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CHAPTER XXIV.

When Betty returned in Heron's company to Revels worth House in search of Victor, the latter was not to be found.

Upstairs and down-stairs Betty ran to look for him, and she even went to the length of tapping at Mrs. Harold's door and asking through the key-hole whether Victor had been there. Receiving a reply in the negative in the Italian woman's thin sweet voice, Betty went thoughtfully down stairs again. Ever since the reading of that letter from the late Mrs. Revels worth's correspondent in Rome, Betty had avoided visiting the invalid unless absolutely forced by courtesy to do so, and then made her visits as brief as possible. With the knowledge she possessed that this woman, whoever she was, was only masquerading as Francesca's mother, a strong distrust of the old Italian's cunning ways and flattering speeches had grown up in Betty's mind, and a feeling of repulsion stole over her whenever "Mrs. Harold," as she was called, addressed a remark to her, or fixed upon her the piercing gaze of her keen black eyes.

She did not therefore attempt to enter Mrs. Harold's room, but went slowly down-stairs, lost in perplexing thought.

"I hope—I do hope that Victor isn't in there with that dreadful old woman!" she said to herself. "But I never can believe one word that either she or Francesca says."

It seemed far more probable that Victor, in his present state of feverish impatience, had grown tired of waiting for Betty, who had been detained for some time by Mrs. O'Meara, and had started off for Walton alone.

Inquiries at the water's edge and at the Hampton boat-house elicited the fact that every boat had been requisitioned, some time quite recently; but as Victor's appearance was not well known, and as Betty could not identify him from the description of the various men who had hired boats within the past hour, she finally had to give up the search for her cousin in despair, and allow Heron to row her in the direction of Walton, where she hoped to exchange a few words with Dudley before he should be able to re-enter Revels worth House, and hoped also to overtake his brother.

However, in both respects Miss Mannington was doomed to disappointment. Stare as she might with eager inquiry at the occupants of each passing boat, she could find no one in the least resembling Victor, nor, in the crush of pleasure-craft assembled to see the fireworks, could she identify the punt containing Dudley and Francesca.

Miss Revels worth had thoroughly enjoyed her day. To lie at ease on silken cushions beneath a sky of cloudless sunshine, with the eyes of dozens of good-looking young Englishmen in flannel, fixed admiringly upon her lovely face and figure, displayed to full advantage by her graceful recumbent attitude, to land and lunch excellently if not extravagantly at a riverside hotel, to watch with lazy pleasure and gaily-colored animated scene around her, the bright tints of the dresses and sunshades of the "river girls," and of the awnings and cushions which adorned several of the craft, to note here and there the picturesque effect of a snow-white, ruddy brown, or crimson sail against the glistening water and verdant-clad banks, to listen to the plash of the sculls, the clatter and laughter, and the tinkling of banjos—all these things were very grateful to Francesca, and, more than that, the companionship of Dudley Revels worth helped to make her thoroughly happy.

From under half-closed eyelids she watched each quick, strong movement of his athletic frame as he manipulated the punt-pole.

How handsome he was, she thought, how manly and vigorous in appearance, and how unlike those two other men she had at different times thought she cared for. How could she ever have loved any other man who was not taller than herself, or who did not possess curly brown hair and deep-blue eyes under long black lashes, and a square jaw with a suggestion of hardness about it?

Those two other faces—the sleepy-eyed, olive-skinned Italian singer and the fair effeminate English aristocrat—came back to her mind, to be dismissed with contempt when compared with the punn before her. And they had yielded so readily, while this one held out against her, fought down the passion she did her utmost to strengthen, put his will in opposition to hers, and so far held his own, though not without difficulty.

"But he shall be mine!" she whispered to herself, as she looked up at him with shining blue eyes under her gay-colored Japanese sunshade. "He must be mine! I really love him! I feel faint with longing to throw my arms round his fine, firm neck, and nestle against his broad chest and kiss his beautiful determined lips. And, when once that sickly mawkish Victor is out of the way, my task ought not to be difficult!"

It was difficult even to make Dudley look at her long when they were alone together. He seemed to prefer to comment laughingly upon the effect of her beauty upon others than to feast his own eyes upon it, and when at length as the day drew to a close, the magnetism of her continued gaze attracted him, she smiled rather satirically as he looked down at her.

"Why do you smile?" she asked. "What are you thinking of?" "I was thinking of a line of Swinburne's which exactly applies to you, but it isn't very complimentary, so perhaps I had better not quote it."

"I have no doubt they would soon grow hard again," Dudley returned, looking quickly away from her, which action Francesca interpreted as a confession of weakness.

"Well, the lines were not so very uncomplimentary," she said, after a pause. "I am not at all offended."

"Ah, but they get worse as they go on to describe the 'cruel red mouth like a venomous flower!'"

"And does that apply to me?" she asked, sitting up to look at him with an enchanting smile upon her lips. "Is my mouth cruel?"

"Not more cruel than you are," said "I—I cruel? Dudley, explain yourself!"

"You know perfectly well what I mean," the young man returned. "You are breaking my brother's heart with your coquetries. And he is the best and dearest fellow living!"

"But I don't coquet with him. You know that. You know that I have refused to marry him again and again. What more can I do? Would you have me marry him when I am in love with another man?"

"Well, it's horrible to see the way in which you take it to heart. His mother will scarcely recognize him when she welcomes him to-morrow."

"If indeed Vernon thinks he is strong enough to go. I've made up my mind upon one point—I shall go with him, and shall not leave him until he is safe with the little mother."

Francesca gave him a strange look. "I think you are quite right," she said. "Indeed I have hoped all the time you would go with him to take care of him; though Betty and I will be very dull without you both. And, Dudley, have you noticed that Betty has changed towards me lately?"

"She certainly doesn't seem quite so affectionate as she used to be," Dudley replied, with some hesitation. "But I don't think it is fair to judge her just now. She has never been quite the same since aunt Margaret's death. She will take a long time getting over such a shock, coming on the top of that ghost-seeing fit. But I hope she will get over it, and be her bright sunny little self again before long. I am very fond of that child."

"Fond of her," murmured Francesca, softly—"yes, but not in the way she would like, you see!"

"What on earth do you mean?" he asked, flushing and knitting his brows.

"Surely you must see that the dear child fancies herself in love with you, and that but for that she would marry that nice young Irishman?"

"What abominable nonsense! I beg pardon, Francesca, but it really makes me angry to hear you say anything so silly! There isn't much truth in that love-sick maid about that dear, energetic, unselfish little Betty!"

"How dense you men are! Now a woman would know the child's secret in a moment merely by seeing the way in which she looks at you."

"If you please," Dudley said very coldly, "we will not allude to this mistaken idea of yours again."

"Some men would like to hear that a pretty and charming girl was in love with them."

"Some men are conceited cads! I think we shall see the fireworks very well from here. Ah, there goes the first rocket! It's time to light our Chinese lanterns."

Lines of thin rope, attached to upright staves, had been arranged along the sides of the punt, and swinging herefrom were many bright-colored lanterns. Owing to Mrs. Revels worth's recent death, the young men had not entered for the boat-decorating competition, nor did their boats take part in the illuminated procession; but Francesca had pleaded for "just a few lanterns," and, as usual, she had had her way.

The evening wore on, bright lights and music everywhere, the showers of artificial fire breaking upon the silver-spangled sky almost with a desecrating touch. Or, at least, so it seemed to Dudley, into whose heart the gentle melancholy inseparably from a lovely evening on the river began to steal.

The day had died in splendor, flooding the boat-loads of chattering and laughing revellers with a crimson radiance, and the night air was full of a still peacefulness. A strange foreboding crept into Dudley Revels worth's heart as he looked up from the face of the beautiful woman reclining upon the silken cushions at his feet, with the light from the lanterns reflected in her jewel-like eyes, to the solemn beauty of the evening sky, stained now and again with gold and crimson streaks of artificial fire.

Something new, something terrible, he felt was taking place, some awful misfortune was rushing upon one dear to him. That was it, warning which the night breeze bore to him, and suddenly, without any preamble, he put his fears into words.

"Francesca, we must go home! Something is the matter with Victor. He is ill—he wants me—I am sure of it!"

He was surprised and touched by the feeling his cousin showed. Raising himself upon her elbow, she stared at him for a moment with dilated eyes and a face from which all color had fled.

"Oh, how can you possibly know?" she faltered. "He seemed so much better when we left home—"

"He is worse now," Dudley interrupted, almost curtly. "Oh, Victor and I are like the Corsican Brothers in that. I intuitively know when any great misfortune threatens him: I am sorry to cut short your pleasure, Francesca; but we must go home at once!"

Already he was vigorously using his punt-pole and making his way from among the clustering boats. Francesca did not attempt to detain him, but remained for some moments in silence. When she spoke again, it was in accents tremulous with feeling.

"Dear, dear Victor," she murmured—"I would not for the world that any harm should come to him! I have been hoping so much from his journey to his mother! So often, in cases of consumption—"

"Consumption!" "Yes, surely you know he was in consumption? I don't think Doctor Vernon has any doubt upon the subject. And Victor himself told me that several members of his mother's family were consumptive."

"Did he? That is curious! Certainly he had an uncle, his mother's brother, who caught a fatal chill—"

"Exactly. But I can't help thinking that, if we get Victor safely over to his mother, he will be saved. This is only a sudden superstitious fancy, born of your natural affection and anxiety for his safety, as you will find when we get home. I have little doubt that our dear Victor is at this moment wholly free from pain."

"Pray Heaven he is!" murmured Dudley, half to himself.

Long afterwards he remembered these words of Francesca's—remembered them with a heart which contracted in horror and loathing. But at the time he was touched by her tender speeches, by her reiterated expressions of anxiety to get back to dear Victor as fast as possible, and by her sympathetic silence, as though she feared to trouble him with trivial talk on indifferent subjects when she knew that his thoughts were with his beloved brother.

Sunbury and Molesey locks were passed in the gathering night, lit by a crescent moon which cast a shimmering line along the middle of the stream, while the banks loomed darkly in contrast. And, as the punt passed out of Molesey Lock in company with a few other boats, gaily bedecked with flowers and lanterns and full of happy young people of both sexes, a strange thing happened.

Just where the main body of the stream joins the broad backwater that flows below Queen Elizabeth's red-roofed stables—at the identical spot where, three hundred years before, the stiffened corpse of Mistress Catherine Fenfold was found, in bedraggled bravery of yellow brocade and pearl-decked hair, floating on the tide with her broken heart stilled for ever in death, a crouching figure, whether of man or woman they could not tell, stretched out appealing hands and arms across the water, and a cry, tang out—a cry of human agony—

"Francesca—Francesca!" The despairing cry silenced the gay chattering revellers in the boats and struck an awful fear into Dudley's heart.

"It was your name!" he whispered hoarsely to his cousin.

"No—no!" she cried, springing up in the boat, almost as if she were in pain. "It is impossible! There is no pathway along there—it is private property. What are you doing?"

With that awful cry still ringing in his ears, Dudley was making strenuous efforts to reach the spot whence it had seemed to proceed. But the form he had dimly seen was gone, and, although he passed with the punt closely along the banks, calling his brother's name, no answer was returned to him.

"Oh, Dudley," sobbed Francesca, as with a face blanched and distorted by terror, she bent towards him, "for Heaven's sake, take me home! I cannot bear it—the shock of that terrible scream we thought we heard—"

"Thought we heard!" "Yes—it was nothing real. It came from a fearful rustling thing that haunts our house. It was here she was found—don't you remember?—floating in the stream on a winter morning cold and dead. Ah! Mon Dieu, what is that?"

"I see nothing."

"Nothing! But I see!" she almost screamed, with a burst of hysterical laughter. "There—there—close to our boat—the white face floating! The saints protect me! Dudley, Dudley—"

Francesca had sprung erect in the boat, and then had fallen, half swooning at his feet; but for the moment he had forgotten her. An icy terror held his heart fast and seemed to paralyze his hands.

For his eyes had followed hers, and there, floating upon the stream just beyond his reach, with white anguished face and blind eyes staring up into the night, was the dead body of his brother.

CHAPTER XXV.

"Sad Fatality at Molesey"—that was what the newspapers called it; and "Inquest Drowned" was the verdict at the inquest which was of necessity held on Victor Revels worth's body.

Out of respect for the family, the proceedings were brief and formal. Doctor Vernon's evidence amply proved the weak state of health and nerves of his patient; no one had seen him leave the house, and it was surmised that, in a feverish and light-headed condition, he had wandered to the water's edge, and, slipping in, had been drowned.

Francesca's grief was absolutely frantic in its first demonstrations. When she and Dudley discovered Victor's body, she had herself helped to lift it into the punt, and, after vainly trying to chafe the cold hands back to warmth and life, she had cast herself in an abandonment of grief upon the corpse; and, while Dudley stared down at her in tearless despair, she had adroitly contrived to extract from the dead man's breast-pocket its contents, including a folded note and a tiny jewelled bonbonniere. These last she retained, doubtless in reverent memory of the dead.

Betty Mannington, for all her tender heart, when she learned the dreadful news on her return home, showed some of the effusive grief which characterized Francesca, and mechanically produced from her pocket the missing key of the young men's rooms. No

tear fell from her eyes when, half an hour later, the maid Susan, sobbing, led her into the darkened chamber where Victor's body lay in the massive curtained bed he had been wont to occupy. Francesca was there already, kneeling by the bedside, a most dignified and tragic figure, with her golden head lowered, and clad in long black draperies. She rose on Betty's entrance and came towards her, tears shining in her eyes.

But Betty shrank back, and thrust out her hands to hold her off.

"Please don't speak to me or touch me," she whispered. "I can't bear it just now."

It was but natural, of course, that these successive shocks should have unnerved a girl of Betty's sensitive and affectionate nature; but Francesca looked at her oddly before she resumed her picturesque kneeling attitude.

Dudley, on his part, was little more accessible in his grief than Betty.

His love for his step-brother had been almost paternal, although but a few years lay between them, and he recalled again and again with poignant sorrow the sunny and unselfish sweetness of Victor's disposition, his frankness and high spirits, and his tender devotion to his mother and himself. Remembering him as he used to be, Dudley felt for the moment that he absolutely hated Francesca for having come between them, and for having excited so passionate and so disastrous a love and longing in Victor's heart.

"If he hadn't met that woman, he would be alive now," he told himself. "Vernon says he must have been half-dying when he fell into the river, or, being so good a swimmer, he would have managed to have saved himself. Half-dying! And I was out, letting the woman he loved make love to me! I cannot forgive myself or her!"

After the funeral, on a dull wet August afternoon, with autumn already in the air, when the Revels worth vault was reopened so that Victor's remains might lie near those of his aunt Margaret, Dudley came back to the darkened house with bent head and bowed shoulders, feeling as if he had buried his youth with his brother.

The streaks of silver in his curly hair had multiplied during the past few dreadful days and contrasted strangely with his ruddy skin. The thought which oppressed him like a nightmare was that the little mother must still be told. And how should he tell her?

He had already telegraphed to her that illness would defer his brother's visit; but how should he break the truth to her? In her present state of health it would be doubly dangerous—for that she would be heart-broken by such a blow as the sudden and tragic death of her firstborn son he knew well. All that he could do would be to cross to France as speedily as possible, and coquet with her husband how he should best break the evil tidings to her.

He let himself into the house and passed up-stairs to his room. Locking the door, he sought some relief for his feelings by pacing restlessly up and down, and, while so engaged, his attention was attracted by a slight sound on the other side of the door, and he perceived a folded note being inserted beneath it.

It was from Francesca, he instantly decided, with a monetary feeling of irritation—Francesca, whom he had scarcely seen or spoken to since his brother's death. He had purposely avoided her, taking his infrequent meals at the house of Doctor Vernon, who, seeing and pitying the young man's silent agony, had insisted upon taking him home with him, Mrs. Vernon being absent at the seaside.

But now he had returned home, and after that journey to Paris he must take up the threads of life at Hampton Court again—must face the woman whose dangerous beauty had worked such havoc in his brother's mind, and must meet and strive to comfort little Betty—Betty who had nerved herself to tend the dead with gentle reverent hands, and whose pitying lips had been the last to touch Victor's ice-cold brow.

He found himself wishing, in his present state of nervous prostration, that he could have had Betty with him to impart the dreadful news to Victor's mother. Betty was so tactful and so kind. She always knew what to say and what to leave unsaid. She was so like the little mother, and the two would be such friends. Thinking thus, he half absently stooped to pick up and open the folded note, and, to his surprise, he found it was from Betty herself!

"Dear Dudley," it began—"I feel sure you will be going to France to tell the terrible news to my mother. You cannot write it. But before you go I must see you alone, and not in this house"—(the words were heavily underlined)—"I have very much to say to you—things it will grieve me terribly to tell and you to hear. But they must be told, and told at once. I am going now to lock my room-door and slip out at the back of the house to the Palace gardens. There I will walk up and down Queen Mary's Walk until you come. I pray to Heaven you will not fall me, for I have a dreadful responsibility weighing upon my mind, and, until you advise me, I cannot tell what I ought to do."

Betty Mannington.

The contents of this note filled Dudley with astonishment. The tone of tragedy and of mystery which it breathed was so utterly unlike all he knew of the writer that he could hardly believe his eyes as they rested upon the signature. The elaborate precautions which she meant to take to escape observation, and the heavy underlining of the injunction "not in this house" especially puzzled him. Such a request, coming from her, was not to be disregarded, and, little as he felt inclined for talk, even with so sympathetic a companion as Betty, he was careful to leave her only sufficient time to arrive at the rendezvous before hastening to another himself.

It was on a Friday, the one day upon which the Palace is not open to the public, and the weather being bad, the grounds were woefully deserted save for an occasional official, Queen Mary's Walk, with its roof of interlaced branches, beneath which traditions tell that James Stuart's royal daughter wandered up and down in the long absences of her soldier-husband, offered at least a protection from rain, drizzling rain; and, at the other end of the long green archway, as he entered it, Dudley beheld the little girlish form

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