. I'm afraid there will be mischief done before she returns. I'll saddle up Akbar and follow her."

Meanwhile Gay had reached the park; and it was on this particular morning that Percy Granville had asked Evelyn St. Clair to become his bride, when he had bidden adieu to his fiancée, forgetting, in his eagerness to catch the train, to give her even a farewell kiss as they parted.

He reached the city in a strangely perturbed state of mind, quite unusual to his cheery nature.

Was it fate that caused him to give the

There came a dark, bitter day when Ione Leighton remembered those lines but too well.

She read of Miss Remington's great beauty and her success in the fashionable world with a revengeful, envious heart.

Proud old Mrs. Cheseleigh read them too, with bitter anger at her own folly for not keeping Gay under her roof while she had her at Rosecliff. She would have been delighted to have had her handsome son woo and win the heiress, who would at some future day inherit the banker's three millions of money.

She realized too late that "she had entertained an angel unawares."

The handsome young fellows who worshipped at Gay's shrine were legion.

She gave each and all a bright smile, a coquettish glance, and a pleasant word, but not one of them succeeded in capturing her heart.

Poor Gay! she had no heart to give them; her heart was with him whom she believed so cruelly false to her; she loved him with a passionate yearning still, in spite of all.

Gay had frankly told the good old banker that she was never intended for a grand lady when he had made known his intention of adopting her and making her his heiress.

"I am only a working-girl," she went on simply. "I shall never feel above them; my heart will be always with them."

"God bless you, my child," returned the old millionaire banker warmly, "your heart is in the right place. I honor you for those brave words. My wife was a working-girl when I married her, and she always tells me she don't feel one whit more of a lady in her silks and satins than she did in her neat print dress and spotless apron. Wealth has not spoiled her, by any means, and she will like you all the better for your principles, my dear."

No wonder Gay's heart went out to this grand old couple.

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CHAPTER XXIV.

Gay had given her new-found friends a faithful description of her life up to the time Hazel died, but there was one page in that dark past that she could not bring herself to reveal to them; and that was the story of that hasty, romantic marriage that seemed almost like a dream now.

Gay had been long months amid her new surroundings; she was the very light and life of the grand old house, each day she was growing more like the saucy, impetuous, wilful Gaynell of old.

This was the lull before the terrible storm broke over her head.

"You are quite spoiling me, you dear old darling!" she exclaimed one day, throwing two soft arms around the grand old lady's neck, and giving her a decided hug that almost ruined her dainty lace collar. "I thank you and papa so much for giving me my choice of any pony in the stable for my very own. I have chosen the new one that was bought yesterday. I must run away and put on my riding-habit, the groom will have him saddled and at the door directly. I'm going to take a canter in the park."

"Take care of yourself, dear," replied Mrs. Remington. "You ought to have permitted the groom to accompany you."

Gay laughed and shook her golden head. A few moments later Gay put her head in at the door to say "Good-bye."

How dainty and sprightly she looked in the navy-blue cloth riding-habit that fitted her slender, girlish figure to a charm, the blue cloth cap with a bright, crimson bird's wing coquettishly at one side, the tan-colored gloves reaching almost up to the elbow, and the thick silver veil covering the pretty face all save the dimpled chin and rosy, laughing mouth like a pomegranate bud.

How little Gay dreamed what was to befall her ere she returned!

With flying feet she gained the portico. The groom was awaiting her there, holding a sleek, prancing black horse by the bit.

"I'm so sorry you have ordered this horse to be saddled for you, Miss Gay," he began anxiously. "He's not safe for a man to handle, let alone a young lady. You can depend on it, his old master knew him pretty well when he named him Satan."

"Nonsense. I guess Satan and I will get along pretty well together," laughed Gay, springing into the saddle. "Forewarned is forearmed, you know. I shall keep a sharp lookout for his pranks."

She deftly gathered up the reins, but

order to the cab-driver as he took his seat:

"To the park?"

At the gate he dismissed the cab, preferring to stroll through the grounds on foot, tempted by the beauty of the spring morning.

He had scarcely reached the first curve of the serpentine road, ere he heard a sound that made his very heart almost cease beating.

It was a piercing cry in a clear, girlish voice—a voice that reminded him strangely of Little Gay's.

The next instant he beheld a black horse—upon whose back a young girl sat, swaying to and fro in the saddle like a slender leaf in a gale—plunging and dashing madly down the road at a headlong pace.

The kid bride had snapped asunder, and the lovely rider had lost all control of the spirited animal.

Percy could see that it was only a question of a few brief instants ere the terrified girl would be dashed from the saddle—meeting certain death by striking one of the trees that lined either side of the road.

His face paled as he saw her danger.

In an instant he had made up his mind what course to pursue.

He would save the poor girl's life or he would die in the attempt.

On, with the speed of the wind, came the coal-black horse, and again a wild, piteous cry floated on to Percy's ears, and that cry nerved him for the terrible ordeal that followed.

He saw that the maddened animal must pass within a yard from the point where he stood, fairly rooted to the spot, and, if it should swerve a single hair's breadth in his direction, the plunging iron hoofs would crush him.

With a white, determined face, he wound his left arm firmly around the trunk of a tree, and stood calmly waiting for the bride of the infuriated steed with his strong right arm as it plunged past him.

The few seconds that passed as he awaited the terrible instant seemed the length of eternity.

He realized but too well that upon his agility and strength hung this lovely young creature's life.

Nearer, nearer, dashed Satan, with his terrified burden—one brief instant later, he was abreast of the noble young hero.

And in that thrilling moment a strong hand grasped one of the rings attached to the bit.

There was a powerful lunge forward that nearly tore Percy Granville's strong right arm from its socket.

If his left arm had not been wound so firmly around the trunk of the tree, we should have had to record a tragedy; as it was, the powerful hand that held the ring of the bit brought Satan back upon his haunches; he had recognized a masterly hand, and the next instant he stood panting and quivering, but docile enough, by the roadside.

But in that backward plunge Gay had lost her balance, and would have fallen headlong from the saddle had not Percy loosened his grip from the horse, and held out his arms just in time to catch her.

That was there about that slim figure that swooped for one brief instant a dead weight against his heart, that made the blood course like fire through every fibre and vein of his whole being?

Involuntarily his arms tightened closely about her. Alas! why did not his heart warn him this was Little Gay—his lost bride?

She struggled out of his arms with a little low cry, and he was dimly aware that two dark terrified eyes were staring at him, burning their way down to his very heart, from behind the thick folds of the silvery veil.

The words of thanks died on her lips as she saw who it was to whom she owed her life.

"He would never have saved me had he known it was I," she thought bitterly.

What would she stammered out as she stood there, she could never afterward recall.

Percy lifted his straw hat with a low, deferential bow.

It was little wonder he did not recognize the strained, faltering voice, it was so unnatural; even Gay herself was startled by its quivering hollowness.

"Pray do not thank me," he said. "I should like to know, though, whom it is that I have had the pleasure of serving."

He handed her his card as he spoke, hoping she would give him her own in exchange. It never occurred to him to be untrue to Evelyn, his fiancée, even in thought, but, in the presence of this bewitching creature before him, he quite forgot her.

"I have no card with me," said Gay, confusedly, drawing the thick veil still further down over her face, much to Percy's regret. "I—I am Mr. Remington's adopted daughter, of No. — Gramercy Park."

Before Percy could utter the ejaculation of astonishment that rose to his lips, the groom, who had fortunately followed Gay, dashed up, taking in the situation of affairs at a single glance as he beheld the broken reins; he had picked up Gay's riding-whip fully half a mile back.

Percy had just time to say:

"I will call some day this week at your home if I may be permitted to do so. Your father and my uncle were staunch old friends for long years, Miss Remington. Surely you do not intend to ride that animal home!" he cried in alarm as Gay made a movement to remount her horse. "If I implore you not to do so—let me send you a coach."

Gay uttered a little reckless laugh, that was half a sob. His opposition made her all the more determined to ride the fiery animal home, and he was obliged to see

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her depart, the frightened groom following close at her heels.

Gay never saw the green park, the shrubs and leafy trees on that homeward ride.

"He begs his own invitation to call upon the great banker's heiress," she thought, with bitter pride, "while he scorns the poor little bride he wooed and won on the impulse of the moment. When he calls at the house I will confront him and charge him with the cruelty of breaking my heart. Oh, why should I love him so," she sobbed, tears filling her eyes so thickly that she could not see where her horse was going; "seeing him again adds new fuel to the old love; why can I not learn to forget him or die?"

That afternoon Percy wrote a long letter to Evelyn, and unconsciously it was filled up with the subject he had so much at heart—the lovely young girl whom he had aided in the park.

The girl's voice haunted him like some half-forgotten melody.

Evelyn St. Clair's heart was on fire with jealousy as she read it and she ground her teeth with impotent rage.

"It would be just like him to fall in love with that girl," she muttered, "and I should have just such a time in separating them as I had with that miserable Gay Esterbrook, with her pretty gypsy-like face and baby ways."

"What's a betrothal to me, now-a-days—or marriage, either, as for that matter," she went on, pacing her boudoir excitedly. "Why, I have read of men leaving their brides at the very altar! Yes, one must marry them quick to be even half sure of them."

Suddenly a brilliant idea occurred to Evelyn St. Clair.

She had known the old banker and his wife well, when they used to visit years before at Redstone Hall.

Why not go to the city and pay them a short visit, with the clever object in view of seeing this pretty girl for herself, and giving her to understand she was not to fall in love with the fair-haired, handsome hero of the park adventure for he was already betrothed to herself?

"I will see this girl before Percy does," she concluded triumphantly, "and prevent anything like an attachment from springing up between them."

The next afternoon a coach stopped before Banker Remington's palatial home, a tall, elegant blonde, robed in violet silk and in the very height of fashion, emerged from it and ran lightly up the marble steps, and touched the silver bell.

She handed her card to the servant who answered the summons, requested to see Mrs. Remington, and was shown into the spacious drawing-room.

Evelyn St. Clair, for it was she, had not long to wait.

A moment later there was a swift, hurrying footstep in the corridor without, that stopped before the door.

CHAPTER XXV.

The footsteps ceased abruptly as they reached the drawing-room door; a little white hand drew aside the amber plush hangings, and a slender girlish figure stood in the doorway.

Evelyn turned around; then the smile on her blonde face changed into an expression of the greatest terror.

She sprang to her feet with a hoarse cry.

"Gayne! Esterbrook!" she gasped. "What in the world are you doing here?"

Gay raised her dark eyes to Evelyn's perturbed face.

"I am Mr. Remington's adopted daughter now," she said simply. "May I ask what you are doing here, Miss St. Clair?"

The answer had almost taken the haughty heiress' breath away; but quick as a

flash of lightning a course of action presented itself to her—she would make friends with Gay at all hazards.

She held out her white, jeweled hands with a dazzling smile.

"I will tell you what brought me here," she said sweetly. "I was passing in a coupe yesterday, and I saw a face that almost took my breath away at one of the windows. Can that possible be Gay Esterbrook? I asked myself, and I could not rest until I came here to find out. I am so glad that it is really you."

Gay looked at Miss St. Clair in wonder. "We did not part in friendship," she said slowly; "for that reason I cannot understand why you should feel so interested in me."

"I never meant what I said to you that night in the heat of anger, Little Gay," she answered artfully. "Please forgive me, won't you? I did not mean any harm in locking you in my boudoir; I wanted to keep you with me; I was distressed beyond all measure when I found you had fled from me, gone none knew whither. You might have had such a splendid home with me."

Alas for the artlessness and implicit confidence of inexperienced girlhood!

Before beautiful, treacherous Evelyn St. Clair had been in Gay's presence half an hour she had succeeded completely in ingratiating herself in Gay's confidence, and convincing her against her better judgment that she had misjudged her in the past.

With the skill of a fend, or the deadly serpent that charms a fluttering dove, she had persuaded Gay into an exchange of confidence, and our poor, unsuspecting little heroine had given the heiress a faithful account of her movements from the time she left her roof that night, up to the present moment—of her meeting with Harold Tremaine that night, and her abduction; of her imprisonment in the lone brick house on the river road—her subsequent escape—how she fell, weak and exhausted, by the roadside, and awoke to consciousness finding that she had been ill for long weeks, and had been taken care of in the elegant home of the Leightons.

Evelyn St. Clair scarcely breathed as she listened.

"It was during that illness that I lost all my dark hair," continued Gay, "and this fair hair that changed my appearance so, grew instead."

When Gay mentioned the cause of her being turned away from Leighton Hall because she had gone to the grand ma-ball as the fairy queen uninvited—Evelyn St. Clair's excitement knew no bounds; as she remembered she had disturbed a tete-a-tete with this same fairy queen and Percy Granville in the conservatory that night.

"You saw Mr. Granville there, that night," said Evelyn, searching Gay's face keenly—"you spoke to him—tell me, did he not know you?"

"No," replied Gay, faintly, "there were reasons why I did not make myself known to him—we met and parted as strangers."

Not even to Evelyn would Gay tell the story of that romantic marriage in the old stone church; that must remain a dead secret between herself and Percy until he chose to reveal it.

Gay finished her recital by telling Evelyn that only yesterday she had met Percy Granville, for the second time, and he had saved her life in the park—yet he had not recognized her on account of the thick veil she wore at the time, and the difference in the color of her hair.

Evelyn St. Clair could have cried out in triumph as she listened to that.

The entrance of Mrs. Remington at this juncture precluded all further exchange of confidence.

(To be continued.)

CHAPTER XXVI.

Gay had been long months amid her new surroundings; she was the very light and life of the grand old house, each day she was growing more like the saucy, impetuous, wilful Gaynell of old.

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