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AN ANGEL OF EVIL.

A Story of Intense Interest in which a Beautiful but Unscrupulous Woman's Schemes are Made to Fall by the Man She Loves.

CHAPTER XXIX.
"She knew nothing of it! Don't tell her! She is innocent! She will never forgive me!"

That was all in the nature of a confession or an explanation which could be wrested from Dudley's captive. He had not even asked so much as that, but had contented himself with securing her hands behind her back with a knotted handkerchief, and, after leading her to her room and placing her in her invalid-chair, he had tied her feet together and fastened her securely with blindfold, which he had cut down for that purpose.

The old woman had pretended paralysis and helplessness long enough—she should taste the reality now. As Dudley turned to leave the room without deigning to address one word to her, she broke into a volley of curses in her native tongue. At the door he stopped to look at her.

A light was burning brightly by the mantelpiece, and showed him a figure of such grotesque hideousness that, but for the seriousness of the situation and of the work which lay before him he felt he must have laughed aloud.

In her torn and crumpled gown of yellow brocade, with a limp ruff dangling round her skinny throat, and an absurd golden wig hanging among her unkempt hair, this little, ugly, evil-looking woman, crouching in the chair with her feet tied together beneath it, spitting curses at him in a foreign tongue, looked like nothing in the world but one of the nondescript figures carried about in derision by English boys on the fifth of November.

As Dudley looked at her, his face must have shown something of the feeling with which she inspired him for she suddenly stopped cursing, and addressed him in English in tones that were almost humble.

"You are not going to her, are you? You will not bring her here? Ah, do what you like to me, signor, but do not let me face her!"

Dudley looked at her, frowning with disgust, but did not vouchsafe one word in reply. With his hand upon the handle of the door, he turned, again to her.

"I suppose it is useless to expect any thing but lies from you," he said sternly. "But why did you want to kill me as well as the others?"

"So that Francesca should have all the money, and so that she should not marry you," the woman answered promptly. "What are you going to do to me?"

"Lock you in here until I send for the police," he answered laconically. "Later on you will be tried and hanged."

"To that the woman answered not a word; and he drew the key from the inside of the door and, passing out in to the passage, locked her in and thrust the key into his pocket.

There was still Francesca to be faced. But he felt strong enough for any or deal, and, going to her door, he tapped sharply upon the panels.

"I have something to say to you," he called to his cousin. "You must get up and dress and come down-stairs and hear it."

"I have been deceived for a long time," Francesca answered from the other side of the door. "I was disturbed by a noise in the next room, and I have been trying to get out and calling for some one to unfasten the door. I am locked in."

If she had indeed called for help Dudley certainly had not heard her. But she was speaking the truth about the key. It had been turned in the lock by her foster-mother, and Dudley remembered to have heard her withdraw it and insert it again before she drew it into his own room on her deadly errand.

He turned the key in the lock and stepped aside to let Francesca come out. There was no light in the passage, but he was enabled by the light of the moon to see that she was dressed in a clinging garment of soft black crepe with here and there a gleam of silver among its folds, that her white neck shone through the diaphanous drapery of the material, and that her magnificent hair flowed loosely over her shoulders, caught together with a comb surmounted by a diamond crown.

Francesca stood still for a moment looking at him.

"You want to speak to me, Dudley dear," she said sweetly. "Where shall we talk?"

"In the billiard-room," he answered shortly, and strode thither in front of her without a glance behind him. As he was lighting the gas, she laid her hand upon his arm.

"Not in here," she said pleadingly with a little shudder. "It is so cold and bare and chill and unfriendly!"

"I have nothing friendly to say to you," he returned harshly. "This room will do as well as any other."

"Please—I must have my own way in this!—I am demured with that half-thought," she demurred, with that half-caressing, half-impulsive accent he knew so well. "Even if we are going to be unfriendly, we will be unfriendly comfortably. Come to my little room!"

Without waiting for his assent she moved before him in her trailing black garments towards the room she had furnished on the same floor, and directed him to light the lamp of ruby glass suspended by silver chains from the ceiling, the wax candles attached to scones on the wall, and the tall lamp under an amber shade, which stood near her tapestry-frame in the farther corner of the room.

Dudley chafed over the delay and what seemed to him the ridiculous trifling at such a moment. But, when, having carried out her directions, she turned to face her, he understood her reason for giving them.

She had curled herself among the silken cushions piled upon the window-seat, and, as she gazed at him with brilliant blue eyes, half sitting, half

reclining, resting her cheek upon her white arm, round which the enamelled snake bracelet clung, she looked more beautiful than he had ever seen her yet—the living embodiment of a great Florentine painter's dream.

He had never seen her hair unbound before. He had never thought such hair could grow on a woman's head, wave after wave of perfumed silk, in color varying from a reddish-brown to the purest gold. It rippled about her, over the yellow silk cushions, over her arms and shoulders, gleaming white through sleeves of black crepe, and it even lay, when she bent her head, like a carpet of feathers upon the floor.

Hair to her knees, smelling so sweetly, and eyes blue and clear as at child's, and a figure every curve of which was perfection in its full womanly grace, and a skin like a pale-pink peach-rose, soft and smooth as a woad to the touch, and under it—oh, the pity of it!—a soul hard and callous and cruel!

So Dudley thought as he looked down at her with pale set face and eyes in which no charm of hers could light one spark of passion again.

"Why don't you sit down, Dudley?" she inquired at last. "You look so fearfully serious standing there! And, besides, you must be tired after all that traveling."

CHAPTER XXX.

Dudley bent his head.

"You are perfectly free," he said coldly. "To make what statements you please. They will not alter the course of conduct I am resolved to follow."

"You mean," she said, with a touch of scorn, "that, having decided with your confederate Betty that I am guilty of all manner of unheard-of crimes, you don't intend to listen to anything I may have to say?"

"I am listening."

"Where are your proofs, then?" she burst out passionately, coming close to him. "By what right do you dare to connect me with the death of heart-disease of aunt Margaret, or with the death by drowning of your brother Victor?"

"Your foster-mother, as you know perfectly well, murdered them both. Creeping into my aunt's room in the ghost disguise, she killed her; then, secreting herself in the haunted room, by means of a removable panel, she dropped her infernal decoction into the cooling drink you prepared for my brother. To-night she made an attempt to poison me; but, luckily, I was on my guard and expected her."

"And do you mean to say," she asked, coming closer still to him, so that she almost touched him, "that, knowing as you do that I was locked into my room, you imagined that I was privy to the attempt—if there was such an attempt—to poison you?"

Dudley drew back, distressed against his will by her sudden pallor, the quivering of her lips, and the tears that had started to her eyes.

"I have not accused you of that," he answered.

"Then what do you accuse me of?"

"Why go through it again?" he asked wearily. "A fortnight was left between us three Revelsworths. Presumably your idea in bringing this wretched creature with you was to employ her to murder your co-heir, and claim the entire property as your own next year; or to kill one of us and marry the other, though you were rather averse from such an arrangement, being already married."

"Married?"

"Yes. No more lies on that subject are necessary. As this hour yesterday I was in Paris with your husband, and heard from him the entire story of your married life."

"He told you?"

"And you believe the word of such a creature as that against mine?"

"I believe neither him nor you. But his story is the more credible, and I have not tested his powers of lying as I have yours."

"Dudley," Francesca cried, and suddenly clasped her hands, "how can you be so hard? You love me—you were going to marry me—"

"That was a trick to throw you off your guard, and to make that creature of yours show her hand!" he interrupted.

Francesca stared at him with dilated eyes for a moment, and then suddenly cast herself upon his breast, twining her arms about him, laying her beautiful head upon his shoulder, and murmuring softly to him with warm lips that touched his neck.

"Dudley, Dudley, say it is not true—say you are doing this to try me! I am innocent of everything—I have no control over that woman! She is my foster-mother, and she adores me; she cannot live out of my sight; she has been with me all my life, and I have nothing but pity for her! I love you, and if she did indeed try to murder you or your brother, it was her crazy jealousy that prompted her, because she feared lest I might marry one of you. She has been the only person in the world that cared for me, dear; I could not turn her away to starve. And she knew—that you cannot understand—that I love you—love you with all my soul! Even when you are hard and unkind to me, I love you, and when you speak cruelly to me, I long to kiss the words away upon your lips. Night after night I dream of you, and I awake thinking of you. I keep your portrait under my pillow like a little sick girl, and almost wear it away with kisses. Dudley, you don't know what a love like mine is! You love, you yourself, with your broad shoulders and cold blue eyes and soft curly hair. If you had not a farthing in the world, if you were a beggar in the street, I should love you just the same way, and I love for your love. In return, and quiver

at your touch, and feel my heart leap at the sound of your voice as it is leaping now!"

She gripped his hand convulsively and pressed it against her heart, so that he could feel its rapid beating.

Her passionate tenderness, the gentle accent of her voice, her beautiful blue eyes shining up at him through tears almost unmanly him, and it was only by a supreme effort of will that he remained cold and impressive under her caresses.

"From what I have learned of your career," he said, "you are liable to these sudden freaks of passion—of what you call love. But I have no desire to be married, and then poisoned by you or your fostermother when you tire of me as you tired of your two former husbands."

Francesca sprang from him her cheeks glowing with anger.

"Is that what you were told?" she exclaimed. "Were you told also that I, a child of sixteen, fearless and motherless, was lured from my home by a man so base and vile that, once having made me his wife, he not only forced me, Francesca Revelsworth, with blows and curses to work and drudge for him, but he would have had me encourage rich men to pay me court that he might profit by their admiration? Do you know what a life I have led and what men I have known? Do you wonder if I have grown to scorn them? But for my foster-mother I should have died under my first husband's brutal treatment when he found I would not stoop to obey him. But, when I was ill and almost heart-broken with the misery of the life and disgust of the wretch I had married, she came and nursed me and tended me. A little later the man died, and I was rid of him."

"He died—poisoned—you own it, then?"

"I do not own it," Francesca said, shrugging her shoulders impatiently. "I know nothing of it. It all happened nine years ago. But of what value was a life like such as mine? If you saw a venomous reptile blocking your path, would you not crush it?"

"You poisoned him?" he repeated, aghast at her callousness.

"I sent for my foster-mother," she returned, with sudden fire, "and showed her upon my arms and neck black bruises made by this cur, who was starving me because he could not break my self respect and my pride! She promised to free me from him—I did not ask how—and he died. Would you have me pretend to be sorry?"

"No," he answered slowly—"I would not have you pretend anything. I want you, at this one last interview, to tell the truth, if you can."

"Our last interview?" she faltered.

"Yes, I intend this very day," he winced as he spoke—"to apply for an order to exhume the bodies of my brother and my aunt, that they may be examined for any trace of poison. If any is found, there will be a warrant issued for your arrest as well as your foster-mother's, who will be already in custody on a prior charge of attempting to murder me!"

"You would do this?" Francesca cried. "Have you considered the scandal the disgrace?"

"The disgrace?" will fall upon the heads that merit it!" Dudley said sternly. "My duty is to avenge my brother."

"And you think," she said softly, "that you can best avenge him, as you call it, by tormenting and disgracing me? You think that, if the dead can watch the living, as some think, it would please and gratify your brother to see me hounded down because of my foster-mother's crime, if crime it was? You think he would be happy if he could see me dragged to prison, or forced into a witness-box, to be brow-beaten and insulted and made to lay bare the story of my wretched life before a court filled with sneering and unfeeling strangers? You have told me that your brother would have given his life for me; and yet for his sake you are determined to treat me like this!"

"What did you expect if your guilt were discovered?" he asked. "What mercy did you hope to receive?"

"I do not ask for mercy, I do not own to guilt," she answered proudly. "But I looked for love and tenderness from you, loving you as I do, and believing that you loved me. I am your affianced wife, and you are, besides, my cousin, the only one to whom I should naturally look for protection. You can torture me, persecute me, hound me down with false accusations, blast my character in the eyes of the world—you can ruin my life and break my heart; but what can you prove? That my foster-mother, Margherita Spira, unknown to me, believing that she was serving my interests, attempted to poison my relatives, also that, on one occasion when you actually surprised her in the attempt, she had taken the precaution to lock me into my room lest I should interfere? Is it to you that that foolish and ignorant old woman will never dare to face me again now that I know she has tried to injure you? Have her seized and tried for it if you like—it is a matter of perfect indifference to me what becomes of her now—but the tortures of the rack would not drag from her one word which would incriminate me!"

"You will soon have every opportunity of proving your innocence before all the world," Dudley returned coldly. "You have also now had fair warning of what I mean to do, and if you wish to escape from this house to-night, I shall make no attempt to detain you. You are quite free to go."

He went to the door, and threw it open to emphasize his words. He was beginning to feel acutely the strain of this long interview with a woman whom he had every reason to distrust and hate, but to whose personal victory he could not be wholly indifferent. The mingled cunning and eloquence of her address had frequently appeared to put him in the wrong; and yet through all the charm she exercised over his senses, his reason vehemently asserted that he was in the right, and that this woman with the shining blue eyes and caressing voice was wholly evil, wholly

"You can go," he said again, and turned to look at her.

She sat upright among the cushions in the window-seat, her long hair shrouding her shoulders, her hands clasped firmly. Her face had grown very pale, and her lips were firmly

"All her life came before her as she sat there perfectly still—all her life of five-and-twenty years, with its constant vicissitudes, its kaleidoscopic changes from a palace to a garret, from the cheap lodgings of a fourth-rate singing-troupe to luxurious hotels and brightly-lighted gaming-tables, back to penury again, and then this last great chance of fortune, which she had played for and had lost.

From childhood, Francesca had craved for power and splendor—power especially—and the knowledge that she possessed a source of joy to her. Her passions were strong, but her will was stronger, and of all vices the one that chiefly dominated her was cruelty. The light would flash into her eyes and the warm blood would flush her cheeks at sight of a creature in mortal agony, and, as in the days of old her Roman ancestors had revelled in the fierce sports of the Forum, so Francesca set no value upon human life, and herself in perfect physical health, rejoiced at the sight of pain.

And this man before her, this man whom she loved after her fashion, knew her and understood her and hated her! She could not break his will, she could not dominate him, she could not even deceive him. So she sat and thought, and a sense of impotent fall-ace took possession of her.

She, beautiful splendid Francesca, who had thought to control a million of money and have this man at her feet until she tired of him—she would not crawl like a convict thief from this house in the cold dawn, leaving those two, Dudley and Betty, to triumph over her discomfiture. She would not go back to a life of shifts and discomfort, lacking even the selfish service of the creature who had reared her from her cradle. Dudley Revelsworth should at least have cause to remember her so long as he himself should live!

"I will go," she said at last, and her voice had a hollow far-away sound. "You shall never be troubled with me any more."

With her right hand she lifted the head of the enamelled snake which hung to her wrist.

"Will you say 'Good-bye' to me?" she asked gently.

"Good-bye!" Dudley said, and stood by the door, holding it open for her to pass out.

She did not move however; but looked at him with pleading eyes, which slowly filled with tears.

"Good-bye!" she murmured. "No more than that! And it is for the last time. And I have loved you! Dudley, look at me! If I go now and you never see me again on earth, just to show you I forgive me, will you not kiss me once?"

Francesca had risen and came a step nearer to him, her right hand clasped over her left wrist. She inclined her head a little towards him, her eyes gleaming, her lips slightly parted; but he drew back coldly.

"I do not forgive you," he said, and, as she made no movement, he turned to leave the room.

As he did so, a sound like a sob reached his ears. Francesca had sunk back in her old seat amid the cushions and was staring fixedly at him. Something strange and unnatural in her appearance arrested his attention. At first he thought she had fainted, and he was about to call for Betty's assistance, when, as he spoke to her and received no answer, he spoke with a sudden misgiving, he approached her, and touched her on the shoulder.

Francesca's head drooped forward heavily, and Dudley saw that her lips were compressed and her features drawn as though in a spasm of intense agony. There was no need to repulse her now. He laid her gently among the cushions, and endeavored to unclasp the rigid fingers which still clasped the head of the enamelled snake. Just beneath them two small dark punctures on the white skin told their own tale.

Dudley laid his handkerchief over her distorted face and agonized eyes, and smoothed her long bright hair. Then, with a heart full of pity and pain, he locked the door and left the dead woman alone.

At midsummer of the following year the settlement of the Revelsworth property took place, and the fortune, in pursuut of which two lives had been sacrificed, became the sole property of Dudley Revelsworth.

He, for his part, did not trouble to go forward and claim it, leaving the business to his lawyers. Ever since the distressing suicide of his cousin, to which it was reported that he had been obliged to be married, Dudley had avoided England, and had spent his time traveling in the North of Europe. After Francesca's funeral, Betty Marlington accepted a pressing invitation to stay with Madame Giles, the servants were paid off and Revelsworth House, with its ugly memories, was deserted, until a tenant was at length found for it in the person of an old gentleman with whom economy was a stronger factor than superstition.

Of that sinister figure which had haunted Dudley under the name of Mrs. Harold Revelsworth no trace was ever seen in the neighborhood again. Within a few hours of Francesca's death she was found to have disappeared, having freed herself from her bonds and with a cat-like agility escaped from the window of her room, as was proved by the torn and broken ivy and lattice-work beneath it.

It was unlikely that Dudley would take any steps to trace her; and, whether she contrived to make her way back to Italy, or whether she still hovers witchlike among the poor Italian colony in the neighborhood of Saffron Hill, is unknown to this day.

Within six months of the break-up of the Revelsworth House establishment, Mr. Welldon, senior, married Susan the parlormaid, and took with her an inn on the banks of the Thames, having been comfortably pensioned off by Dudley when the latter dispensed with his services.

"Inn-keeping is not what it was," Mr. Welldon has been heard to complain, "what with the spread of teetotalism and the police always ready to drop on a man if he gets out of waters the deer. And Susan is impudent and wasteful. But I had to have a woman of some sort to manage the business, and it's best to have one whose faults a man knows all about beforehand. It was a kindness to her, poor soul, since she had pined to all the young chaps at Hampton Court, and was nearing thirty! And she does know how to round on that punny of a son of

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