

ALEX. MCVEIGH MILLER

THEY LOOKED AND
LOVED; OR, WON BY
FAITH

Alex. McVeigh Miller

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Mrs. Alex McVeigh Miller

They Looked and Loved; Or, Won by Faith

CHAPTER I.

A WEB OF FATE

"I would sell my soul to Satan for a chest of gold!" cried a despairing voice.

It was a young girl who uttered the words. She was standing under a tree in Central Park, watching the equipages that rolled past in a constant stream. A handsome victoria, in which sat a golden-haired beauty, one of the famed Four Hundred of New York, had just whirled past, and the dust from the wheels had blown into the speaker's face, drawing those reckless words from her lips:

"I would sell my soul to Satan for a chest of gold!"

Of a truth, the girl was fair enough to have exchanged places with the regal woman in the carriage, for her face and form had been shaped in beauty's fairest mold, though the cheek was wan and pale from the pangs of grief and hunger, and the peerless form was draped in worn and shabby garments.

But the fires of pride and ambition burned brightly in the large Spanish-looking dark eyes, as the girl clasped her small ungloved hands together.

"Would you marry me?" asked a low, sneering voice in her ear.

She turned with a start of terror, and it appeared to her as if her reckless words had summoned the arch-fiend himself to her side.

The person who had addressed her was a horribly ugly and grotesque-looking old man.

He was at least sixty-five years of age, bent and stoop-shouldered, with features that were homely to the point of grotesqueness. His nose was large, his mouth wide, his small malevolent gray eyes peered beneath bushy red eyebrows supplemented by grizzled hair and whiskers of the same lurid color. His clothing was scrupulously neat, but well-worn and of cheap material.

"Would you marry me?" repeated this old man, and the beautiful girl gave a start of surprise not unmixed with fear.

"You—you—why, you are as poor as I am!" she gasped, her eyes roving over his shabby attire.

"Appearances are often deceitful, young lady. I look like a beggar, I know, and, truth to tell, I live like one, but I am rich enough to give you your heart's desire—a chest of gold. Did you ever hear of Charles Farnham, the miser?"

"Yes."

"I am Farnham, the miser, young lady, and for once I have a generous impulse. You are young, beautiful, and poor. I am old, ugly, and rich. In the world of fashion such marriages are not uncommon. Will you marry me?"

She gazed into his repulsive features, and shuddered.

"No, no, no!"

"You are very independent," he sneered. "What is your name? Where do you live?"

"My name is no concern of yours. My home will soon be—in—the—river!"

"What mean you, girl?"

"What I have just told you, sir. I am a poor and honest girl, out of work, penniless, and friendless, turned into the streets to-day to starve. Before nightfall I shall end my sorrows in the river."

"A girl with that beautiful face and form need never starve," returned the old miser, with a significant leer.

The pale, young face flushed to a burning crimson, and the large, dark eyes flashed angrily.

"I have been told that many times, sir, but I am an honest girl. I can die, but I cannot do wrong."

"It is too beautiful a day to die," returned the old miser, looking around him at the green grass and flowers and golden sunshine.

The park was crowded. There were throngs on foot, throngs in carriages. Beautiful women were plenty, but none of them could compare with the young girl standing there in the dust of their carriage-wheels talking to the old miser.

"Look at those handsome creatures in their magnificent carriages with liveried servants—look at their silks and jewels. Do you not envy them?" demanded Farnham. "You are more beautiful than they are. It is very foolish of you to drown yourself for lack of bread when I offer you wealth and splendor as my wife."

"But I could not love you. You are old—hideous—and I could not marry any one I did not love; I would rather die."

A fierce gleam came into the old man's eyes.

"You are the proudest pauper I ever saw, yet your very scorn makes you seem more desirable in my eyes," he exclaimed. "Come, give your consent to marry me, and you shall have one of the finest homes in New York—carriages, jewels, Paris dresses, opera-boxes, and an adoring husband. Would you not like all this?"

"All but the husband!" answered the girl frankly and sadly. "Oh, forgive me, sir, but your wealth would not make me happy if I had to live by your side."

"Yet you said just now that you would sell your soul to Satan for a chest of gold."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I—I spoke thoughtlessly, sir. I did not think that Satan would hear me," she murmured in an undertone.

The miser saw in her eyes a girlish scorn that maddened him; yet, strange to say, it made him more eager to possess this luring though scornful beauty. He stood gazing covetously at her, and suddenly she added archly:

"I have read stories about people who sold themselves to the devil; but you see they had a little respite first, and rather enjoyed life before he claimed them, but if I married you I should be signed, sealed, and delivered over at once to the enemy," and she laughed, a mocking, mirthless laugh, for, in truth, she was desperate with despair and misery.

"You are very complimentary," said her strange suitor, with a contortion of the lip that was a cross between a grin and a sneer. He had an angry longing to strike the beautiful face that looked at him with such defiant scorn, for the girl was as proud as she was poor, and she had her treasured love-dreams like all other young girls—dreams of a rich and handsome lover who might some day woo her for his bride.

Miser Farnham, with a frightful grimace, withdrew from her side, but remained close by, watching the lonely, desolate creature with keen, calculating gray eyes.

Something more than an hour went by, and as the brilliant pageant of wealth and fashion began to fade, the girl drew a long, shuddering sigh, and turned to leave the park. A jibing voice sounded in her ear:

"Are you going to the river now?"

The dark eyes, heavy now with despair, turned upon the face of the old man.

"Yes; I am going to the river," she replied, in a dull, dreary tone.

"Will you wait one moment, please?"

She stopped and looked at him in dull wonder, her face so pallid, her eyes so despairing, that he shuddered to meet them.

"You said just now that Satan always gave a respite to those whose souls he bought; I have pondered deeply over those words, and here is the result: I will give you a respite, if you will marry me. No, don't turn away so recklessly. I mean it, young lady. Marry me to-day, and I will not see you

again for a whole year. In the meantime you shall reign a queen in a palace; your life shall be a dream of delight. In my hand is the wand of the magician—gold—yellow gold—and I can accomplish all that I promise, and more! Think! A whole year of luxury, of pleasure, and in that time not one sight of my face. Can you turn from this to the dark, cold river? Surely, then, you must be mad!"

The girl stood like one rooted to the spot, her eyes dark, burning, eager. What was it he was offering? Wealth, ease, happiness—and she was homeless and starving. Her brain reeled; she trembled with excitement.

"A year," repeated old Farnham temptingly, "and in all that time I will not come near you. Only speak the word, and we will go now to a lawyer, I will have a marriage contract drawn, waiving all rights for one year from the date of marriage. Then we will be married. I will secure a chaperon and maid for you, and, leaving you in a home of luxury, take my departure until the months of your respite are over. Perhaps by then your gratitude to me will lead you to look on me with favor—if not, there is still the river"—leering wickedly.

Surely a stranger offer had never been made to a fair and homeless girl. It was romantic in some of its aspects, and it was tempting to the forlorn young creature. A gleam of piteous hope came into the large, sad eyes. A year or more of life, of ease, of comfort.

"No poor girl ever had such a chance before. Surely, you consent," continued the wily tempter.

"Yes, I consent," answered the girl, with stiff lips and unsmiling eyes.

"Good," uttered the miser, with a chuckle of satisfaction. He caught her small ungloved hand and pressed it with awkward gallantry. It was cold as a lump of ice, and fell stiffly from his clasp. Then she looked at him and spoke again, briefly and coldly:

"I am trusting fully in your promises," she said. "Remember, you must not play me false, or weak girl as I am, I shall know how to punish you."

"You can trust me, for I love you," he answered, in wheedling tones. "Come now, let us go at once to a lawyer. We can get a cab at the park gates."

She followed him away from the park, and when seated in the cab on their way to the lawyer's, he said:

"When the contract is drawn up, and we are married, the first thing will be to get you some clothing and jewels suitable for a beautiful young heiress. The next thing will be a chaperon. Well, I know an aristocratic woman, widowed and reduced to poverty, who will gladly take charge of you for the splendid salary and privileges she will get. She has one daughter, who will be a fitting companion for you. These two will make it possible for you to enter at once into the best society. You will be introduced to them as my ward, not as my wife. Then, with your chest of gold, you will enter upon a dazzling career. Your wealth and your beauty, and the prestige your chaperon will confer upon you, will enable you to dazzle the world of society and fashion. Does the picture please you?"

"I must be dreaming," answered the girl, passing her hand across her eyes in a bewildered fashion.

But the rest of the day seemed but a continuation of her dream. They went at once to a lawyer, who drew up the strange marriage-contract; then to a minister, who united them in matrimonial bonds. Next the old miser took his bride to a large store, where he gave orders that she should be supplied with an outfit of clothing suitable to her needs as a young heiress. Obsequious clerks flew to do his bidding; then, drawing her aside, he said:

"I shall leave you here several hours while I go to see the lady who will be your chaperon during the one year that you will pass as my rich ward instead of my wife."

He paused a moment, then added, with an air of hesitancy:

"I have decided that your home shall be for the first few weeks at a seaside residence I own in New Jersey. I will arrange for you to go this evening, as it is but a short distance from New York. Be all ready in your traveling-dress when I call for you with the lady and your maid at six o'clock."

CHAPTER II. AT PIRATE BEACH

It was midnight, and the moon rode high in the star-spangled sky, and mirrored itself in the ocean as it rolled its long and heavy swells in upon the silvery sands of the shell-strewn shore.

Far up the beach stood an old, graystone mansion, many-gabled and picturesque, surrounded by handsome and spacious grounds dotted with trees and shrubberies. Up in the second story a dim light gleamed from an open casement, and from it leaned a girl watching the beauty of the summer night with dark, solemn eyes—Nita Farnham, the miser's bride.

Charles Farnham, Mrs. Courtney, the chaperon; a maid, and several servants had accompanied Nita here. The old man had stayed only one hour, at the end of which he had accompanied his bride to her chamber and showed her upon the hearth-rug a small iron-bound box containing the promised gold.

"The little chest is yours, all yours," he said, with a strange emphasis. "There are many thousands of dollars in it, but they are nothing to my great wealth. I am many times a millionaire. Ah, Farnham, the miser, eking out his wretched life by selling cigars on the elevated railroad, but they little dream of his stores of hidden wealth. Wait one year more, and they will stare in envy at my Fifth Avenue palace and my peerless bride!"

She shuddered uncontrollably, and, dropping the cold hand he had taken in farewell, he turned away with a grin.

"Good-by, for a year, my beauty!"

She bowed in horror; then locked the door, and stood alone in the luxurious chamber, with the shadow of a fateful tragedy looming over her unconscious head and the price for which she had sold herself—the chest of gold—lying open at her feet.

The maid tapped presently upon the door, but Nita sent her away.

"I shall not need you to-night. You may retire."

But sleep was far from Nita's eyes. Midnight found her leaning from her window, watching the moonlight on the sea and the gray mist creeping up the shore, and murmuring over and over:

"Pirate's Beach! Pirate's Beach! How strange that he should have brought me here! Here of all places in the wide, wide world!"

A strange, beguiling melancholy crept over her as she listened to the voice of the sea as the surf broke continuously upon the beach. The very beauty of the summer night oppressed her.

"I am married, married," she murmured sadly. "I should not mind it if my husband were young and handsome, and we loved each other; but, alas, I am forever cut off from love's sweetness—I am bound by golden chains to that hideous old miser."

Nita was passionate, wilful, and undisciplined. A strange life had been hers, and it had left her like some beautiful, untamed, wild bird—untrammelled by conventionalities. The great, inrolling waves down on the beach seemed crying out to her yearningly:

"Come, come, come. We love you, we understand you!"

She flung a thick woolen shawl over her dark head, and stole down to the beach, and stood there dreamily, her gray-clad form blending softly with the creeping gray mist.

"How familiar it all looks, yet that old man did not dream I had ever been here before. I wonder if old Meg, the fortune-teller, lives here still? What if we meet? What if she recognizes me?"

She ran with a light, quick step along the beach for about half a mile, then paused pantingly close to a tumble-down old shanty that had evidently been constructed out of the black hull of an ancient wreck. From a tiny, smoke-begrimed window a dim light pierced through the murky sea fog, and Nita murmured:

"So she is here still, the old harpy!"

She bent her head, and peered through the dim little panes into the shanty. A smothered cry escaped her lips.

"Good heavens! what is that old man doing here?"

Seated by a table, ornamented with bottles and pipes, Nita had seen an ugly, witchlike old crone in close converse with—Farnham, the miser. It flashed into her mind that he was seeking from old Meg some knowledge of the future which she pretended to foretell, and she smiled in ironical amusement.

"An old man like that ought to know that Meg's pretensions are all humbug," she thought impatiently, and bent her ear to listen to their words. Old Meg was muttering with fierce gesticulations:

"I don't understand your plans nor approve them. Beware how you trifle with me, Farnham, or I will tear her from that stately home. I will make her my slave as in the old days before she ran away from my boy's love, the proud jade!"

Miser Farnham put out a lean hand and gripped the virago's wrist so tightly that she screamed with pain.

"Behave yourself then, you she-devil, and do not presume to question my actions. You will leave the girl alone, remember. She belongs to me now, for I found her after you had let her escape your clutches. No wonder she fled from you. The bare idea of that ruffianly son of yours aspiring to the hand of the proud Juan de Castro's daughter—faugh!"

"You know what he wanted," Meg growled significantly.

"Yes, what he will never get," was the harsh reply, and Farnham only laughed at her incoherent ravings. To Nita it seemed plain that the fiendish pair shared some dark secret between them, and that the man held the balance of power.

"They are plotting against me. They both know the secret of my parentage, although old Meg has told me a hundred times that I was cast up by the sea. What if I go in there and tax them with their villainy, and demand the truth?"

With flashing dark eyes she moved toward the door, and her hand touched the knob to throw it open. A moment's indecision, then her brave heart failed her. She recoiled, shuddering with a sudden fear.

"No, no, I dare not. They might murder me," and she hurried from the spot, with terror-winged feet.

When the old black hulk and its glimmering light were swallowed up in the gloom, Nita stopped a moment to take breath, and turned her exquisite white face toward the sea.

"Oh, ocean, how I love you, you great murmuring mystery!" she cried, stretching out her white hands lovingly, as the surf rolled in.

Hark, what was that blending with the hollow voice of the waves? A human voice, a deep groan as of one dying! Nita uttered a cry of superstitious terror, and ran wildly a few paces farther along the shore. A broken shell pierced the sole of her thin shoe, but she limped painfully on, half-blinded by the salt spray and her own startling tears, when suddenly she stumbled over a body lying directly in her path, and fell prostrate.

CHAPTER III.

"IT IS BETTER THAT YOU DIE."

Nita believed for a moment that she had stumbled over a body cast up by the cruel sea. That strange awe of death overcame her at first, and, struggling painfully to her feet, she was about to hurry from the spot when she was suddenly arrested by a low moan similar to the one that had so startled her when she was several paces away.

She realized that it was not a corpse, it was a living being, lying unconscious at her feet—a living being, wet already with the surf, that went over him each time it rolled in on the shore. The tide was coming in strongly, and presently the fatal undertow would sweep him out to sea.

"It must not be!" she cried.

Sinking down on her knees, she gazed into the white, upturned face for some sign of life.

"Oh, pitiful Heaven, he is dead!" cried Nita wildly, and she laid her white hand with an involuntary, tender caress on the broad, white brow, from which the wet masses of brown curls fell carelessly back.

Did her touch recall him to life? The broad breast heaved suddenly, the eyelids fluttered open, and the young girl met the wondering gaze of a pair of eyes that seemed to pierce her heart.

The next moment a giant wave rolled in and flung her prostrate against his breast. Drenched and shivering, Nita struggled to her knees again.

"You are alive, thank Heaven," she exclaimed gladly. "Oh, speak to me, sir; let me help you to rise, for if we remain here, the sea will sweep us both away."

She had to bend her ear close to his lips to catch the faint reply:

"I am—wounded—and have no—strength—to rise. Go—save yourself—leave me—to—my—fate!"

It must have cost him a severe effort to utter the disjointed words, for with the last one his eyes closed and he became unconscious.

And out upon the ocean Nita saw the white-caps rolling in to the shore, as if eager to seize and carry off their helpless victim. From her pallid lips came a cry of despair, and, seizing his shoulders, she tried to drag him further up the beach.

"God help me to save him," she prayed aloud, for the heavy body resisted her efforts, and she was distinctly conscious of as strong a yearning to save this man's life as though he had been a beloved friend of long, long years.

A happy thought came to her, and, dragging the strong woolen shawl from her head, she passed it with difficulty under his body, knotting the long ends on his breast. Just then another strong wave engulfed them. Clinging to the end of the shawl, she bent down and let it rush and roar above them, with its thunder of sound, and almost resistless fury of force.

With her whole heart uplifted in prayer, Nita grasped the ends of the shawl, and slowly, wearily, but determinedly, dragged the heavy form of her companion far up the beach; and within the gates of her home, where she sank down, exhausted, and gazed anxiously into his unconscious face, her heart convulsed by an agonizing yearning that he might live.

But the features remained still and lifeless, the broad breast did not heave with the faintest sign of life. She noted even then with the eyes of an artist his wonderful beauty.

"Oh, the pity of it that one so beautiful should die like this," she sobbed, and laid her hand caressingly upon his brow. Then she started as from a trance, and withdrew her hand from his brow, sobbing under her breath: "It is better that you died, for if you had lived you would have lured my heart away!"

She shivered as the keen breeze swept over her drenched form, bearing with it the intoxicating scent of June flowers blooming riotously in the neglected gardens, and rising wearily, she toiled up to the house and aroused the servants.

They gazed at her in amazement when she briefly explained the situation, and commanded them to bring the unconscious man into the house, and send for a doctor.

When the man-servant and the housekeeper had brought the dripping form and laid it on a bed, the woman cried out in wonder:

"What a strange thing! Why, I know this young man, Miss Farnham! He is Mr. Dorian Mountcastle."

And the pale young creature, leaning over the pillow, looked at her with dark, eager eyes, and murmured:

"Is he dead? Do you think that he is dead?"

"The Lord knows, honey; he looks like it, that's certain. But we can tell better when the doctor comes. Now do you go right up to your room, please, and get some dry clothes on before you catch your death of cold, while we tend to the young man," pushing her gently toward the door.

Nita threw one long look of mute despair upon Dorian Mountcastle's still and beautiful face, with the long, dark lashes lying so heavily upon the death-white cheeks, and moved silently out of the room, dragging herself wearily up the stairs, encumbered by her dripping wet garments, that left little rills of salt-water wherever she moved.

As she went along the dim corridor to her room her lips moved ever so slightly. She was whispering:

"Dorian! Dorian! What a soft, sweet name!"

When Nita had left her room, obeying the strange impulse that had tempted her out to the shore in the dead hour of the night, she had forgotten the open chest of gold upon the floor; she had even left the door standing slightly ajar with a dim light burning on the dainty dressing-table.

It was just the same now as she stepped across the threshold, little pools of salt-water sinking into the rich carpet. She stopped then, staring before her in wild-eyed horror.

Upon the rug crouched the haglike woman she had seen but a little while ago, cursing Miser Farnham in the old shanty. Her back was turned to Nita, her clawlike, skinny hands were diving into the chest of gold. She was filling her apron with the glittering coins. She had not heard the light footstep behind her, but suddenly a sharp voice rang in her ear:

"Put back that gold, you vile thief! What are you doing here?"

The old woman started so violently that the corners of her apron fell, and the gold pieces rolled in every direction. Springing wildly to her feet, she confronted Nita with the horrible, burning eyes of a murderess.

"I came here to kill you, Juanita de Castro, and to avenge my son!" she hissed, springing on her victim like a tigress.

Ere Nita could cry for help, she was borne down by her enemy's fierce onslaught, her white throat gripped in a clutch of death.

CHAPTER IV.

LIZETTE SAVES HER MISTRESS

When Nita had left the room the housekeeper stood gazing with deep commiseration at the deathlike face of Dorian Mountcastle as it lay among the pillows.

"Not much use to send for a doctor, for he is certainly dead, poor fellow," she said aloud.

"Oh, what a pity!" exclaimed a voice at her side, and, turning abruptly, she saw a pretty young woman—Nita's maid, Lizette.

"Oh, Mrs. Hill, I hope he's not dead! Can I do anything to help you, please?"

"Why, Lizette, I did not know you were out of your bed, but I'm glad some one awoke you, for your mistress needs you very badly. Go up-stairs and attend to her while I wait here for the doctor."

Lizette went away obediently, and ascended the stairs to Nita's room, full of surprise at the strange happenings of this summer night at Pirate Beach.

Finding Nita's door ajar, she stepped over the threshold. Then she recoiled with a cry of surprise and terror.

A startling sight was before her eyes. Prostrate upon the floor lay her young mistress, and across her body was stretched the lean, lithe frame of an old witchlike woman, whose skinny claws gripped Nita's throat in a murderous clasp. The victim's face was purple and distorted.

The dim light that shone upon the scene showed also to the wondering maid the open chest of gold and the glittering coins scattered over the floor in reckless profusion, where the hag had dropped them in her spring upon Nita.

One moment's recoil of amazement and horror, then Lizette comprehended the full meaning of the scene—robbery and murder.

"Lord help me!" she exclaimed, and sprang upon the murderess, grasping her arms in a viselike hold, and tearing them apart from Nita's throat, although the hag struggled and snarled like a wild beast baffled of its prey.

Finding herself unable to regain her grip on the girl, she turned with a fierce howl upon her assailant. There was murder in Meg's heart, and she was determined to silence forever the witness to her attempt upon Nita's life.

But although she was strong and wiry, her lean frame soon weakened under the vigorous onslaught of her young and agile foe, and the struggle soon ended, for Lizette adroitly tripped her up, and she fell heavily, her head striking the corner of the iron-bound chest with a loud thud.

Then the maid turned to kneel down by her unconscious mistress. Nita lay motionless, but when Lizette put her ear against the girl's heart she was rejoiced to find that it was still throbbing faintly.

"Poor darling, that old fiend didn't quite kill her!" she cried joyfully, and set to work to revive her hapless mistress.

But Nita came back to life very slowly, and it was not until her wet garments were all removed and she was laid in her bed, that she opened a pair of languid dark eyes and met the affectionate gaze of the anxious maid.

"What has happened?" she breathed faintly, and Lizette explained, softening the whole affair as much as she could, not to excite the patient.

"You saved my life, Lizette," cried Nita gratefully. Then she shuddered at perceiving the unconscious form of the old fortune-teller.

"I'll see how much she's hurt now; I have been tending to you all this time," said the maid. "I don't suppose she's dead, but there's an awful cut on the side of her head. She will go to prison for this if she lives—oh, Lordy!" as the apparently dead woman suddenly opened her dazed eyes and lifted up her grizzled head. Lizette sprang to the door, and locked it.

"You don't get out of here except to go to prison, old woman," she observed, then brought water and sponges and bathed and bandaged the wounded head. Then she gave Meg a drink of cordial, and said:

"You're all right now. The cut ain't as bad as I thought at first. Well, now I'm going to send for an officer and hand you over on a charge of attempted robbery and murder."

The hag sprang to her feet, her sullen face ghastly in the dim light, her eyes lurid with hate.

"You shall not send me to prison," she hissed savagely.

"You will see!" cried the maid, stretching out her hand to the bell.

Meg's skinny, upraised arm arrested the movement.

"Wait. See what your mistress will say," she snarled, and, moving to the side of the bed, she bent down and whispered sharply for several minutes in Nita's ear.

A low cry of horror came from the bed, and the old harpy moved aside, muttering significantly:

"I knew when I told you that, you would let me go free. Indeed, I did not mean to touch you if I could get the gold without—but you took me by surprise."

Lizette looked at her mistress for orders.

"Miss Nita, you surely won't let the old hag escape?" she cried.

"Yes, open the door," Nita cried faintly, shudderingly.

"But, Miss Nita—"

"Let the woman go!" Nita repeated, and the maid reluctantly obeyed. Then Nita said faintly:

"Lizette, I am already your debtor for my life, and indeed you will find me grateful. Do me one more kindness. Keep the secret of this terrible adventure locked forever in your breast unless I give you leave to speak."

"Oh, Miss Nita, is it best to shield that old wretch from justice? She may come back again and carry off all your gold, and kill you, too."

"No, Lizette, she has sworn never to attempt it again, and you must keep it a secret. Gather up the gold, put it back in the chest, and lock it carefully away. But first take some for yourself."

"Oh, Miss Nita, I don't want any reward for saving your life."

"But I insist," murmured Nita sweetly. "Take five hundred dollars."

She saw the young woman's eyes grow suddenly eager.

"God bless you, Miss Nita. It means so much to me—oh, you can't think the good I can do with just two hundred dollars. I will take that much, no more, if you please, and, dear Miss Nita, I'll love you with every drop of my heart's blood to the end of my life for this. Oh, I will tell you all some day, my lady," and Lizette, sobbing like a little child, kissed Nita's white hand. Then she locked and carefully put away the chest of gold.

"For no one else must find out that you have such a treasure in this room," she said cautiously.

Then Nita sighed wearily:

"Oh, Lizette, I feel so tired and ill. My arms ache with pain, my whole body is stiff and sore. I should like to go to sleep, but first you must go down-stairs and bring me news of Dorian Mountcastle—if he is dead or alive, for surely the doctor must have come by this time."

CHAPTER V. A PLOT TO WIN A LOVER

Mrs. Courtney, sitting at a desk in her own room the morning after the arrival at Pirate Beach, was busy writing a letter to her daughter, who had been absent from New York when Miser Farnham had called at her lodgings and electrified her with the welcome offer to become the chaperon of his beautiful ward.

After acquainting her daughter with these facts and the later ones of the night's happenings, Mrs. Courtney added:

"Now, prepare for a joyful surprise, my dear Azalea. A happy fate has thrown Dorian Mountcastle across your path again. It is he whom Miss Farnham so romantically saved, and although he has a mysterious wound in the side which will cause several weeks of confinement, the doctor thinks he can pull him safely through. Of course, I shall nurse him assiduously, and I want you to drop everything and come home. That girl is quite ill to-day, feverish and delirious from her exposure last night. Before she is well enough to come down and see Dorian Mountcastle, you will have a chance to cut her out with him. Our former acquaintance will be to your advantage, too, for there is some secrecy about Miss Farnham's antecedents that I don't at all approve. Well, if you can only secure the prize, we can soon drop this other affair; so come quickly, my dear daughter, for I know your heart seconds my wishes in this matter."

It was barely twenty-four hours later that Nita's maid said to her mistress, who was still too ill to leave her bed:

"Mrs. Courtney's daughter, Miss Azalea, came to-day."

"Is she pretty?" asked Nita—always a girl's first question about another one.

"She is a little thing with blue eyes, rosy cheeks, and golden hair. The housekeeper was just telling me that these Courtneys used to be grand rich people, and that they are old friends of this Mr. Dorian Mountcastle."

"Old friends," murmured the invalid, and her heart gave an inexplicable throb of pain.

"And," continued Lizette, "Mrs. Hill says Mrs. Courtney is perfectly devoted to the young man, and just takes the nursing right out of her hands."

Nita smiled a little contemptuously, for Mrs. Courtney had made her but two formal visits, into both of which she had infused a sarcastic disapproval of the girl's nocturnal wandering.

"Oh, Mrs. Courtney, it was an irresistible impulse stronger than myself that led me out. Indeed, I think God sent me to save Mr. Mountcastle's life," the girl had cried reverently.

Mrs. Courtney had smiled in a sort of cold derision.

"Never go out alone like that again. I would never forgive my daughter, Azalea, for doing anything so highly improper," she had replied stiffly.

And now Azalea had arrived upon the scene, and the housekeeper had bluntly told Lizette that the lady was preparing to throw her pretty daughter at the young man's head.

"But it won't work, for he's always talking about Miss Farnham, and begging to see her to thank her for her bravery. He told me he took her for a real angel when he first opened his eyes down there by the water and saw her face!" cried Mrs. Hill, and Lizette returned:

"And when Miss Nita was delirious last night, she kept calling his name: 'Dorian, Dorian, Dorian,' like they were old acquaintances. I think myself, it's a case of love at first sight on both sides."

"And so do I, Lizette."

And, kindly, romantic souls that they were, they took a keen, womanly delight in this incipient love-affair. Miss Farnham had saved Mr. Mountcastle's life, and in novel-lore this romantic incident always led up to love and marriage.

It was noon the next day before Nita saw Azalea. A bewitching golden-haired vision in a white morning-gown, with floating blue ribbons, that matched the color of her large, turquoise-blue eyes, and brought out clearly the rose-pink tinting of her soft skin—this was the fairy that floated into Nita's room alone, and murmured gushingly:

"How do you do, Miss Farnham? Mama has been trying to keep me out, saying that you were too ill to be disturbed. But you must not mind me, will you? I am only Azalea! May I call you Nita?" Dropping suddenly on her knees, she kissed Nita's feverish cheek. "I love you, you brave heroine!" she cried.

Nita could only smile, for Azalea gave her no chance to speak. She went on cooingly:

"I want to whisper a sweet secret to you, dear. I love you already, because—well, because you saved Dorian's life. When I came yesterday and found him here, I almost fainted with surprise and joy. Do you understand, Nita? Dorian and I were—lovers—once—but afterward we were cruelly parted. But now, we have made it up, and are happy. But only think, dearest, if you had not saved his life that night I should have gone mourning him all my days. God bless you, Nita."

Strange that those words of blessing almost sounded like a curse in Nita's ears. She shrank from the red lips that again caressed her cheek, and murmured coldly:

"Pray, take a seat, Miss Courtney."

"Do I weary you, poor dear?" sinking gracefully into an arm-chair. "Oh, how dreadfully ill you look; I suppose you will be in bed for weeks."

"I am going to sit up to-morrow."

"Surely not so soon, dear. I don't think mama will permit you."

"I beg your pardon, I shall not ask her leave, Lizette is my nurse"—quietly.

"But I thought mama ought to be consulted. She is your chaperon, you know"—wheedingly.

"I am very wilful, Miss Courtney, and intend to have my own way. I am better, and there is no need of my remaining in bed longer than to-morrow. Then, too, I have a guest, you should remember, and courtesy demands that I should greet him as soon as possible."

"Although a perfect stranger to you. But, perhaps, mama will not consider it correct form for you to visit the invalid," almost sneered Azalea.

"You have called on him, I presume"—pointedly.

"Why, of course"—flushing slightly—"but that is very different. I have known Dorian a long time."

"Ah, and I saved his life," replied Nita quietly.

Their glances met, the artful blue ones, the defiant black ones—in their hearts they knew themselves sworn foes. Nita saw through the girl before her, her artfulness, her assumptions, and despised her already.

"Can it be true that Dorian Mountcastle loves this pretty, shallow girl?" she wondered, with inexplicable anger and bitterness. She thought him a thousand times too good and noble for Azalea, and felt a sudden passionate longing to be free of the hated fetters that held her in thrall that she might measure lances with her for the prize of his heart.

CHAPTER VI.

UNDER THE ROOF OF GRAY GABLES

Dorian Mountcastle belonged to that gay, careless, half-Bohemian class of rich young men, who, without seriously offending the proprieties, manage to set at naught many of the petty conventionalities that obtain in their set, and enjoy themselves after their own fashion in a sort of come-and-go-as-you-please style.

He was five-and-twenty. His parents had both died before he was sixteen, and he had traveled extensively, five years with a tutor, and latterly alone. Many men envied him, and many women sighed for him—or for his fortune, he was not certain which.

Chance had brought the young man to Pirate Beach the night of Nita's arrival there. Two days before he had joined a yachting-party, but caprice, or disgust, at the machinations of a husband-hunting young lady on board, had inspired him with so keen a longing for escape, that he had prevailed on his friend to set him ashore, at an hour when plain people are just seeking their beds.

"I'll seek shelter presently at that imposing old mansion up there," he thought indifferently, and walked musingly along the shore, thinking in weary disdain of the woman who had persecuted him on his friend's yacht.

"And all for the Mountcastle gold, not at all for the owner," he muttered cynically. "How beautiful and heartless women are! Shall I never be loved for myself alone? No, I have proved that," and he turned his face to the sea with a short, angry laugh.

There glided toward him across the noiseless sands, like a spirit of evil, the bent and crouching form of an old woman, with a hideous, scarred face, and bright, furtive eyes. A catlike bound brought her within hearing of his last words, and she echoed his laugh with one more cynical and hard than his own.

Turning with a start of surprise, Dorian Mountcastle beheld the witch, and exclaimed, in a tone of comic despair:

"Ye gods, another female! Can I not escape them either on land or sea?"

"No, for a woman is destined to work you bitter woe, young sir," replied a cracked and gibing voice.

"A safe prophecy, madam. Woman has worked woe to man ever since Adam's day, and will no doubt continue it to the end of the chapter," laughed the young man, in a tone of careless raillery.

The scarred, hideous old hag was watching so greedily the flashing diamond on his hand that she forgot to answer him, until he touched her lightly, and asked mockingly:

"Are you so overcome with admiration that you cannot speak? Who lives up there in the great house?"

"They are new tenants—just arrived to-night. I know nothing about them, but the house is called Gray Gables, and belongs to an old man in New York. You must be a stranger, sir, not to know Gray Gables?"—with a glance of furtive inquiry.

"Yes, I am a stranger. I landed here from a yacht to-night," Dorian answered, with careless confidence. "I'll tell you the truth, old lady. Some women badgered me so that I was fain to jump overboard into the sea to avoid them, so my friend, the owner of the yacht, kindly consented to set me off here, where I'm as lonesome as Robinson Crusoe on his desert-island."

"You don't know anybody at Pirate Beach?" she suggested.

"Not a living soul but you, my friend—no, not even the name of the place until now. Pirate Beach! Jove, an unpleasantly suggestive name."

"There's nothing in the name, though there might have been many years ago. There's no danger now, young sir"—wheedingly.

"Glad to hear it, I'm sure. Well, is there any hotel hereabout?"

"A matter of five miles or so on a lonely road."

"Too long a tramp for a lazy man. Maybe they will give me a bed up yonder."

A hoarse cry issued from the woman's lips, and, recoiling from him, she suddenly lifted her skinny right arm on high, and almost shrieked, so loud and uneven was her voice:

"Young man, venture not now or ever beneath the roof of Gray Gables. It is written in the stars that Fate threatens thee there!"

Dorian Mountcastle stared, then laughed at her tragic turn.

"So you are a sibyl? Come, read me a page from the mystic stars."

A piece of silver crossed her skinny palm, and she laughed in joy. There was more where that came from. She had caught the clink in his vest pocket. She laughed, then scowled.

"Oh, you may sneer," she cried angrily. "You do not believe that old Meg can read the stars, you jest at her art. But the time comes when you shall weep. Look up yonder at that old gray house, so dark and forbidding, among the trees. It has been accursed and uninhabited for years; but to-night I see in the shining stars a new shadow hovering, vulturelike, above it. You are mixed up in it—you, whom fate has sent here to-night. For you I read woe and despair. You will go mad for a woman's love!"

He laughed at her in keenest mockery, this Dorian Mountcastle, who was so tired of lovely woman and her deceitful wiles.

"You are cheating me, Madam Sibyl! I know the shallow sex too well to lose my head over any of them!" he exclaimed, in a voice of cynical melancholy, and, throwing her another coin, walked impatiently away to some little distance, standing with his back to her, and his moody face turned to the sea.

Meg, the fortune-teller, remained where he had left her several moments watching him with a strange, catlike intentness. Now and then she would throw a cautious glance around her, but there was no one in sight—no one but the young man yonder with the diamond gleaming on his hand, and his pockets full of gold—yes, gold, for the last piece he had thrown her was yellow and shining. A terrible cupidity was aroused in the old crone's breast.

As for Dorian Mountcastle; in his careless or cynical self-absorption he had already forgotten the woman and her wild predictions—a fatal forgetfulness. For, as Meg crouched there, on the shining sands, her lean claw slipped inside the long black cloak she wore, and clutched the hilt of a sharp knife she carried in her breast. A low grating chuckle escaped her lips—the laugh of a fiend—and she began to advance upon her unconscious prey.

With his back to her, and his hands in his pockets, he was watching the sea, and softly whistling a melancholy strain from a favorite opera.

Meg crept close, unheard, unseen, threw out a cautious foot, tripped him, and he fell backward on the wet sands, ere he could extricate his hands from his pockets.

That instant she sprang upon her helpless victim. The murderous knife glittered in the moonlight, then descending, sheathed itself deep in his breast. Dorian Mountcastle quivered all over, like one in the agonies of a violent death, then lay quiet, at the mercy of the murderess.

CHAPTER VII.

FORGOT SHE WAS A WIFE

And so Dorian Mountcastle, saved from death by Nita's brave efforts, lay ill beneath the roof of Gray Gables—the house of all others that the murderous old sibyl had warned him to avoid.

And very pale he looked that morning when the housekeeper entered, bearing a fancy basket, heaped high with dew-wet roses of all colors, whose fragrance filled the air of the sick-room with the perfumed breath of rosy June.

"From Miss Farnham, with her best wishes for your recovery," she said graciously.

She saw his eyes light up with eager pleasure as he placed the flowers close to his pillow, and inhaled their spicy fragrance.

"My mistress gathered them for you herself," continued Mrs. Hill, and he looked at her in surprise.

"Impossible! Why, I was told that she was too ill to leave her bed for weeks!" he exclaimed.

Mrs. Hill tossed her head with a knowing air, and answered:

"Them that told you that, Mr. Mountcastle, wished it might be the case, no doubt, but Miss Farnham is up and dressed, and took breakfast with the family this morning."

"Happy, happy news!" murmured the young man, gladly. "She is better, thank Heaven! Oh, Mrs. Hill, will she be kind enough to come to me and let me thank her for so nobly saving my life?"

"The same ones that were so anxious to keep her abed so long have busied themselves this morning to persuade her that it would be highly improper for her to visit you in your sick-room," replied the worthy housekeeper, swelling with indignation.

"Pshaw! Why, Azalea has been in here a dozen times."

"They told her that was quite different. You see, sir—old friends, and all that."

She saw his lips curl in angry contempt under his mustache, and he exclaimed angrily:

"Mrs. Hill, I will not submit to this hectoring by the Courtneys. Go at once to Miss Farnham, say distinctly that I demand an interview. If she refuses I shall consider myself an unwelcome guest, and depart from Gray Gables within the hour."

"Oh, sir, it would kill you to be moved!"

"No matter. I will not remain."

Mrs. Hill chuckled to herself, and departed on her errand without more ado.

"Do come, Miss Nita, please. He's that cranky he thinks you don't want him here, and if you don't go and pacify him he'll go away sure, and that will be the death of him, for the wound would get to bleeding again, and the doctor said it mustn't on no account," she pleaded anxiously.

"He has no right to demand," Nita said haughtily, but she followed Mrs. Hill to the sick-room, somehow glad in her secret heart of that imperious message.

Mrs. Hill pushed her gently over the threshold, shut the door on the outside, and—trembling with a new timidity, her face burning, her heart beating wildly, Nita was alone with Dorian Mountcastle. His eager blue eyes turned to her, dwelling on her beauty in wondering delight.

"Miss Farnham," he cried, and his musical voice thrilled her. Involuntarily, she moved nearer to him till she stood by his side.

"How can I ever thank you enough for your goodness?" he said, holding out an eager hand. She laid hers gently in it, and as he clasped it their eyes met.

When love is young and new there is something wonderful in the spell of a glance. This pair, looking into each other's eyes, wore pale, serious faces, and felt their hearts leap and their breath flutter unevenly over their parted lips. They seemed looking not alone in each other's eyes, but into

each other's hearts. The veil of conventionality had unconsciously fallen, and Nita stood with her lips trembling, her eyes wide, solemn, half-questioning as they met and held his devouring gaze.

Suddenly, she recovered her self-consciousness. She started back, flushed vividly, and let her eyes falter shyly from his gaze, while she murmured in a low voice:

"Do not try to thank me. Only live, that is all I ask!"

In tones of tenderness he answered:

"Now that you are well I hope that I shall live. But when they told me you were so very, very ill I did not care if I died," and impulsively he kissed the hand he held, adding, "you know me, Miss Farnham. They have told you my name?"

She drew away the hand he had kissed, her whole frame thrilling, and with a struggle for calmness, answered smilingly:

"Mrs. Courtney has told me your name and position, and that your sojourn at Gray Gables is an honor to us."

"Nonsense! Mrs. Courtney knows that I am simply a lazy young vagabond who has inherited a fine old name and plenty of money, and that Azalea is making a dead set at me to get it," he rejoined, almost curtly in his vexation. "How I wish no one had recognized me here," he added, "then I should have palmed myself off on you as a poor young man, and tried to win your friendship on my personal merits."

"Is not that the only way, anyhow?" she queried ingenuously.

His blue eyes began to twinkle with the merry light of laughter.

"Mercy, no, Miss Farnham, I've never had a true friend in all my life! People value me solely for the length of my purse. Ask Miss Courtney if that is not true," and he smiled with sarcasm that puzzled Nita, but that also recalled to her mind Mrs. Courtney's displeasure if she should find her here with Dorian Mountcastle.

"I must go now. Mrs. Courtney did not wish me to come in here at all," she faltered, turning toward the door.

"Please stay a little while with me, won't you? There is not the least impropriety in it, I'm sure. That old cat is only trying to keep you in the background because you are so—beautiful—pardon my frankness, won't you? And do say you're not going yet. I want to thank you for these sweet roses—and, one minute, please—I'd like you to read to me every day to cheer me up. Will you? It would be so good of you to come to my rescue."

With a merry smile she answered:

"Perhaps—perhaps—you might think the same of me."

"Never! I only wish you would! It would make me the happiest vagabond on earth if you only—beg pardon, Miss Farnham, indeed I did not mean to offend," for she had suddenly drawn back from him, her eyes startled, her cheeks pale, her pose haughty.

Nita, who for a few brief moments had been wandering with bounding pulses and dreamy bliss through an earthly paradise, had suddenly remembered.

Remembered that she was not free.

And Dorian Mountcastle, such a short while ago a cynical scoffer at woman's love, gazed in alarm and surprise at the cold white change that had come over that lovely face that but a moment ago blushed with love beneath his eyes.

"Your pardon—I spoke lightly—but I meant no offense," he repeated anxiously.

She turned on him the full gaze of her large eyes, somber now and grave with secret pain, and their sadness pierced his heart.

"Oh, no, no, Mr. Mountcastle, I am not offended. Do not fancy such a thing, but—I—I have forgotten something. I must go—this moment," she answered gently, but incoherently, and almost staggering to the door, half-blinded by starting tears, she tore it open and hastened out.

In the strange confusion of her abrupt departure Nita did not notice that she had left Dorian Mountcastle's room by a door exactly opposite to the one she had entered.

But in a moment she realized that she had blundered. She found herself in a dark, narrow, carpetless corridor, with closed doors frowning grimly upon her from either side of the moldy-smelling hall.

"It must be the servant's quarters, but I will try to escape this way. I cannot possibly go back through his room," she murmured, and pursued her way timorously along the hall, soon losing herself in an intricacy of abrupt turnings and obscure passages seeming to have no outlet.

"How strange," she murmured uneasily; "I do not seem to be finding my way out at all, and perhaps I could not find it back to Mr. Mountcastle's room. Ah! there is a narrow door and a dark little stairway. I suppose it will lead me out-doors into the garden," and Nita began to descend the dark, rickety old stairway, all unconscious of the startling discovery she was on the eve of making, or she would have fled back in an agony of terror.

CHAPTER VIII. IN DEADLY PERIL

Slowly and carefully Nita went down the dark, narrow, dusty steps to the rickety door at the foot, expecting confidently that it would lead her straight out-doors, most probably into the kitchen-garden. She found the door slightly ajar, pushed it quickly open, and found herself, without warning or premonition, in a small, dingy, cobwebby room, full of gloomy shadows, and dimly lighted by a flaring dip, in an old battered tin candlestick.

The little closetlike chamber, barely eight feet wide, was furnished with a small table, and an arm-chair, over which was thrown a coarse, dark-gray blanket. Against the walls were ranged a large number of small, iron-bound chests, similar to the one up-stairs in Nita's closet. The lids of several were open, and the wondering girl saw that they were filled to the brim with money, that gleamed bright and yellow in the flaring, uncertain light of the solitary candle.

But not even all this hoarded gold could have surprised Nita as did the central figure of it all—the old man kneeling with his back to her over one of the open chests, and running his shriveled fingers through the bright coins, while his lips worked nervously, emitting chuckling and guttural noises of ghoulish delight.

Nita's instant alarm struck her dumb. She was for the moment incapable of speech or motion. She could only stare in an appalled silence. She had recognized in the crouching old man gloating over his treasure her miser-husband, Charles Farnham, whom she had supposed to be far away from this place, according to the terms of the marriage-contract.

Even while she gazed there crept over her a sensation of deadly fear and dread, that seemed to freeze the very blood in her veins. She thought in wild alarm:

"I have blundered upon this secret, and the accident may cost me my life. Heaven help me to escape before he discovers me!"

Absorbed in his fascinating employment, the miser had not noticed her entrance. He continued to play with the gold like a child, pouring it from one trembling hand to the other, muttering and chuckling in a strange ecstasy.

Nita summoned all her will-power to break the thrall of terror that seemed to hold her limbs immovable. Suddenly, the power of motion returned. She turned softly, made two catlike steps, and was on the stairs on the other side of the door, safe—ah, what was that grating sound?

In drawing the door softly to behind her the rusty hinge had creaked harshly! Nita's heart gave a bound of deadly fear, she gasped for breath, and sprang wildly forward.

If only she could reach the corridor above with its intricate windings, she could elude pursuit in some dark corner.

But from the room she had left came a sound between a howl and a groan, and the old man bounded to the stairs with such wondrous agility that his outstretched hand caught the long skirts of the escaping girl, and dragged her ruthlessly backward.

Clutching her fiercely, in spite of her cries and struggles for liberty, and bearing her forward into the light, he gazed eagerly into her face. A bitter oath escaped his lips as he beheld in his struggling captive the face of his beautiful, unloving bride.

To Nita, with her nerves yet unstrung by sickness and excitement, the sight of the old miser's face, distorted by rage and surprise, was absolutely terrifying.

She trembled like a leaf in his rude grasp, and moans of terror came from her blanched lips.

"Spy!" he hissed angrily, and in the fierce malevolent gleam of his snakelike eyes she read a wild temptation to grasp her fair white throat in his strong hands and throttle her to death.

"Spy! You have followed me here!" the old man hissed again savagely.

He shook her rudely until the breath had almost left her body, then flung her upon one of the chests, and, locking the little door, dropped the key into his pocket. She was at the mercy of this fiendish old man who had come into her life so strangely, and at so dark an hour.

"Release me, oh, release me!" she gasped faintly, pleadingly, but he looked at her with pitiless eyes, and answered:

"Once before a woman, filled with the greed for gold, followed me here to find out the secret of my hidden treasures. Well—her friends are searching for her yet, as perchance yours will be, too, for many a year."

"You murdered her!" gasped Nita, with a creeping thrill of utter horror.

"No," he replied, and after a moment's pause continued with a hideous leer:

"I simply left her locked in this room and went away, leaving her alone with the treasure she coveted. It was a long, long time before I came back, and then—I found her still here."

"Still here!" the startled captive repeated. He saw the shudder that crept over her frame, and laughed mockingly.

"Still here—waiting for me still," he sneered. "Always here, waiting for me when I come. Look!"

Turning from her, he threw aside the dark blanket that had draped the chair by the table. Nita looked and shrieked aloud.

The coarse blanket had concealed the fleshless skeleton of a human being sitting at ease in the chair, with the bony digits of one hand resting on the table. About the neck was clasped a golden chain with a shining pendant, while on one finger gleamed a magnificent emerald ring, ghastly mockery of adornment.

Nita's overstrained nerves gave way at the startling sight. She crouched upon the chest of gold with her hands before her eyes, while appalling shrieks burst from her lips.

She doubted not the same awful fate would be her own, despite the fact that she was bound to Charles Farnham by the most solemn tie.

At her shrieks he turned upon her with the fierce command:

"Silence! Do not think that your cries will bring assistance to this vault! This wing of Gray Gables is utterly uninhabited and isolated from the newer part of the house. You are wholly in my power and at my mercy to punish as I will."

From his excited, remorseless face she doubted not what that punishment would be—isolation and starvation in the miser's hidden treasure-vault in company with that awful thing yonder, the ghastly, grinning, jewel-bedecked skeleton.

There came a swift thought of Dorian Mountcastle. She should never see him again. Would he miss the girl into whose eyes he had gazed with such passion? Would the mystery of her strange fate sadden his life? She cried out, rebelliously:

"Punish at your will! Yet I have done nothing—nothing!" and, falling on her knees, she poured out impetuously the story of the mistake in opening the door that had brought her to this terrible strait.

"Through no fault of mine," she sobbed wildly. "Yet—yet—I am to suffer death for this unconscious wrong. Ah, sir, how can you be so cruel? Why, then, did you save me from the river for this more terrible fate?"

He stood silent, gazing at the beautiful, convulsed face. Yes, it was scarce a week since he had turned her aside from a self-sought death.

He remembered her strange, almost stoical calm, in such contrast with her wild agitation now. Life had grown sweeter, dearer now since that day in Central Park, when, starving and friendless, she had derided him with the scorn of a hopeless and reckless despair.

"Let me go free, only give me my liberty, and the secret I have unwillingly discovered shall never pass my lips!" she cried frantically. "Do you remember that day in the park when you pretended that you loved me? Then, how can you be so cruel?"

The old miser's face changed suddenly from rage and malevolence to a leering softness more hateful still to her shrinking eyes. He came closer, and she started back in disgust.

CHAPTER IX. THE SERPENT RING

"Ah, Nita, you remember that day still!" cried the old man in a transport of joy. "You remember that you are my wife! Do you know that in my wrath I had almost forgotten it? And so you appeal to my love? Have you none to give me in return, pretty one?"

As he approached her she thrust him violently back with hands that were nerved by the strength of fear and hate.

"Do not touch me, do not ask me for love. Remember our marriage-contract!" she exclaimed.

"I remember it," he answered, gazing on her with fiery eyes. "But, listen, Nita; I will give you one chance of escape from the doom that hangs over you. Burn the marriage-contract. Become my wife in reality as you are now only in name, and we will begin our new life to-day. I love you, Nita, but only on these terms can you regain your freedom."

She shrank back with dilated eyes full of horror, and cried:

"I would not abridge one hour of that year if twenty lives were at stake. Ah, no, no, no—sooner death!"

"So be it!" he exclaimed bitterly, incensed by her scorn, and pointing to the skeleton. "I will go now and leave you to the companionship of this grim lady whose fate you will share." He moved toward the door, but she sprang before him with desperate courage to do battle for her liberty.

"Do not dare to leave me here!" she cried imperiously. "Listen to me, you wicked wretch! If you leave me here to perish with this woman you have already murdered, I—while I am dying of starvation here in this gold-vault, surrounded by enough wealth to feed famishing thousands—I will curse you with my latest breath! I, to whom Heaven will listen because I am good and friendless, will pray God to chastise you with a terrible punishment, and to bring down on you a death even more awful than mine. And after death I will haunt you night and day, if such things can be, until I drive you mad with horror."

Before the solemn force of Nita's frenzied adjuration, the old man started and grew ashen pale. His eyes glared, his knees trembled. She saw quickly that her desperate words had some effect upon him, and continued:

"See, I will take an oath, if you let me go free, never to reveal the secret of what I have seen here to-night, never to enter this place again. The secret of your hidden wealth, and of this murdered woman, shall be as though I had never known it. Will not this suffice?"

Charles Farnham did not answer at first. With bowed head and ashen features, he remained in deep thought several minutes, while Nita waited in keen anxiety. Then he looked up, and said:

"You promise to take a solemn oath! Very well. For the love I bear you I will spare your life. But there is one condition."

"Yes," she breathed eagerly.

"You note the ring on that skeleton-hand there? Come nearer, Nita, and examine it. You shudder. A coiled serpent, with quivering, emerald scales, you observe. Is it not magnificent and unique? It has a history, and was made for this woman by a foreign artisan, who then destroyed the pattern. Note the tiny quivering gold wires that uphold each emerald scale. At the least movement of the hand the serpent-head seems to raise itself, and the eyes and scales to glow with malignant greenish fire."

"Yes, yes," she answered impatiently. "But the condition, sir—the condition?"

Scowling darkly at her, he hissed rather than spoke:

"That you take your oath of silence with that skeleton hand clasped in your own, and afterward withdraw the serpent-ring from that bony finger, and wear it always, in memory of this hour."

She shuddered and recoiled at first, then, catching the gleam of triumph in his eye, answered, with apparent calm:

"I agree to your condition."

With an evil, jeering smile, he said:

"Perchance there are people yet alive who have never given up the hope of tearing aside the thick veil of mystery that enshrouds the fate of this woman. If you wear this ring you may meet them—they will recognize it, they will ask you questions that you will not dare to answer."

Her brain was reeling, her limbs trembled, her strength was fast going in this atmosphere of horror, but there was an element of desperate bravery in the girl when driven to bay. She answered her tormentor:

"Only give me my liberty, and I will risk it all—all!"

The die was cast. He looked at her for a moment with a strange expression, and exclaimed warningly:

"One moment, please. You will remember that you will have no chance to prove a traitor to your oath, even if you dared. This door I shall wall up immediately, as there is a secret entrance that I shall use hereafter. So beware of attempted treachery, girl."

With a shudder she replied:

"The wealth of the Indies would not tempt me to return to this dreadful place! Now, the oath."

With wolfish eyes he saw her white hand close shrinkingly over the dead one on the table. Sepulchrally he spake some words which Nita repeated after him through stiff white lips, her eyes dilated with horror.

Then she drew the glistening ring from the skeleton's bony hand, and placed it on her third finger. The emerald scales quivered with greenish fire, and a shock as of electricity seemed to thrill through her at the contact. Repressing a cry of terror, she turned toward the stairway.

"You must return the way you came," said Farnham, unlocking the door, and holding it ajar. "Good-by, Nita, and do not forget the oath sworn on the dead hand."

But the girl was speechless. Flitting past him like a shadow she crept up the stairway, and heard with silent thanksgiving the lock turn in the door, between her and the miser's gold-vault.

CHAPTER X.

"WILL YOU NEVER FORGIVE?"

When Nita had left him, Dorian Mountcastle lay with half-shut eyes in a delicious reverie. Believing himself proof against all the darts of Cupid, he had yet gone down helplessly before the fire of a girl's dark eyes, and the charm of her sweet, sad smile. Upon his life's horizon had dawned the radiant star of Love.

He forgot his weakness and illness in the intoxication of the moment. He was too well versed in the signs of love not to interpret aright Nita's looks and blushes. It only brought a smile to his lips when he recalled her strange pallor and sudden flight.

"Sweet girl, she was frightened and agitated at the sudden discovery mutually made that our hearts had leaped to meet each other. She will return when she recovers her composure," he thought happily.

A light tap at the door, then it opened softly, and his heart leaped at the thought that it might be Nita already returning. But it was only Azalea Courtney, radiant as the morning, carrying a little silver pitcher full of iced lemonade.

"Alone, Dorian? I thought Miss Farnham was with you?" she cooed, in silvery tones.

"You were mistaken," he replied coldly, vexed that she had disturbed his sweet love-reverie, and out of mere perversity he refused to drink the draft she proffered, declaring that he was not thirsty.

But if he thought to freeze out his dainty visitor by his indifference he was mistaken. She slipped into the arm-chair by his bed, and began with pretty raillery:

"Miss Farnham made you but a short visit. I fear you did not make a good impression."

"I should be sorry to think so, for in that case I should feel compelled to leave Gray Gables immediately, and be jolted five miles to the nearest hotel," he rejoined maliciously.

"Leave us, Dorian? Indeed, you should not. It would kill you to be moved. Besides, what does it matter what that girl thinks, so long as mama and I are delighted to have you, and to be of service to you?"

"It matters everything, Azalea, since Miss Farnham is the real mistress here. Remember your mama is only her salaried chaperon, and you, like myself, but a transient guest."

Azalea pouted prettily at this rebuke.

"You take pleasure in reminding me of my poverty—you forget the past," she half-sobbed, and he answered impatiently:

"I choose to ignore it, and, pardon me, but it is bad taste in you to recur to it."

"Ah, Dorian, will you never forgive?—never permit me to atone?" she sighed.

The young man made a gesture of impatient scorn, as though dismissing an unwelcome subject, and half-buried his face in the roses that still lay beside his pillow.

Azalea Courtney knew that Nita had sent the roses. A spasm of mingled pain and bitterness crossed the pretty, pink-and-white face, and she cried out sharply:

"Well, how do you like Miss Farnham?"

He knew well how to stab this dainty beauty—perhaps he knew, too, that she deserved it. He looked straight into her curious blue eyes, and answered enthusiastically:

"She is charming!"

"Ah!" breathed Azalea, with her little white hand pressed against her side to still her heart's jealous throbs.

"She is charming," repeated Dorian Mountcastle, quite oblivious to her pain, and, furious with anger, Azalea darted from her seat and left the room as precipitately as Nita had done a while ago

—left the room to hurry to her mother and sob out her jealous longing for vengeance upon dark-eyed Nita, her beautiful rival.

Without the least compunction over the stab he had given his visitor, Dorian Mountcastle dismissed all thoughts of her, and again fell to dreaming of the girl who had bewitched him.

Beautiful women he had seen in plenty, but hovering about this one there was something more than beauty. With closed eyes he lay silent, breathing the fragrance of the roses by his pillow, and going over in his enraptured mind all her separate, distinctive charms.

Suddenly, he started broad-awake, his brow beaded with dewdrops of terror, his heart throbbing painfully. What was the sound that had awakened him? Ah, a timid tapping over and over again upon the door.

"Enter!" he called out in a strangled voice, and the door opened and closed again, admitting —Nita!

Nita, pale and gasping, with wild eyes and disheveled tresses, her white gown soiled with soot and cobwebs, her slender hands grimy with dust, outstretched before her like a sleep-walker's, as she staggered across to him, gasping, it seemed, with mortal terror, vainly essaying to speak.

"My dream, my dream!" he cried, in a voice of agony, as she sank with a long, quivering sigh into the arm-chair close to the bed.

Putting out his hand he touched hers. It was icy cold, and he saw on it a ring that he had not noticed before, a serpent, with eyes and scales of quivering greenish fire. It was so lifelike in its malignant semblance that he shuddered through all his frame.

At his gentle touch, Nita started, and lifted her dazed dark eyes to his face. Their expression was piteous, and so was her voice, as she murmured incoherently:

"I—I—went out at the wrong door—and—was lost—oh, I was so frightened!"

Her eyes closed, her head drooped heavily. Drawing her hastily toward him, her pale face sank upon the roses by his pillow. She was unconscious.

It was a mean advantage to take of the helpless girl, but Dorian could not resist the temptation. The dark curls on her white brow mingled with his own fairer ones, and the lovely lips were close.

He turned his face slightly, and his eager mouth brushed hers.

The pressure of his lips recalled her ebbing senses. She stirred slightly, opened her eyes in a dreamy fashion, realized everything, and started back from him in sweet and strange dismay.

"Nita, Nita, I love you!" Dorian murmured, as she looked at him with bewildered eyes, but ere she could reply the door opened, and Mrs. Hill, her faithful nurse, entered the room. The girl sprang up and clasped her around the neck, sobbing hysterically.

"Do not look at me so angrily, Mrs. Hill, indeed I have done nothing. Miss Farnham went out at that door yonder, got lost in the winding corridors, and found her way back here almost frightened out of her senses," explained Dorian.

"Oh, take me to my room," pleaded the girl, drawing the kindly housekeeper toward the door without a backward glance at her lover.

CHAPTER XI. "IT IS THE RING."

Nita was walking alone in the grounds at twilight. The purple shades of the gloaming were shot through by the opaline light of a new moon swinging like a silver sickle in a rosy-lilac sky, and a wind from the sea—cool, salty, and delicious—stirred the flowers, shaking out fragrance upon the languid, love-breathing air of June.

The beautiful white-robed girl, as she walked up and down the flowery paths, cast now and then glances of yearning tenderness toward one window of the house, through whose lace-curtains gleamed a dim, soft light. She knew that Dorian Mountcastle was waiting there, heart-sick and restless, and pining for her presence.

A little while ago Lizette had brought her a note that set all her pulses beating with blended rapture and despair:

"My Dear Miss Farnham: How can you be so cruel to a sick and lonely man? It is a week since I have seen you. Mrs. Hill keeps making excuses that you are not well, but how can I believe it when I have seen you from my window every day walking, riding, and even boating, rowing yourself with the most consummate grace and skill? Azalea also tells me you are very well. She is devoted to me, the dear girl, but it is you I want.

"Do you know that I am so much better the doctor let me sit up several hours to-day, and that I shall soon be well enough to go away? I am glad, for I have already trespassed too long on your hospitality, and, of course, you will wish me gone, else you would let me see you when I am so miserable over your displeasure. How cruelly you punish me for that sweet stolen kiss, whose memory thrills my every hour with silent rapture. Ah, Nita, I love you madly! Will you accept the life you saved so bravely that night and make me happy?

"You remember that sweet old song 'Juanita'? It keeps singing itself over and over in my thronging thoughts:

"Nita, Juanita, let me linger by thy side;
Nita, Juanita, be my own fair bride!"

"Ah, Nita, did not our souls rush together at our first meeting? I remember with intoxicating rapture how we looked into each other's eyes—looked and loved. Oh, my dearest, do not be cold to me. You are no heartless coquette, I know. Forego all further punishment. Come to me, dear, and set my heart at rest.
Dorian."

The letter was in Nita's bosom. The sweetness and the thorn were in her heart. She wrung her slender hands together, as if in pain, then they fell apart, and a stifled cry came from her lips.

The keen little tongue of the emerald serpent had pierced her rosy palm and the blood started. But the wound in the young girl's heart was deeper far.

Everything around Nita—the moon, the flowers, the sea, breathed of love. What wonder that the same pulse throbbed at her heart! She leaned on the railing of a little fountain throwing diamond sprays into the air, and murmured plaintively:

"If this had come to me only two weeks ago it would have opened the gates of heaven to me. To love—to be loved—that is the best of life. But I have lived to be almost eighteen, and never had this

crowning joy—never until now, when it comes, alas, too late. Ah, would it be so very wrong to love him just a little while? I have just one year of life, for I have sworn to die ere the moment comes of giving myself to Miser Farnham's arms. One year—only year in this beautiful world! Oh, it is cruel, cruel! And life has been so hard to me; who could blame me for taking this joy that fate holds out to me, this draft of love whose dregs will be so bitter?"

Hungry for love and happiness, the girl was faltering with a terrible temptation. For a week she had held it at bay. To-night Love stood sentinel at the door of her heart and proclaimed himself her master.

That night in the old garden when she had believed Dorian Mountcastle dead, she had uttered prophetic words:

"If you had lived, you would have lured my heart from me."

Only time could prove whether it was for better or worse that he had lived, and that they had looked and loved.

"I must go to him!" she cried suddenly, sweeping all irresolution aside.

She gathered a lily from the marble basin of the fountain, fastened it in the bosom of her white gown, and turned toward the house. Coming into the graveled walk at the foot of the steps, Nita almost ran into the arms of a tall, middle-aged man, who lifted his hat with easy grace, exclaiming:

"Beg pardon, Miss—Miss—"

"Farnham," the young girl said quietly, and stood waiting.

He bowed deeply, and resumed in his easy courteous manner:

"My name is Donald Kayne, Miss Farnham, and I am in search of a missing friend of mine, Dorian Mountcastle. I set him ashore on this beach about two weeks ago, and on returning only yesterday from our little yachting excursion, I heard that he had not returned to New York, nor even been heard of there. I became uneasy and came down to-day to hunt him up, although now"—with an admiring glance—"his exile is no longer a mystery to me. I learned at the hotel of my friend's accident, and that he was your guest. I hastened without ceremony to call on him."

"You are most welcome," she answered, in a low, musical voice.

"Thank you; and is he better?"

"He will soon be well," she murmured—"you will come to him at once, sir. He will be glad indeed to see his friend."

He followed her up the stately granite steps into a broad marble-paved hall. Then Nita led him to Dorian Mountcastle.

The invalid was resting in an easy chair, and Mrs. Courtney and her daughter were with him in spite of the only half-suppressed yawns with which he slyly evidenced a decided preference for solitude.

He was waiting for Nita's answer to his letter. Would she come, his proud, dark-eyed darling, would she forgive his audacity and grant his prayer? And, meanwhile, Mrs. Courtney and Azalea were engaged in holding her up to his scorn.

"The most singular young girl I ever met. She makes the duties of a chaperon merely a sinecure," sneered Mrs. Courtney, and Azalea chimed in with pretended sweet excuses:

"But, then, mama, dear, you must remember that the poor girl does not really seem to have any knowledge of the usages of the best society. I fancy her wealth must have come to her quite suddenly. She cannot play the piano, Dorian, nor sing a note. She knows no language but English, she is brusk, and—" But the sentence uttered in a clear, high-pitched voice, was never ended.

The door that already stood slightly ajar, to admit the evening air, was pushed open by a graceful hand, and Nita stood on the threshold with the stranger. She had heard, for, looking straight at her dismayed rival, she said archly:

"You are quite right, Miss Courtney, I was brought up in poverty until a few weeks ago, when I came into my—inheritance."

Cool, fair, queenly, she bowed to Dorian, and said simply:

"Your friend, Mr. Kayne."

"Donald Kayne!" cried Dorian joyfully.

A confusion ensued in which Nita's daring speech was happily passed over. The Courtneys were well acquainted with the newcomer. In their palmy days they had been in his "set," and, although surprised to see them here, he greeted them with the easy cordiality of a man of the world.

A lively conversation ensued from which Nita seemed for a short while necessarily left out. She withdrew to the only vacant seat, regretting that she could not conveniently move the heavy arm-chair away from the strong glare of light.

She leaned back, with languid grace, her eyes downcast, a hovering smile on her scarlet lips, her exquisite arm escaping from the lace of the loose sleeve, resting on the arm of the dark velvet chair, the taper, extending fingers quivering with a slight nervous motion that made the serpent-ring glitter so weirdly one would scarcely have been more startled to hear a sibilant hiss escape from the open jaws.

Nita was unconscious that the stranger's eyes dwelt admiringly upon her queenly beauty as she sat in the velvet arm-chair. She kept her lids lowered persistently, not daring to meet Dorian's ardent gaze.

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