

ALEX. MCVEIGH MILLER

THE BRIDE OF THE TOMB,
AND QUEENIE'S TERRIBLE
SECRET

Alex. McVeigh Miller

**The Bride of the Tomb, and
Queenie's Terrible Secret**

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Содержание

THE BRIDE OF THE TOMB; OR, LANCELOT DARLING'S BETROTHED	5
CHAPTER I	6
CHAPTER II	8
CHAPTER III	10
CHAPTER IV	13
CHAPTER V	16
CHAPTER VI	20
CHAPTER VII	23
CHAPTER VIII	26
CHAPTER IX	31
CHAPTER X	34
CHAPTER XI	37
CHAPTER XII	40
CHAPTER XIII	43
CHAPTER XIV	46
CHAPTER XV	50
CHAPTER XVI	53
CHAPTER XVII	56
CHAPTER XVIII	61
CHAPTER XIX	64
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	65

Mrs. Alex. McVeigh Miller
The Bride of the Tomb, and
Queenie's Terrible Secret

THE BRIDE OF THE TOMB; OR,
LANCELOT DARLING'S BETROTHED

By MRS. ALEX. McVEIGH MILLER

CHAPTER I

Sweet Lily Lawrence had committed *suicide*!

Oh! impossible! A girl so young, so gifted, so lovely, the darling of her father's heart, the idol of her brilliant lover, the heiress of a splendid fortune—what had she to do with the grim king of terrors? Death to her was an enemy to be shunned and dreaded rather than a lover to be courted.

And to-morrow was her bridal day!

Yet there she lay prone on the velvet carpet, with its delicate pattern of myosotis, and the soft light of the June morning shining through the open window on the still form, robed in creamy white satin and priceless lace, the fair hair streaming across the floor, the turquoise blue eyes wide-open with a look of unutterable horror frozen in their upward stare, the small and dimpled white hand clinching tightly a tiny jeweled dagger whose murderous thrust had left a ghastly, gory, crimson stain on the snowy satin lace above her heart. By that crimson stain death claimed her for his own—the fairest bride the grim monarch ever took to his icy arms.

A thrill of universal horror ran through the great city where she had been known and loved, not more for her beauty and wealth than for her sweet and gentle character. Friends came and went through the portals of Banker Lawrence's splendid brown stone mansion on Fifth avenue for a sight of the beautiful suicide who had been expected to appear so soon as a happy bride. Mr. Lawrence, the bereaved and sorely stricken father, appeared like one dazed with grief and horror. Ada, his younger and only remaining daughter, was confined to her room in strong hysterics, attended by the maids. Mrs. Vance, the beautiful widow of a second cousin of Mrs. Lawrence, a lady who made her home at the banker's, was the only one in the house who retained sufficient calmness to attend to anything at all. It was she who kept back the curious throng of the news-seekers who would fain have invaded the mansion. It was she who talked with sympathizing friends, breaking now and then into a heart-wrung sob, and hiding her eyes in her damp lace handkerchief.

"Oh, doctor," she cried, as the physician who had been hastily summoned after the shocking discovery, bent over the pale form trying to see if any spark of life remained—"oh, doctor, she is not really dead, is she? Surely our darling Lily is not gone from us forever!"

The physician looked up curiously at the dark, beautiful face of the speaker now convulsed with grief and horror. He bent again over the recumbent form, closely examining the beautiful white features of the girl, touched her wide-open eye-lids, felt her tightly clenched hands carefully, and laid his ear over the still breast whose crimson blood had stiffened the bridal robe above the tender heart so lately bounding with the joyous pulses of youth and hope and perfect happiness.

"I am sorry to say," he answered, rising and looking down with a pale face and trembling hands, "that Miss Lawrence is, indeed, no more. Life has been extinct for hours."

A few hours later a coroner's inquest was held over the remains. Mrs. Vance, Miss Ada Lawrence, and the deceased girl's waiting-maid were the three who had seen Lily Lawrence last in life. Their testimony was accordingly taken.

The maid deposed that on the night on which the fatal event had transpired her mistress had kept her in her room until about eleven o'clock, for the purpose of making some trifling alterations in the fit of the elegant white satin bridal robe.

While thus engaged Miss Ada Lawrence and Mrs. Vance had come in for a chat with Miss Lawrence. Miss Ada, a young school-girl, and fond of finery, had persuaded her sister to don the beautiful dress and veil.

After staying awhile and admiring the loveliness of Miss Lawrence, the maid had been dismissed, her young mistress saying that she would herself remove the dress, having already laid aside the veil and wreath of orange blossoms.

She (the maid) had accordingly bidden the ladies good-night. The next morning, as usual, she had gone at eight o'clock to call her young mistress. She had found the door locked on the inside.

In response to repeated knocks and calls no answer had been elicited, and becoming frightened she had repeated the fact to the family, who were just assembling at breakfast. Mr. Lawrence had caused the door to be forced immediately. On entering they had found Miss Lawrence lying dead upon the floor, arrayed in her bridal dress, and clutching in her right hand a small, jeweled dagger.

She was asked here by the coroner if the dagger had belonged to Miss Lawrence. She answered in the affirmative, saying that Mrs. Vance had presented it to her a few days before as a bridal present, and that it had lain on the dressing-table ever since as an ornament.

Being asked why they had supposed it to be suicide instead of murder, the affectionate girl burst into tears, and replied that her sweet young mistress had not an enemy on earth, so that no one could have murdered her for malice; and that none of her splendid jewelry or bridal presents had been touched, so that no one could have murdered her for gain; and that the natural inference was that Miss Lawrence had taken her own life with her own weapon.

The young lady had seemed much as usual in her manner when she last saw her, had betrayed no undue agitation of mind and was only anxious about the fit of the bridal robe in which she was to appear on the morrow. The maid was suffered to leave the stand, on which Miss Ada Lawrence, dreadfully nervous and agitated, was led in and took her place.

Her testimony was merely a corroboration of the maid's. She had left the room in Mrs. Vance's company shortly after the maid's dismissal. Both had kissed her good-night and left her standing at the mirror smiling at her lovely reflection. Lily had seemed in good health and spirits. She did not know of any reason for her sister's committing suicide; but as she had no enemies, and nothing had been touched in the room, it was the natural inference. She had not seen her sister again until the next morning, when she lay cold and dead in the middle of her room.

Mrs. Vance gave substantially the same testimony, with the addition that she had heard Miss Lawrence lock her room door after their departure. She knew of no cause that could have driven the young girl to take her own life. For a few months past she had noticed that Lily had strange fits of depression and abstraction. She had thought then that some secret sorrow preyed on the mind of her cousin, but she did not know of what nature. She was suffered to retire, her agitation growing uncontrollable, while many admiring glances followed her graceful form as she swept from the room.

Dr. Pratt was next called to the stand. He was a tall, dark, sinister-looking man, with restless black eyes and nervous manner. He gave his testimony briefly and to the point.

He was not Mr. Lawrence's family physician. He was riding past the house on his way to visit a patient when he had been suddenly called in by the summons of a domestic who rushed frantically into the street after him. He had gone into Miss Lawrence's room, where he found the family assembled and indulging in the wildest grief. The young bride-elect lay dead upon the floor, grasping a small dagger in her right hand. Upon examination he found that life had been extinct for eight or nine hours. He thought that death must have been instantaneous with the dagger-thrust. From the pose of the body and the position of the right arm and hand, together with the direction of the deadly weapon, all the probabilities pointed to an act of self-destruction.

A few more witnesses were examined, but nothing new was elicited, and the jury retired to consult.

The verdict was given to the effect that "Miss Lawrence came to her death by a dagger-thrust inflicted by her own hand—probably under a temporary aberration of mind."

CHAPTER II

Doctor Pratt attended the funeral of Miss Lawrence, looking grave and sad, and dignified as the mournful occasion demanded. His restless eyes took in every detail, noted the grief of the mourners and friends, peered beneath the heavy crape veil of handsome Mrs. Vance, noted the absence of the bereaved bridegroom-elect; he even entered the gloomy vault and stood by the open coffin among the friends who were taking their last look at the pallid features of the beautiful suicide whose golden hair strayed over the white satin pillow, mingling with fragrant rosebuds and lilies.

After the funeral was over he drove to a fashionable street, and stopping at a fine hotel, sent up his card to a person whom he designated as Mr. Colville.

After a brief delay he was shown up to that gentleman's room.

Mr. Colville was a rather handsome but dissipated-looking man, of perhaps forty years. He was dressed in the extreme of fashion, and the elegance of his apparel, his costly diamonds, as well as the luxuriousness of the furniture about him, betokened a man of wealth and ease.

He removed his cigar from his dark mustached lips, and said, with a light laugh:

"Ah, Pratt, what deviltry are you up to now?"

"I have just come from attending a funeral," Doctor Pratt answered sedately, as he seated himself in a satin-cushioned arm-chair.

"A funeral!" Mr. Colville started and grew pale. "Was it that of—of Miss Lawrence?"

"The same," was the calm reply.

"Ah! beautiful Lily—so you are gone to be the bride of death—to be clasped to her icy heart! Well, better so," said Colville, bitterly.

"I wonder at your coldness," said Doctor Pratt, eyeing him keenly. "I thought you loved her to desperation."

"Man, man—I did, I did!" cried out Colville, starting up and pacing the floor wildly, "but what of that? She would not have my love. She laughed it to scorn, and was about to give herself to my haughty rival. Great Heaven! I was nearly crazed by the knowledge. It was a happy madness that armed her hand against her own life! I am glad she is dead. I would rather she were the prey of the worm than given to the arms of another."

"Sit down, sit down," said the physician, shortly. "Calm yourself, or you will fall in a fit as did your horror-struck rival on hearing the dreadful news of her death."

"Fell in a fit, did he?" said Colville, stopping short in his hurried walk. "I wish he had died. But, no! he might have rejoined her then in some better land than this."

"If there be a better land, which I doubt," said Pratt, with a cold sneer.

Colville threw himself down into an arm-chair and looked moodily across at the physician.

"Well, what have you come after?" he asked, abruptly and testily. "You have put me up to so many devilish schemes that I always expect some villany when I see your satanic countenance."

"I have put my freedom in jeopardy this week for the sake of your happiness," Doctor Pratt answered with assumed indifference, "but if you take such a high tone I can leave with my secret untold."

"A secret!" said Colville, looking up with some interest; "your secrets are always worth hearing, doctor. Let me have it, I beg you."

"This one is worth hearing, any way," said Doctor Pratt grimly, and, rising, he turned the door-key in the lock, after looking out suspiciously into the wide hall. Returning, he drew his chair close to Colville's and continued, calmly: "I cannot afford to give you this secret, Colville, I will sell it to you for the pretty little sum of ten thousand dollars—a mere bagatelle, that, to a man of your wealth."

"Ten thousand dollars! is the man mad?" muttered Colville. "Why, man alive, there is not a secret under the sun I would pay that much for!"

"Is there not?" smiled the other, and bending a little nearer he whispered in low, impressive accents: "What would you give me, Harold Colville, if I could take Lily Lawrence from her coffin to-night, cheat the grave-worm of its prey, and give her to your arms, warm, living, beautiful—dead to all the world, alive only to you?"

"Great Heaven! the half of my fortune were not too great a price for such a miracle," breathed Colville, excitedly. "But, Pratt, you are raving! Even your skill, great though I own it to be, could not accomplish that, unless you are leagued with the devil, as I have often suspected you are."

"Thanks," said the grim physician, curtly, then interrogated calmly: "So ten thousand dollars would not weigh much in the scale against Lily Lawrence living?"

"Not a feather's weight! I would give it to you freely, gladly, but, Pratt, you cannot do it!"

"I *can* do it! Listen to me, Colville," he whispered breathlessly. "Lily Lawrence lies in her coffin to-night, to all the world dead: but to me she is a living woman, and as such may be resurrected."

"But how—why—"

"Be calm, I will explain all. When her lifeless form was discovered I was hastily called in. I went; I carefully examined the body, which lay, to all appearance, cold and dead. I found an almost imperceptible warmth about her heart, a tinge of color in the palms of her hands, and a vacant stare in the eyes resembling death, but which might be only produced by that rare and strange disease known to medical men as 'catalepsy.' There was a slight flesh-wound about the heart; but the blow had been struck by such a trembling hand that it had failed to penetrate a vital part, and the dreadful shock of the attempted murder (for I do not believe in the sapient jury's verdict of suicide) threw the poor girl into a state of syncope, or catalepsy, so closely resembling death that it deceived all but my professional eyes."

"Yet you suffered them to entomb a living woman?"

"For your sake, remember, Colville; for as I knelt by the beautiful creature, half stunned by my startling discovery, the thought of you darted into my head like an inspiration. I remembered what you must suffer if she lived to bless your rival with her love. I said to myself—It will be several days, most likely, before she rouses from this trance of death. Let them bury her, and make to themselves other idols. In the meantime I will resurrect her, give her to Colville's eager arms, and earn his eternal gratitude as well as a more substantial fee for myself."

"Pratt, you are a demon!"

"Is that the way you thank me for my friendship?"

"No, oh, no; you have done well—you have done right, and you shall have your reward. But, Heavens! to think of her lying there in her living beauty among the skeletons and the worms—perhaps even now she is waking amid those gloomy shades! Ugh!" he shuddered, and started from the chair.

"No danger, I think," said the dark physician, smiling contemptuously; "I observed her closely this evening, and there were no signs of reviving. Patience, my friend, I bribed the old sexton, I have the key to the vault. In a few hours it will be night, and then we will bear away your drooping Lily to revive beneath the sunshine of your love."

"But where can we take her? If the theft is discovered there will be a hue and cry raised about the body."

"I know of a safe place. You remember the old couple in the suburbs? the same who kept poor Fanny till her ravings ended in her death?"

"Oh, God! do not remind me of such horrible things—let the dead past lie! Yes, I remember!"

"We will take her *there*. I have been to see them, and prepared them for our coming. You will have to pay heavily, of course, but you will not mind that in such a cause. Now, then, will you go with me to the graveyard to-night?"

"I will, and may the devil, who certainly helps you in your evil deeds, doctor, aid us both in this precarious scheme, and restore my living love to my devoted arms!"

"Amen!" breathed Doctor Pratt piously.

CHAPTER III

It was the day following the funeral of sweet Lily Lawrence—a sunny day, fragrant and bloomy with the wealth of summer. Outside of Mr. Lawrence's stately mansion in the handsome grounds enclosing it, flowers blossomed, the fountain threw up its diamond spray, and birds twittered and chirped.

But within the house all was silence and gloom. Mr. Lawrence was shut up in the library alone with his grief; Ada Lawrence lay ill of a low, nervous fever, induced by her poignant sorrow, and Mrs. Vance sat in the drawing-room alone, nervous and ill, and starting at every trivial sound.

The stately-looking widow was very handsome this morning. She wore a dress of thin black grenadine, relieved by creamy old lace at throat and wrists, and delicate ribbons of heliotrope color. Her wavy black hair was braided about her small head like a coronet, and a cluster of heliotrope blossoms nestled in its silken darkness.

A faint roseate bloom tinted her lips and cheeks, and heightened by contrast the restless brightness of her full, dark eyes, and the whiteness of her low brow. She was fully thirty-five years old, but nature and art had combined so gracefully in her make-up that she did not appear twenty-five.

A sudden peal of the door-bell made her spring up suddenly in nervous terror of she scarce knew what. She had hardly reseated herself when an obsequious servant ushered in a tall, exceedingly distinguished-looking young man. It was Lancelot Darling, the betrothed lover of the dead girl.

He was a splendidly handsome and imposing gentleman, but his elegant dress was disordered, his face was pale, almost to the verge of ghastliness, his large, brilliant dark eyes were so wild in their expression of grief that they almost seemed to glare upon the lady who advanced toward him with extended hands.

"Mr. Darling," she murmured in a low tone of surprise and pleasure. "You are better, you are able to be out."

He pressed her hand speechlessly, and tottered to a sofa, falling heavily upon it while his eyes closed for a minute. In a fright at the look of exhaustion on his white face, Mrs. Vance darted from the room, soon returning with a glass of cordial.

She lifted his head on her arm and pressed the goblet to his lips, trembling excessively the while. In a moment he revived, and rising on his elbow looked up while a faint flush mounted to his white forehead.

"Pardon me," he said, in a broken voice. "This is unmanly, I know, but I have been very ill, Mrs. Vance, and I am weak still—and it is hard, oh! so hard to come here like this!" He sat up, pushing the dark locks back from his brow, while a shudder ran through his strong frame.

"Believe me, I sympathize with you, I grieve with you," murmured the lady in silvery tones. "Our poor, lost Lily!" and her face was hidden in her handkerchief while a sob seemed to shake her graceful form.

"They say she died by her own hand," he cried, excitedly. "My God! what mystery is here, Mrs. Vance? What hidden cause drove the girl who was almost my wife to that fearful deed?"

"Did you suspect no cause?" asked she, looking at him sadly.

"None—there could be none. Young, beautiful, loving and beloved, she had no cause for sorrow."

"So it seemed to *you*," she answered, in low, soft tones, looking down as if she could not bear the anguish written on his features; "but strange as it may seem, Lily had some trouble unknown to us all, but which I suspected months ago. She had strange moods of deep depression and abstraction, followed by a feverish, unnatural gaiety. My suspicion of some mysterious trouble weighing on her heart was only confirmed by her sad and tragic death."

"Of what nature did you suspect her mysterious trouble to be?" asked the young man, looking at her in surprise and anxiety.

"I had nothing but conjecture to build on," said she, reluctantly. "It would be cruelty to harrow your soul with suspicions that may be baseless."

"But I insist on your telling me," said he, with unconscious imperiousness of tone and look.

"I fancied—mind, I only *fancied*," said she, deprecatingly, "that Lily, though betrothed to you, had conceived an unrequited attachment for another, or that perhaps she was the victim of some boarding-school entanglement which threatened to mar her happiness."

"Oh, impossible!" he answered, decisively. "Lily had no silly school-girl entanglements. She told me so. And she loved me alone—loved me as devotedly as I loved her—I am perfectly certain of that. No, Mrs. Vance, you are mistaken. The theory of the jury is the only one I can accept. The fatal deed must have been committed under a temporary aberration of mind."

The sudden entrance of Mr. Lawrence checked the mournful expression that rose to her lips.

As the two men shook hands in silence, each noted the ravages grief had made in the other.

Mr. Lawrence's portly form was bowed feebly, his genial face was seamed with lines of grief and care, while premature silver threads shone amid his chestnut-brown hair.

The ghastly pallor of Lancelot Darling, his wild eyes, his trembling hands, attested how maddening and soul-harrowing was his despair.

"Lance, my poor boy, you have been ill," said the banker, in a gentle tone of sympathy.

"Yes, I have been ill," said Lancelot, brokenly; then almost crushing the banker's hand in his strong, unconscious grasp, he broke out wildly: "Mr. Lawrence, I have come here to beg a favor of you."

"Name it," said Mr. Lawrence, kindly.

"I want the key of your vault. I want to see my Lily's face once more," he answered, in an imploring tone.

"Would it be well? Would it be wise?" asked the other in a tone of surprise and pain.

"I do not know, I do not ask," said Lancelot, impetuously. "I only know that my soul hungers for a sight of my darling's face. Do not refuse me, my friend. Let me see her once more before death has obliterated all her beauty!"

"Better think of her, Lance, as when you last saw her in life and health," said the banker uneasily. "She is already changed. You are too weak to bear the agitation that would ensue if I granted your request."

"You refuse me, then," said the young man in a voice of passionate grief. "She was to have been my wife ere now, yet you will not suffer me to press one last, long kiss on the cold lips of my darling."

"Oh, do not refuse him," cried Mrs. Vance, gliding forward and laying a persuasive little hand on the banker's arm. "Think of his bleeding heart and blighted hopes. Remember how fondly he loved her. Go with him to the vault, and show him our broken Lily lying asleep in the deep rest she coveted."

Lancelot's heavy, dark eyes flashed a look of gratitude upon the beautiful pleader as she ceased to speak.

The banker paused irresolutely.

"If I thought he could bear it," he murmured.

"I *can* bear it, I *will*!" said Lancelot, firmly. "Only grant my request."

"The sexton has the key of the vault," said Mr. Lawrence, yielding reluctantly. "I will go with you, Lance."

"Let it be at once then. My carriage is at the gate," said the half frenzied young lover, moving off after a slight bow to Mrs. Vance.

Mr. Lawrence followed him, the door was closed, and the handsome widow stood alone in the center of the splendid drawing-room. She took one or two turns up and down the room, her black dress trailing its gloomy folds over the rich carpet.

"Let him go," she said at last, pausing and clenching her delicate hands together. "Let him go! That marble mask of his beautiful love can but disenchant him. I have already dropped a suspicion of her love into his heart. He does not heed it yet, but no matter, it shall take root, it shall grow, it shall bear fruit an hundredfold! He shall turn to me yet. I love him with a love passing everything, and I will stop at nothing till I call him mine!"

She laughed aloud as the thought of her future triumph swept through her heart. It was a strange, eerie laugh—It sounded as if a beautiful fiend had laughed in Hades.

The elegant carriage, with its high stepping, spirited gray horses, bowled rapidly along the busy streets of New York, and at length paused before the beautiful cemetery in which Mr. Lawrence's vault was situated. The banker then stepped into the sexton's house where he called for the key of the vault. The sexton gave it to him with some surprise at the request, and the gentleman returned to Lancelot Darling who was impatiently pacing a graveled path in the "fair Necropolis of the dead."

The banker paused and laid his hand on the young man's arm.

"I have the key, Lance," he said, "but even now I wish I could persuade you not to enter the vault; I dread the effect on your already weak nerves. Remember what a difference there must be between the blooming Lily you last looked upon and the poor, faded flower in yon gloomy stone vault."

"Mr. Lawrence, you do but torture me," said the young man, with a gesture of wild despair. "However she may be changed let me see her. Yet I cannot believe that that beautiful face can be altered so soon. Cruel death would stay his defacing hand when he looked on such loveliness."

With a sigh of regret the elder man turned and walked on down the shady path. Lancelot followed him, taking no note of the beautiful day and the song of the birds and the fragrance of the rare flowers all around him. Over the low mounds everywhere gentle hands of affection had planted lovely flowers and shrubs, trying to make grim death beautiful. But he heeded them not as he stopped in front of the marble vault, guarded by a marble angel, and followed Mr. Lawrence into its dim recesses.

They walked down the echoing aisle, between rows of moldy, decaying coffins, and paused with beating hearts and labored breath beside a new casket, loaded with wreaths and crosses of fragrant white hot-house flowers.

The murky air of the charnel house was heavy with the scent of tube-roses, violets and pale white roses. With trembling hands they removed these tokens of affection, until the lid of the coffin was disclosed. With a shudder Lancelot read the inscription on the silver plate:

"Lily Lawrence

"Aged eighteen."

Mr. Lawrence drew out the silver screws and removed the lid.

"My God!" he cried, as he gazed within.

The costly casket was empty. The white satin cushioning that love had devised to make the bed of death a soft one, held the impress of her form, the pillow was lightly dented where her golden head had lain, but the cold form that rested there yesterday with white hands folded over the quiet heart, with pale lips shut over the woful secret of her death, that loved form was gone from their gaze.

CHAPTER IV

Go with me, kind reader, to the outskirts of the great city; enter with me an humble house; we pass invisibly inside the locked door, we glide unseen up the staircase, and into a plainly furnished, low-ceiled room. Our acquaintance, Doctor Pratt, is there—also his co-conspirator, Harold Colville, is there. Both are bending anxiously over a low, white bed where a girlish, recumbent form lies extended.

At the foot of the bed stands an old crone with gray elf-locks floating under a tawdry black lace cap. Wrinkled, and bent, and witch-like, with beady black eyes and parchment-like skin, she is frightful to look at as she peers curiously into the beautiful white face lying on the pillow.

"Pratt, you have deceived me," Colville breaks out sternly; "all your restoratives have failed, all your potent art is at fault. Look at that marble face, those breathless lips. It is death, not life, we look upon."

"Bah!" said Doctor Pratt. Rising and going to the young lady's head, he gently turned it on one side: at the same time he changed the position of one arm. *Both retained for a short time their new position* then slowly resumed their former place. He raised her eyelids and they remained open a brief interval, then gently closed again. The beautiful blue eyes they disclosed were neither glassy nor corpse-like, though fixed in a vacant, unnatural stare. The physician resumed his seat and said, calmly:

"You see, Colville, it is life, not death. I tell you it is that rare, mysterious affection we call *cataplexy*—a state fearfully blending the conditions of life and death—a seeming life in death, or death in life. It is true that all my remedies have failed: but it is equally true that life is not extinct, though the spark may perish from exhaustion if she does not soon revive. It is now four days since the cold steel entered her side and this mysterious unconsciousness fell upon her. But the horrid spell must soon be broken, or death will ensue as a consequence of loss of blood and vitality."

They withdrew a little further from the bed, Pratt still keeping a watchful eye upon the patient, while Colville tried to keep his roving glance away from the death-like face that sent a shudder of fear now and then along his frame. It seemed fearfully like death despite the learned theory of the case which Doctor Pratt was patiently explaining to him.

"You said the first time we talked of this that you believed Miss Lawrence had been murdered," said Colville, suddenly. "Why did you form that opinion despite the contrary evidence?"

"There was no evidence to the contrary," said the dark physician, complacently. "I formed it on the evidence of my own eyes. True, Miss Lawrence's door was locked on the inside; but"—he paused a moment to give effect to his words—"but a heavy, luxuriant honeysuckle vine was trained from the ground up to her window in the second story. The murderer, or murderess, entered her room by the door, turned the key, perpetrated the dreadful deed, and escaped by sliding down the thickly-twisted vine to the ground."

"That is only your theory, doctor, I suppose."

"It is a fact, not theory, monsieur. I furtively examined the vine myself. It was broken in places, bruised in its tender parts, and quantities of leaves and flowers were strewn upon the ground. It plainly showed that a heavy body had slid down upon it and injured it. I wonder that it escaped the dull eyes of the jury."

"You are an astute man, doctor. Who, then, was the assassin of one so young and fair?"

"I do not know, but I half suspected the beautiful woman who lives at Lawrence's—a sort of cousin, I think—a Mrs. Vance by name. Her evidence went a little further than the rest. She asserted that she heard the young lady lock her door that night—she seemed to favor the idea of suicide also by pressing a theory of her own, that Miss Lawrence had a secret trouble—was subject to fits of abstraction and depression. Yes, decidedly, I suspect the beautiful widow."

"What motive could she have had?"

"That I do not know. I could find out though if I set my wits to work. But I have no interest in knowing."

"I have it," said Colville, suddenly; "I am acquainted with Mrs. Vance. When I used to visit the Lawrences I found out—no matter how—that Mrs. Vance was in love with Lancelot Darling. If she did the deed it was jealousy that goaded her to its commission."

"Very probably," said the doctor.

They had talked on, forgetful or regardless of the old woman who sat at the foot of the bed. She was listening eagerly, with twitching fingers, and muttered inaudibly, "Gold, gold."

"What are you muttering about, old hag?" said Pratt, overhearing her. "None of your jargon now. And don't repeat what we have been saying to your old man. If you do I will send your black soul to its doom sooner than it would go of its own accord! Do you hear me, old witch?"

"Yes, I hear; I will never repeat it, never," whined the old wretch, grinning horribly.

"See that you don't, then," said Colville.

The evening hours wore on to midnight, and the three watchers in the quiet room kept their places, undisturbed by even a breath from the pale form on the bed. The old crone sat wide awake and on the alert: Doctor Pratt leaned back and watched the patient through half-closed lids; Colville dozed in a large arm-chair. Surely there never was a patient who gave so little trouble to the nurses. No querulous complaint came from the pale lips, no restless hands tossed aside the bed-clothes, no fever-parched tongue cried out for the cooling draught of ice-water. Still and pale she lay through the panting summer night, taking no note of time or aught earthly.

Hark! the midnight hour tolled solemnly and sharply. Mysterious hour when crime stalks abroad under shelter of darkness, when disembodied spirits re-visit the haunts of men! Colville started from his uneasy dozing, then settled himself again as the last loud stroke died away in hollow echoes. But he did not sleep again, for a simultaneous cry from the physician and the old woman turned his glance toward the bed. Ah! what was that?

The awful spell of death was *broken*. The patient presented a ghastly appearance. Her large, blue eyes were wide open, and staring an indescribable look of horror at the witch-like face of the old woman. Her lips were slightly apart, and a thin stream of blood was trickling from her mouth and nostrils.

"Begone," said the physician, sharply. "Bring warm water and sponges."

She quickly returned with the necessary articles. Doctor Pratt gently sponged away the blood with warm water so as not to entirely check the bleeding. A long, deep sigh quivered over the patient's lips, and turning her head she looked languidly about her. Doctor Pratt made a sign to Colville and he hastily drew aside out of range of her vision.

"Drink this wine, Lily," said the physician, putting a wine-glass to her lips. She feebly swallowed the contents, then closing her eyes with a languid sigh fell into a deep, refreshing sleep, breathing softly and audibly. He turned to Colville with a triumphant smile.

"What about my theory *now*?" said he.

Colville was trembling with excitement. He came forward, and looked at the face sleeping calmly on the pillow, its rigid lines softening into natural repose.

"Surely, Pratt, you are in league with the devil," said he, half-fearfully. "An hour ago I could have sworn that it was grim death we looked upon, but now—"

"But now," said Doctor Pratt, "she is doing well—she will soon recover. And then you can set about your wooing."

"Ah!" said Colville, doubtfully. "I wish that your potent art could insure me her love as skillfully as you insured me her life!"

The patient's deep slumber lasted till the rosy dawn of the summer morn began to break over the earth. Then the blue eyes opened with a look of bewilderment in their beautiful depths.

"Where am I?" she languidly interrogated, sweeping her small white hand across her brow.

Colville had gone, but the unwearied physician sitting by the bedside answered, calmly:

"You are in good hands, Miss Lawrence. I am your physician. You have been very ill, and must not agitate yourself by asking questions yet."

CHAPTER V

"You say I have been very ill?" said Lily, looking up into the dark face bending over her.

"Yes, you have been near to death's door; but indeed you must not talk; you will exhaust yourself."

"But I must talk," said the patient, willfully. "Why am I here? This is not my home," glancing round the poor, ill-furnished room. "Where are my father, my sister, my maid? Oh, God!" and a piercing shriek burst from her lips. "I remember everything—the murderous dagger-thrust, the horrid spell that bound me hand and foot and tongue. I could not speak, I could not move; but I heard them weeping round me; I heard—"

"For Heaven's sake, cease! You will kill yourself indeed, Miss Lawrence!" cried the physician in alarm.

But she waved him off, and sitting upright in bed continued wildly:

"I heard your voice telling them that I was dead. I heard the horrid inquest held over me. I heard the funeral service while I lay in the open coffin, unable to stir, unable to comfort my weeping loved ones. They bore me away. They locked me—me, a living, agonized human creature—into the dreadful vault with the horrible dead for companions. Ah! then, indeed, I became unconscious. I knew no more. Oh! oh! what torture, what agonies I have endured!" cried the girl, waving her white hands over her head and screaming aloud in her terrified recollection of the dreadful agonies she had borne while in her cataleptic state.

"She will kill herself indeed," muttered Pratt, hastily forcing a composing draught between her writhing lips.

She continued to rave wildly until the potent drug took effect on her overwrought system and produced a deep, unnatural slumber.

He went away and left her to the care of the witchlike old woman. She awoke toward evening and found the old woman knitting away by her bedside. The beautiful girl looked at her in wonder and fright.

"Are you a vision from another world or only a fevered phantom of my brain?" she inquired in a weak voice.

The creature only scowled at her in reply, but she rose and brought a bowl of fresh arrowroot and fed the patient, who found it very refreshing after her protracted fasting.

Old Haidee, as she was called, left the room with the empty bowl, and Lily lay still, looking about her with a vague dread creeping into her heart. Had she indeed died in that horrible vault, and was she now in another world inhabited by such hideous beings as the one who had just left her? She shuddered and closed her eyes. The sound of a footstep aroused her. A man was entering the room. It was Harold Colville. He came and stood by the bed-side, looking down at her pale face with passionate tenderness shining in his eyes.

Her white cheeks turned crimson.

"Mr. Colville!" she cried, angrily, "what means this unwarrantable intrusion?"

"Oh, Lily! this from you!" he cried in sorrowful reproach. "Lily, I have saved your life, my darling, and this is my reward; when all others deserted you and left you in your coffin my love could not rest without one more look at your dear face. Yes, the love you spurned in happier days clung to you then and sought you amid the horrors of the dreadful charnel-house. I entered the vault; I opened the coffin; I kissed the lips that were dearer to me dead than those of any living woman. And then I discovered faint signs of life! In my rapture at the discovery I bore you away in my carriage and placed you under the care of a splendid physician. You revived; you lived—yes, dead to all the world beside, you live alone for me, my fair, my peerless Lily!"

He smiled triumphantly, while a look of horror dawned in her eyes.

"You—you will restore me to my friends?" she gasped in breathless agitation.

"Lily, can you ask it? Can I bear to give you up, long and truly as I have loved you? When death, in compassion for my sorrow, has given you up from the very tomb itself to my loving arms could I give you back to your less devoted lover and live my life without you, my peerless darling? Lily, do not ask me for such a sacrifice."

"I am never to see father, sister, friends, again?" asked she, with whitening lips.

"Yes, yes, Lily. Only consent to reward my fidelity with your dear hand, and you shall see them all again."

"I cannot," she moaned, faintly; "I am betrothed to another."

"Death has broken the bond," said he; "your lover has torn you from his heart ere this in angry resentment at your supposed suicide. He believes that you loved another and chose death in preference to a loveless marriage with him. Give yourself to me, Lily, and that will confirm his belief."

"Oh, never, never! I do not love you," she cried, vehemently.

"Love would come in time, darling. Gratitude to the savior of your life would create love. I could make you happy, Lily; I have wealth, position, influence—all the things that woman values most."

"I can never love anyone but Lancelot Darling," she said, while a blush tinged her cheek at the sweet confession.

His brow grew dark as night.

"Speak not the name of my hated rival," he cried, angrily. "I saved your life, not he! Yet this is your gratitude!"

"Oh, indeed I am grateful if indeed you saved my life," she cried. "But ask me for some other reward. Take my eternal gratitude, my undying friendship, take the last penny of my fortune, but spare me my happiness!"

"You rave, Lily," he answered, coldly. "Nothing you have offered me has any value in my eyes except yourself. I will never, never resign you. You are in my power here. To all the world you are dead. You shall remain so until you marry me!"

"I will never, never marry you!" she cried, with passionate defiance.

"We shall see," he answered, angrily; but his words fell on deaf ears. She had fallen back in a deep swoon. He went out and sent Haidee to assist her while he hurriedly left the house.

The swoon was a deep one. Lily lay quite exhausted after she revived, and was still and speechless for some hours. Doctor Pratt came that night and gave her another sleeping potion. She took it quietly without remark, and slept heavily all night. The sun was high in the heavens next day when old Haidee, sitting by her pillow, started to find those large blue eyes fixed thoughtfully upon her. She ran and brought a nourishing breakfast up-stairs to her patient.

"You are better," said she, in her cracked voice, seeing that Lily ate with an appetite.

"I am stronger," said she, as Haidee removed the tray.

She was quiet a while after the old crone had taken her seat and resumed her knitting. Presently she asked, abruptly:

"What is your name?"

"They call me Haidee," said the old woman, shortly.

"Do you live here alone, Haidee?"

"My old man lives with me," said she.

"You are very poor, I suppose," said Lily, letting her eyes rove over the poorly furnished bedroom.

"Miserably poor, honey," said old Haidee, while an avaricious light gleamed in her small black eyes.

"Is this place in New York?" asked the patient.

"Thereabouts," answered old Haidee.

"Would you like to earn some money—heaps of shining gold?" asked the girl, timidly.

The old woman's beady eyes sparkled. "Aye, that I would," said she.

"If you will carry a little note to my father for me, I'll give you plenty of money," said Lily, tremblingly.

"Where is your money?" asked Haidee, cautiously.

"I have no money with me," said Lily, "but my father will give you some when you take him this note."

"The pay must be in advance," said Haidee, provokingly, "I can't trust your promise."

Lily looked about her despairingly. There was nothing valuable about her except a diamond ring on her finger. Her eyes fell upon that.

"I will give you my diamond ring if you will carry the note to my father."

"Aye, aye, but your captors would miss it from your finger," said Haidee, watching the sparkling jewel with greedy eyes. "They would suspect you had bribed me, and they would kill old Haidee."

"That is true," murmured the patient, sadly. She lay a little while lost in thought, then her face grew bright.

"I will tell you what I will do," said she. "See, there are five diamonds in my ring. Each one is worth a hundred dollars. I will loosen one of the stones and give it to you if you will help me to escape from here. They will not miss one single stone from the ring, or if they do they will think it had become loosened from the setting and lost. Come, what do you say?"

"It is a risky undertaking, and the reward is small," muttered the old creature.

"My father shall give much more if you help me. Haidee, will you do it?" asked Lily, imploringly.

"Yes, I will," said the old woman, greedily.

"Now?" asked Lily.

"Yes, now, before the doctor or Mr. Colville comes back. My old man can take care of you until I return."

Lily shuddered at the mention of the old man, but hastily begged for writing materials.

There were none to be had except the stub of an old pencil and some light brown wrapping-paper. The old crone brought her these with a muttered apology for her poverty, and sitting up in bed, Lily wrote a few feeble, incoherent lines to her father.

"Dear papa," she wrote, "I am not dead, though you put me in a coffin and locked me in the vault with all the dead and gone Lawrences. I was stolen from the vault, and a doctor brought me to life again. I am kept a prisoner here by Harold Colville, who swears he will not release me until I marry him. I have hired the old woman who takes care of me to take you this letter. You must give her money, papa dear, for her kindness. She will conduct you here where I am. Oh! hasten, papa, and release me from this horrible prison.

"Your loving daughter,

"Lily."

Taking the old woman's knitting needle she carefully pryed out one of the diamonds from her ring, and putting it with the note into Haidee's hand bade her hasten.

"It is a long way from here. It will take me several hours to go," was the answer.

"I shall count the minutes till you return," said Lily. "God bless you, Haidee, for your goodness to me at this trying time."

The old woman chuckled as she went out, and locked the door after her. At the foot of the stairs she paused and carefully reread the superscription of the letter.

"Number 1800 Fifth avenue," said she, gloatingly. "Ah! the outside of this letter is all I want to see."

She hobbled into her room, set her old man on guard to watch her prisoner, and blithely wended her way cityward.

CHAPTER VI

"Mrs. Vance, there is an old woman down-stairs says she has brought the laces you wished to see," said a trim little serving maid at Mrs. Vance's door.

Mrs. Vance looked up impatiently from her book.

"I have not ordered any laces at all," said the lady, sharply. "Send the lying old creature away, Agnes."

The trim maid hesitated.

"You ought to look at them, Mrs. Vance," said she, timidly; "such lovely laces I never saw. They are as delicate as sea-foam and very cheap. I expect they are smuggled goods."

"Well, well, let her come up then, but I do not need any of her wares."

Agnes went away and presently reappeared a moment at the door, and ushered in old Haidee with a basket on her arm. The maid then left them together.

"Now, then," said the lady, sharply, "what did you mean by saying I had ordered your laces?"

"Oh! pretty lady, forgive an old woman's lie to the maids for the sake of getting in. I have bargains, lady—lovely laces smuggled through the Custom House without any duty—I can sell them to you much cheaper than the merchants can afford to do."

"Let me see them, then," said the lady, with apparent indifference.

Old Haidee unpacked her wares and exhibited a small but fine assortment of real laces. Her prices were extremely low, and Mrs. Vance, though she pretended indifference, was charmed with their elegance, and the small sum asked by the vender. After a good deal of haggling she selected several yards, and paid for them in gold pieces taken from a silken netted purse through whose interstices gleamed many more pieces of the same kind. Old Haidee's eyes gleamed greedily at the sight.

"Gold-gold!" she muttered, working her claw-like fingers. "Give me the purse, pretty lady."

Mrs. Vance withdrew a step in amazement.

"Old woman, you are crazy. Go, leave the room this very instant!"

"Give me the gold," still pleaded the miserly old hag.

"I will have you turned out of the house this minute, miserable old beggar!" cried Mrs. Vance, moving toward the bell.

"Stop one moment, lady, I have something to say to you—a secret to tell you. You would not have me tell it before the servants, would you?" said the old woman, in such a meaning tone that Mrs. Vance actually hesitated, with her hand on the bell-rope.

"Say on," said she, haughtily, and thinking to herself that the old lace-vender was insane.

"Bend closer, lady, the walls have ears sometimes. This is a terrible secret," said Haidee, with a solemn air.

Mrs. Vance moved a step nearer, impressed in spite of herself by the eerie, witch-like gestures and sepulchral air of the speaker.

"Lady, a few nights ago a fair young girl was murdered within these stately walls. Ah! you tremble; she trembled too when the jealous woman stole into her room, turned the key in the lock, and struck her down as she stood looking at her sweet reflection in her bridal dress—yes, struck her down with a brutal dagger-thrust in her heart. The wicked murderess stooped to see if her guilty work was done, then escaped down the ladder of vines that climbed up to the window. The jury said that the poor girl committed suicide; but we know better—do we not, beautiful lady?"

"You are a fiend," cried Mrs. Vance, from the chair where she had sunk down, still clutching the heavy purse of gold coins in her cold hand. "You lie! no one murdered her—she died by her own hand."

"Lady, I shall not tell my secret to any one but you," said Haidee, with a low and fiend-like laugh. "Now, will you give me the gold?"

"Never! You have come here to blackmail me! you wish to frighten me by trumped up suspicion; I will not buy your silence!" cried Mrs. Vance, passionately.

"Very well, lady, I will go to Mr. Lawrence, I will go to Mr. Darling, I will tell them what I have told you," said the lace-vender, rising to leave.

"Stay—who knows this lying tale besides yourself?"

"No one, lady. I, Haidee Leveret, am the only witness of your crime, and you can buy my silence with that purse of gold," said the old crone, sepulchrally.

"Take it, then," said Mrs. Vance, flinging it down at her feet "and keep the secret till your dying day! you need not return to blackmail me again. That is all the gold I have. I am a poor woman. I can get no more to give you!"

The old woman gathered up the purse of coins, hid it in her bosom, and trotted out, mouthing and mumbling to herself. Mrs. Vance fell down upon the floor writhing in terror. "My sin has found me out," she cried, wringing her white hands helplessly. "Oh, Lancelot, Lancelot, it was all for you!"

"A lucky day," said old Haidee to herself as she trotted down the street. "A fine piece of work, and well paid for! A purse of gold and a diamond! Well, well!"

She stopped and took poor Lily's note from her pocket where it had lain concealed, and tearing it into minute fragments threw it into the street. A gentleman passing by observed the action curiously. It was Mr. Lawrence. Ah! if he had but known whose hand had written the note whose coarse, brown fragments lay under his feet, if he had but turned and followed that hideous old witch, what months of sorrow might have been spared him. But he did not know, and he went on to his home, bowed and heart-broken, while old Haidee trotted quickly past, crooning a low tune in the pride of her gratified avarice and cunning.

As she went into the door of her home, Doctor Pratt came in suddenly after her.

"Now where have you been, Haidee?" he asked, suspiciously.

"Only to market, doctor," said she, trembling, sidling past him with the basket on her arm.

He found his patient restless and excited. She was tossing uneasily from side to side of the bed, and her cheeks were flushed and feverish. He took the small hand, and found the pulse bounding rapidly beneath his touch.

"This will not do," said he, "you must not excite yourself unduly."

The door opened, admitting Haidee with a bowl of fresh arrowroot. Lily looked wistfully beyond her, but she was quite alone. She saw in Haidee's cautious, negative shake of the head that her mission had failed. She fell back, crushed with her disappointment.

"Come, take your nourishment," said Pratt, kindly.

She shook her head. A choking sensation arose in her throat, and she could not swallow. She determined to make one appeal to this grim-looking man.

"Doctor," she said, clasping her hands imploringly, "I appeal to your honor, to your generosity, to your humanity, to restore me to my home and father!"

Doctor Pratt shook his head decisively.

"It is impossible for me to do that," he answered; "you are in the power of Mr. Colville; I am merely employed by him to attend you in your illness. You must make your appeal to him."

"He is a villain, a designing wretch!" she broke out, indignantly. "I will make no appeal to him. But, doctor, if you will go and tell my father where to find me, I will give you five thousand dollars the day I am liberated from this prison-house."

He laughed and drew a newspaper from his pocket. Putting it in her hands, he directed her attention to a marked paragraph. She read it with streaming eyes. It ran simply:

"Much sympathy has been excited for the Lawrence family in the painful discovery that the body of Miss Lily Lawrence has been stolen from the vault of her father. The well-known wealth of

the great banker makes it seem probable that the foul deed was committed with a view to a heavy ransom. It will be seen in our reward column that Mr. Lawrence offers ten thousand dollars for the return of the corpse."

"So your father offers more for the repose of your dead body than you do for your living one," he said, laughing. "No, Miss Lawrence, I cannot accept your munificent bribe. My duty to Mr. Colville forbids. And *au revoir*. I must be going. I leave you some medicine and will see you again to-morrow. Take the best care of her, Haidee."

He went away, and they heard the hall door clang behind him. Lily turned to her silent attendant.

"Haidee, you did not go," she murmured, in a reproachful tone.

"Oh! yes, I did, miss, but your father was not there," readily answered the treacherous old woman.

"Oh! then you left the note for him, and also your address?" said Lily in a more hopeful tone.

"Aye, that I did, miss," said old Haidee, lying glibly; "I gave it to a very pretty lady."

"It was my sister Ada, then," said Lily.

"No, miss; your sister lies ill of a fever. I gave it to a lady called Mrs. Vance," lied Haidee, watching the patient's face keenly.

A startling change swept over the girl's white features. Fear, terror, resentment—all were blended in that look.

"Oh!" she cried, "then indeed I have no hope of release! She will not give the letter to my father. She is my murderess—she tried to kill me. She will come here and make her fatal work sure! Watch for her, Haidee—do not allow her to enter here. She will kill me, indeed she will kill me!"

"Oh, me, honey, I am so sorry that I gave her the note," said Haidee, artfully; "but do not be afraid, she shall not come here to finish her devil's work—no, not she, my poor deary."

Alas! alas! poor Lily! Doctor Pratt's opiates could not bring oblivion of her troubles that night. She raved and tossed through the long and weary night, while Haidee, thoroughly alarmed, was very glad to see the physician's face quite early the next morning.

CHAPTER VII

"Come home and dine with me, Lance," said Mr. Lawrence, meeting Lancelot Darling amid the bustle and stir of Wall street.

Poor Lance had been strolling carelessly up and down with a care-worn, wretched look upon his handsome face. Time went very slowly with him now. He turned about and, shaking hands with his friend, walked on by his side.

"Is there any news?" he asked, his mind reverting instantly to the painful event which occupied all his waking thoughts.

"None," answered the banker, sadly. "Some of the sharpest detectives in the city are trying to trace it, but as yet there is not the faintest clew."

He sighed and Lancelot echoed the sigh. Both walked silently on. At length the banker signaled a car and, entering it, they became at once the cynosure of all the eyes within it. Their recent terrible affliction was so well known that sympathy shone on them from every eye. But little was said to them even by the friends they encountered. The mute trouble of their faces seemed to repel the mere trivialities of conversation, and no one wished to speak of the mournful tragedy whose impress was written so legibly on the faces of both the sufferers.

"You are looking very ill," Mrs. Vance said, in a gentle tone of sympathy, when the banker had left the guest in the drawing-room while he went up to see Ada, whose illness had not as yet taken any favorable turn.

"I am quite well, thank you," he answered, absently, and with an unconscious, heart-wrung sigh. He was looking about him sadly, seeing in fancy the graceful, girlish form that had so often flitted through this grand room. She saw the turn his mind had taken, and instantly diverted it to the present.

"Has anything been heard from our poor Lily yet?" she asked, in low, mournful tones.

"Nothing, nothing. Oh! Mrs. Vance, this suspense is very hard to bear," said he, impetuously, won by the gentle sympathy in her face and voice to an outburst he had not intended. "It is almost killing me!"

"Poor Lance," said she, in a broken voice; "your features show the traces of your great suffering. It is hard for us all to bear, but harder still for you."

Her delicate hand fluttered down upon his own with a pressure of mute sympathy, while she buried her face in her handkerchief, sobbing softly.

"I should not have brought my gloomy face here to sadden you still more—forgive me for my reckless outburst," said he, pained by the sight of her womanly grief, which always goes to a man's heart.

"Do not regret it," she answered, through her sobs. "Let me grieve with you, poor boy, in your trouble. Believe me, sympathy is very sweet."

"Thank you," he answered, gently. "Ah! this indeed is a house of mourning. Is Ada any better to-day, Mrs. Vance?"

"I am sorry to say she is not," answered the lady, making a pretence of drying her eyes, which, however, had not been wet by a single tear. "She has a low, intermittent fever, which does not as yet yield at all to the physician's treatment. God grant we are not to lose our lovely Ada, too. Ah! that would indeed be a sad consequence of poor Lily's rash suicide."

He shuddered through all his strong young frame at that concluding word.

"Oh, God!" he groaned, "the mystery of it! Suicide! Suicide! If God had taken her from us, I could learn to say, 'It is well'—but that she should weary of us all, that she should rush out of this life that I thought to make so fair and beautiful to her in our united future! I cannot understand it—it is horrible, maddening!"

Musingly she murmured over a few lines from Tom Hood's mournful poem, "The Bridge of Sighs:"

"Mad from Life's history,
Swift to Death's mystery,
Glad to be hurled
Anywhere, anywhere, out of the world!"

The words seemed to madden him. Impatiently he strode up and down the floor.

"She never loved me as I loved her!" he broke out, passionately. "I could not have done aught to grieve her so. If earth had been a desert, it must still have been Paradise to me while she walked upon it. Oh! Lily, Lily, you were very cruel!"

"Do not grieve so, I beseech you," said the widow's gentle voice. Timidly she took his hand and led him to a seat. "You will make yourself ill. We cannot afford to lose you, too. You were so near becoming one of the family that you seem almost to take the place of our dear one who has left us."

"You think me almost a madman," said he, remorsefully. "I startle you with my wild words. I should not have come here."

"Yes, you should," she answered, kindly. "You should come oftener than you do and let me sympathize with you in your trouble. Who can grieve with you so well as I who knew and loved your dear one? Promise to come every day, dear Lance, and let us share our trouble together."

"I will try," he answered, moved by her gentle friendliness, and thinking as he looked up that she was a very handsome woman. Not with the beauty of his lost Lily. *Her* angelic, blonde fairness typified the highest beauty to him. But handsome with a certain queenliness that was very winning. How dark and soft her eyes were—how beautiful the sweep of the long, dark lashes. And her cheeks—how rich and soft was the color that glowed upon them and deepened to crimson tints upon her full lips. And when that dark, bright face glowed with tenderness and feeling how very fascinating it became. When she took on herself the *role* of comforter how softly she could pour the oil of healing on the troubled waves of feeling. She had Lance soothed and quieted before Mr. Lawrence came down, with a pale and troubled face, from Ada's sick room.

Dinner went off rather soberly and solemnly. The array of silver and cut-glass was dazzling, the edibles costly and dainty, but Lance scarcely made a pretence of eating. Mr. Lawrence merely trifled with the viands, and Mrs. Vance was the only one whose appetite was equal to the demands of the occasion. Conversation lagged, though the beautiful widow tried to keep it up with all the consummate art of which she was mistress. But the gentlemen did not second her efforts, and she was relieved when the formal ceremony was over and they went out to smoke their cigars.

"I will go in and see Ada a little," thought she. "The nurse says the fever is not infectious."

She tripped lightly up the steps and into the room where poor Ada lay tossing in her burning fever. She was very much like her sister in appearance, but the luxurious chamber where she lay was in great contrast with that in which poor suffering Lily was now immured. True, Lily had all the comforts her sickness needed, but here the capricious eyes of an invalid found everything to charm and soothe the weary eye. Here delicate curtains of silk and lace shut out the too dazzling light of day; here dainty white hangings delighted the eye with their coolness and purity. Here and there were set vases of freshly-cut flowers filling the air with sweetness, and rare and costly paintings looked down from the softly tinted walls.

An expression of annoyance swept over the girl's fair, ingenuous face as Mrs. Vance bent airily over her and touched her feverish brow with her delicately rouged lips.

"You should not kiss me," said she, pettishly, "this fever may be infectious."

"The doctor said it was not infectious, my dear," murmured the lady sweetly. "I asked him myself this morning."

"Oh! you did, eh? I suppose wild horses could not have dragged you in here to see me if it had been," said Ada, sarcastically.

"Is there anything I can do for you, my love?" asked Mrs. Vance, gracefully ignoring the spoiled girl's incivility.

"Nothing—only do not talk to me—talking hurts my head," replied the invalid, turning her face away.

"Ah, then, if I only disturb you I will take my leave," said the handsome widow, tripping out of the room.

"You were rather rude, my dear," said the nurse, surprised at her gentle patient's sudden petulance.

"I don't care," said Ada vehemently, "I hate that woman! I cannot tell why it is, but I have hated her ever since she came here to live, nearly two years ago. She knows I do not like her, but she affects unconsciousness of it. Keep the door locked, nurse, and do not let her come in here again—tell her I am too ill to see anyone. When she kissed me just now I felt as if a great slimy snake had crawled over me—ugh!" she said, shuddering at the recollection.

CHAPTER VIII

The great agitation of poor imprisoned Lily Lawrence culminated in a severe fit of illness, and Doctor Pratt found need for all his skill before convalescence set in again. Mr. Colville prudently kept himself in the background now, so she was not troubled by the sight of the villain's face for several weeks. Haidee proved herself a careful and efficient nurse, and in three weeks' time poor Lily rose from her sick-bed pale, weak and weary, her girlish heart filled with heaviness and despair. She had again and again entreated old Haidee to go to her father, but in vain. The old woman stubbornly turned a deaf ear to all her entreaties. The old crone's husband Lily had not yet seen, though she frequently heard his gruff and brutal tones in the next room to hers, which appeared to be his sleeping-apartment.

She was sitting up one day in the great arm-chair puzzling her brain over some plan of escape. She looked very lovely still, though wasted by illness and sorrow. Haidee had provided her with a neat blue wrapper, and her fairness was almost dazzling by contrast with its becoming hue. Her rich golden hair was gathered in a loose coil at the back of her graceful little head, showing the whiteness of her neck, and the rosy tinting of her small, shell-like ears. A fancy seized her to look out of the window which was always covered with thick curtains. It was warm and sultry and she longed for a breath of the sweet and balmy air outside her gloomy-looking room.

Rising with feeble steps she went to the window, and pulled aside the curtain.

Horrors! the window was barred with great, heavy iron bars!

Some vague, indefinite plan of escape through that window had been forming in her mind. She almost screamed in her despair as she saw the futility of her plan.

"Hateful prison-bars!" said she, angrily, and clenching one in her small hand she shook it with angry violence. To her surprise the rotten wood-work yielded, and the bar fell from its place and remained in her hand. Very cautiously she looked through the aperture just formed.

She saw that she was in an old and weather-beaten house set in the midst of a large garden whose overgrown shrubs and bushes had grown wild and tangled, and over-run the paths. There was not another house within half a mile of this one. She was far out on the suburbs, she comprehended at once.

A noise below startled her from her reconnoissance. Hastily fitting the heavy bar back to its place, she dropped the curtains and tottered back to her seat, assuming an air of indifference and weariness.

The door opened and Harold Colville entered.

"Good-evening, Miss Lawrence," said he, coolly; "I trust you find yourself improving."

Lily vouchsafed him no answer save a look of scorn and contempt.

"Come—come, fair lady," said he, seating himself near her, "have you no kinder greeting for your devoted admirer?"

"Leave the room, if you please," said she, while the indignant crimson suffused her cheeks. "I have nothing to say to you, sir!"

"Nothing? surely it were wiser, Lily, to try to make terms with me than to bandy angry words. Remember you are in my power. I love you, and I want your love in return. But, proud girl, beware how you change my love into hate."

"Mr. Colville," said she, "it is cruel, it is unmanly thus to persecute a defenseless girl. I beseech you, restore me to my home and my father. Think of my poor father, my suffering sister. There are other women who will love you, women who have not given away their hearts as I have done."

"There is but one woman on earth to me, Lily, and I have sworn to make her my own. You cannot move me by all you say—as well try to topple a mountain from its base as to move me from my firm will. Better, far better were it for you, Lily Lawrence, to waive all this useless pleading, make

yourself as charming as you well know how to do, and become my wife. If you still persist in refusing there may be worse things in store for you."

She could not misunderstand the insulting meaning of his angry speech. The hot blood flushed into her face, then receded and left her pale as death. In bitter shame at his rudeness she bowed her face in her hands.

"You understand me," said he with a low, malignant laugh; "so much the better! Now listen to reason, Lily. I love you, and you are in my power! you are dead to the world, dead to the father who reared you, the sister who loved you, the man you would have wedded. Consent to marry me, and within an hour after I call you my wife you shall see your friends again, and tell them the romantic story of my love, and how it saved your life; you can tell them that such devotion won you to reward my fidelity with your hand. All this I offer you in good faith and honor, and give you time for decision. But refuse—and—well, you know you are still in my power!"

She rose and stood confronting him in all the pride and dignity of outraged and insulted purity. She was rarely, peerlessly beautiful with that scarlet tide staining her cheeks, that lightning flash in the violet eyes.

"Villain, coward, dog!" she cried, in the white heat of passionate resentment, "how dare you threaten me thus? Know that I defy you! I spurn you! I will never be your wife! I will die first, do you hear me? I will die by my own hand rather than be so disgraced."

"Rave on, my beauty," he answered, laughing tauntingly. "Flap your pretty wings against your prison bars, my little bird, you will only ruffle your feathers in vain. By Jove, you only make me more determined! I never saw you so beautiful, so utterly fascinating! I did not think you had so queenly a spirit, my fair one! you would make your fortune on the tragic stage!"

"Oh! go, go," she gasped, lifting her hand with a wild gesture toward the door, "go, leave me, unless you wish to see me dying!"

He paused irresolute an instant; then her flashing eye and dauntless air cowed his craven spirit into submission. With a slight bow he turned and went out of the door.

Face downward on the bed, Lily wept and sobbed unrestrainedly. She was determined, if release did not come ere long, to die by her own hand. "Better than dishonor," thought she with another burst of anguished tears.

She looked about her for some instrument to secrete in case she should be driven to the last stronghold of honor. There was nothing to secure. Old Haidee had made sure of that. "Well," she thought, "if there is nothing else I can strangle myself with my handkerchief."

The hours wore on to twilight. Old Haidee brought her supper, grumbled because she did not eat it, and scowlingly withdrew. Lily was left alone with her sad thoughts for companions. She went to the window, pulled aside the curtain, and looked out. The twilight had faded, a few pale stars glimmered in the cloudy sky, a crescent moon gave forth a weak and watery light. A wild thought darted into her mind. "Oh! if I could escape through these broken bars. Ah! why not?"

She stood still and listened. Familiar sounds from the adjoining room informed her that the Leverets were retiring. She crouched down and waited perhaps half an hour. Then a dual chorus of snores announced that her lynx-eyed guardians slept.

Breathlessly she stole to the window and removed the iron bar. It left an aperture large enough to admit her slight form. She tried the other bars, but they seemed more firmly fixed than the first one she had tried. They resisted her strongest efforts.

"If I only had a strong rope," she thought to herself, "I could secure it to these bars and slide down it to the ground."

She leaned her head through the aperture and looked down to see how far she would have to descend. The distance appeared to be about thirty feet.

"If I only had a rope," she thought again, "I could certainly gain my freedom—freedom! that means home again, papa, Ada, Lancelot!"

She sat down, her heart beating wildly at the thought. They believed her dead. She pictured their wild, incredulous joy at first when she burst in among them, their own living darling. What a story she would have to tell, and how swiftly the vengeance of papa and Lancelot would descend on Mrs. Vance and Harold Colville. Her breath came quick and fast, her courage mounted high within her.

"I must escape," she murmured with passionate vehemence; "surely there must be some way out of this horrible prison."

She thought of all the stories she had heard and read of the escape of prisoners—she remembered that she had read of one man who had torn his bed-clothes into strips and made a rope of them by which he descended from the window. Why could not she do the same?

Cautiously, so as not to awaken the sleepers in the next room, she removed the bed-covers. There were not many, for the sultry summer weather precluded the possibility of their use, but there were two strong linen sheets.

"These would do, I think," she murmured to herself. "I am so light it would not need a very strong rope to bear my weight. I will tear these sheets into four long strips each. That will make eight strips. I will tie them together in knots, fasten the rope thus formed to a bar, and lower myself from the window. If the rope is not long enough I must jump the remainder of the distance. Then, free from this dreadful prison, I must trust in Providence to find the way home."

She set to work diligently. She was obliged to be very cautious for fear the sound of her work should penetrate the ears of her jailers. She had nothing with which to cut the cloth, and it was strong and difficult to tear. But by dint of hard labor with teeth and fingers she at length accomplished it, and set to work tying the slips of linen together.

It took some time to make these knots secure. When that was done she secured the end of her impromptu rope to the lowest bar of the window, and looked out to see how far the end escaped the ground. Joy, joy! it was only about ten feet.

"I can easily jump that distance," she thought, with a thrill of triumph at her success.

She looked about for some wrapping to put over her thin blue dress. A long dark cloak with hood attached hung conveniently against the wall.

"They must have put that around me when I was brought here," she said, "so I will wear it to go away in," and, taking it down, she rolled it into a compact bundle and threw it out of the window.

Nothing now remained but to follow the bundle. She stood still a moment with streaming eyes raised to Heaven while with clasped hands she invoked the divine mercy and protection on her perilous undertaking. Then shuddering, she climbed into the window, forced her body through the narrow opening, and, catching to the rope, swung herself downward.

Hark! there was a swish in the shrubbery in the garden below as if some heavy body had dashed through them. Her heart leaped into her throat, her clasp on the rope grew unconsciously looser, and she slipped much lower; so low that she heard distinctly on the ground beneath a deep, low, hurried breathing.

In an agony of dread and fear she clung tightly to the rope and waited for some demonstration from below. Some unexpected peril had intervened between her and freedom.

Hush! Hark! Suddenly, as if all Hades had broken loose, there rose a fearful, blood-curdling sound on the soft warm air of the summer night. Louder and deeper still it grew, and Lily, hanging there by the clasp of her frail little hands, midway between the window and the ground, knew that it was the cruel, hungry, relentless baying of a deep-mouthed blood-hound.

A scream of terror burst from her lips as she heard the dangerous creature at work beneath her wreaking its vengeance on the cloak she had thrown down—tearing it and rending it with fangs and paws. Thus, she thought, with a gasp of agony, the terrible beast would soon be rending her warm, living body.

Its vengeance sated on the cloak, the blood-hound began to make hungry leaps into the air towards Lily's body, at the same time uttering murderous yelps that froze the blood in the poor young

creature's veins. She felt herself growing weak and faint, and knew that she could hold on but a few minutes longer ere she must faint and fall into the devouring jaws of the blood-thirsty animal. Oh! God, she thought, what a horrible death, to be torn limb from limb by that hungry brute! Papa and Lancelot would never know all she had suffered.

She had escaped death by steel, death by living entombment, to be rent in twain by this awful blood-hound!

Suddenly, with a cry of rage, a night-capped head was thrust out of a window above. The Leverets had been awakened by the noise, and now hastened to the rescue. Lily heard them coming and tried to hold on yet a little longer; but her strength was spent, her bruised hands relaxed their hold, and with a shriek of horror she was hurled downward into the hungry jaws that were waiting for her. She heard the wild, prolonged howl of joy given by the dog, felt its hot breath on her face, then unconsciousness supervened and she knew no more.

At that moment when her death would have been but the work of an instant, a powerful hand grasped the dog's collar and dragged him, howling and yelping away to his kennel, while old Haidee raised the unconscious girl carefully up and looked at her limp form in the moonlight.

"Is she dead?" muttered the old witch. "Has the hound killed her? Here, Peter," as the old man came back from fastening the dog into his kennel, "carry the girl up-stairs—I believe the dog has killed her."

They carried her back and laid her down upon the bed whose coverings she had stripped and rent with such high hope an hour ago.

White and cold she lay there as if indeed life had been driven from its beautiful citadel forever. Old Haidee carefully examined her face and limbs. There was no sign of any wound from the animal's fangs.

"He has not bitten her. If she be dead, it is sheer fright that has killed her," said she. "Peter, you ugly brute, stand aside. If she were to revive, the sight of you would be enough to frighten her to death!"

Peter removed his homely countenance to one side, while old Haidee pursued her task of bringing the unconscious girl out of her swoon. Cold water, camphor, burnt feathers and ammonia were successively tried by the old crone before faint breath began to flutter again over the pale lips. Her eyes opened and she looked up in bewilderment.

"Where am I?" she moaned. "What is the matter—oh! what is that?"

Her wandering gaze had fastened on old Peter Leveret, and she regarded him with looks of horror. And no wonder, for old Peter was hump-backed and deformed, and had a countenance so wicked it resembled that of a brute more than a human being. A shock of bristly, unkempt red hair surmounted his visage, and his straggling beard was of the same fiery hue. He leered maliciously at her looks of terror.

"Pshaw! that is only my old man, miss," said Haidee, shortly. "You need not put on so many airs at sight of him, for I do assure you that if he had not pulled old Nero off you just in the very nick of time, the hound would have torn you to pieces long before this."

"I thank you," said Lily, timidly, forcing herself to look gently at the repulsive old creature. "Oh, where did the dreadful dog come from?"

"We keeps it chained up all day in the garden, and at night we lets him loose to purwent you from escaping, miss," answered old Peter, doggedly.

"Strange that I never heard him before," mused Lily, reflectively.

"He never had occasion to make himself heard before," said Haidee, grimly.

Lily shuddered and remained silent.

"Pray, miss," said old Peter, who had been examining the window curiously, "how did you get the iron bar out of this here window? You don't look strong enough to have wrenched it out."

"The woodwork was rotten," she answered, quietly. "I pulled the bar out at the first effort."

"Peter," said old Haidee, "go into the third room from this and see if the bars are strong in that window."

Old Peter hobbled out on his errand, and Haidee said, shortly:

"I did not think you would try to give us the slip, miss, or I would have warned you long ago about old Nero. There is no use trying to escape from here—you are as secure in this house as if you were in your grave. Grave perils await you the moment you step over this threshold. Old Nero was but a foretaste of what you may meet with, so I advise you to marry Mr. Colville, and content yourself."

"I will never, never marry him, Haidee," said the young girl, sadly, yet dauntlessly. "And you need not try to frighten me from trying to escape, for I shall use every endeavor to that end. I can but die, and death is preferable to what I must endure in this house."

She lay back and closed her eyes wearily.

Peter Leveret entered and reported the bars as strong and tight in the third room.

"You may sit here by the patient, then, while I go and prepare that room for her reception," said his wife.

"You will not put her in *that* room," said Peter, with vague surprise and doubt.

"Yes, in that very room—there is no other where the windows are barred. She must occupy that until we can get this window fixed. Nothing will hurt her. I dare say she is not afraid of ghosts," said Haidee, grimly, as she passed out.

She was absent half an hour or more. Lily lay still with closed eyes all the while, dreading to see again the villanous countenance of old Peter, for hideous as Haidee had appeared to her startled eyes, her aspect was beauty in comparison with that of her husband. It was with feelings of relief, therefore, that Lily welcomed her return.

"Come," said the old crone, shortly, "I will conduct you to a more secure apartment, miss."

She led Lily along a dark passage, thrust her rudely into a dimly-lighted room, and locked the door upon her.

CHAPTER IX

Thus rudely disposed of, Lily stood still a moment in the center of the floor whither the old woman's rude push had landed her, and looked about her with a swelling heart full of grief and indignation.

She found herself in a meagerly furnished, low-ceiled room, very similar to the one she had just quitted. The single window was barred with iron strongly and securely fitted in. The low, white bed had a very refreshing look to her worn and agitated frame, and throwing herself upon it, dressed as she was, Lily fell into a deep and weary slumber, broken now and then by a sob that welled up from her heart.

It was probably midnight when she was awakened by the peal of thunder overhead, and the patter of heavy rain upon the roof. A violent summer storm was in progress, and Lily lay still awhile and listened in awe to the raging elements warring furiously together. In a temporary lull of the storm, she fancied she heard groans of pain arising from beneath the floor, and sprang up in bed, trembling violently. She listened again, but the sound was not repeated, and the girl smiled as she said to herself:

"It was only my nervous fancy, giving a human voice to the winds and rain. There can be no one in this old house save my cruel jailers and myself."

She laid her head down again upon the pillow, and as the ominous sounds were not repeated, and the wild thunder-storm decreased in violence, she fell asleep and did not wake until the sun was high in the summer heavens.

Haidee, entering with her breakfast and fresh water for her ablutions, scowled at her suspiciously.

"Did you sleep well?" interrogated she.

"Very well," answered Lily, coldly and briefly.

"Did nothing disturb you through the night?" said the old witch, watching the young girl keenly from beneath her shaggy, over-hanging eyebrows.

"Thunder awakened me," replied Lily, calmly, "and once, in a pause of the storm, it seemed to me I heard a human voice groaning; but I became satisfied afterward that it was only the wind in the trees."

"Most likely," said Haidee. "I'm glad you were not frightened. But they do say this room is haunted. A woman died in here, and they do say she walks about and wrings her hands and groans. I know nothing about it myself, but I will own that I have heard strange sounds here."

The long, lonely day wore on while she sat absorbed in her painful thoughts. Colville, with "malice prepense," had denied her the solace of books, work, or music, thinking that the unutterable weariness and stagnation of her life would drive her sooner into his eager arms.

Time passed on leaden footsteps to the impatient young creature whose life hitherto had held every pleasure that love and wealth combined could lavish on its beautiful idol.

Noon brought Haidee and her dinner. Wearied by the length of the sultry day and her own vexing thoughts, Lily scarcely tasted the food brought her.

"Take it away," she said, indifferently, "I have no appetite, Haidee."

Haidee obeyed in silence, and left her walking up and down the floor in passionate impatience. Now and then she shuddered with fear at remembering her escape of the previous night.

"I shall have to die," she thought, despairingly. "There is no hope of escape from this house. But, oh! may it not be by such a dreadful method as that."

Her meditations were suddenly interrupted by a horrible sound. It was the far-off clank of a heavy chain mingled with the anguished wail of an unearthly voice. It broke so suddenly on the stillness that Lily started in affright, the very hairs on her head seeming to stand erect in her overmastering horror.

She had never been a believer in the supernatural, but what was that, she asked herself, with a wildly beating heart. The sounds continued, muffled by distance, yet distinctly horrible and realistic. They seemed to rise from the floor beneath her feet. She covered her ears with her hands, but the sounds penetrated to her whirling brain in spite of her efforts not to hear—dreadful sounds of woe from the suffering lips of some human or inhuman creature. All the while the heavy chain seemed clanking in unison with the voice.

Was Haidee's ghost-story true after all, Lily asked herself, in doubt and bewilderment. No, she would not believe it. Only the narrow-minded and superstitious believed in such things. Suddenly the solution of the mystery broke on her mind like the light of an inspiration. She understood Haidee's anxiety that she should believe in the unearthly nature of the sound she was likely to hear.

"It is nothing supernatural," she said to herself, firmly. "I am not the only prisoner in this house. Some poor being, more wretchedly treated even than myself, perhaps driven to madness, as they will probably drive me, is confined in some loathsome dungeon below me, and Haidee does not wish me to know it."

"Poor soul, poor soul!" murmured Lily in divine pity and compassion for the unknown prisoner.

As she sat musing sadly her eyes fell absently on the carpet beneath her feet. It had evidently been laid down the night before in a great hurry, for it was unevenly spread, and was not tacked down. There was no carpet in the room she had occupied before. Why had old Haidee been so particular about placing one here?

"It is rather strange," she thought to herself. "Haidee had something to conceal. I will look under that carpet."

She glanced toward the key-hole, fearing that argus eyes might be watching her. No one was there. She rolled up a piece of wrapping paper that lay carelessly upon the floor and pushed it into the opening.

"Now I will see what that carpet hides," said the brave girl to herself.

She advanced to the corner of the room and slowly turned back the corners of the gay flowered carpet as far as the middle. She was rewarded by more than she expected. The carpet had been drawn over a trap-door in the center of the room. It had recently been used, too, thought the girl, for it was free from dust and a small crevice appeared at one end. She inserted her fingers in the opening thus found, and cautiously pushed against it. The door slid back under the flooring lightly and easily, and disclosed below Lily's room a long and narrow winding stairway. It looked gloomy and dark, as if the footsteps of the wicked alone trod over its hidden way, and with a shudder Lily pushed the door back into its place, carefully replaced the carpet, removed the paper from the key-hole, and sat down with a wildly-beating heart and trembling limbs.

"That stairway evidently leads to the dungeon of that poor chained prisoner," was her inward comment. "Who can it be that Haidee has immured there? Perhaps another victim of Dr. Pratt and Harold Colville. Oh! God, that such infamous villany should go unpunished beneath the sky of heaven!"

She walked to the iron-barred window, and looked out through the grating.

The sun was shining in the blue heavens—the tangled old garden, refreshed by the storm of the previous night, was a wilderness of bloom. Untrimmed, the roses spread their wild, loving arms over the ground, or climbed heavenward by whatever frail support they could reach. Vines broken down from their frames blossomed luxuriantly on the ground, and ran across the winding path. A high stone wall ran around the whole place, shutting out all the bloom and sweetness from the curious gaze of any who might chance to pass. Poor Lily inhaled the fragrant air that rose to her window with a heart-wrung sigh. What sunshine and sweetness and beauty were outside of her horrible prison—what grief, what desolation, perhaps even madness, within.

The fresh pure air infused new courage into her fainting heart; the memory of those mournful, anguished wails became less dreadful as her courage rose.

"I will go down that winding stairway to-night," was the resolve taking shape in her mind. "I will try and find that poor soul imprisoned beneath me. Ah! can I, dare I? Who knows what awful shape of idiocy or madness may affright me thence? No matter; after enduring the dread companionship of the dead in the charnel house, I can bear that chained creature also."

The day wore on. Twilight came with its dusky shadows and passed. Old Haidee entered with supper and a freshly trimmed lamp. Lily could scarcely eat, she was so excited by the thought of her projected night adventure.

"I suppose you are trying to starve yourself to death, miss," said she grimly; "I shall send word to Dr. Pratt and he will give you some stuff to stimulate your appetite."

Lily made no reply.

"I suppose you'll not try to escape to-night," continued Haidee maliciously. "If you do old Nero will be on the watch for you. He never sleeps at night."

"I will make my next attempt at daylight then," replied Lily coolly.

"You'll not find another loose bar," retorted the old woman angrily, as she went out with the scarcely touched dishes.

Lily waited a long while in perfect silence for the sound of the old people going up-stairs. At length she heard their harsh footsteps creaking up the stairs. As she had expected old Haidee's course was straight towards her room. She sprang into bed, drew the covers up to her chin, and feigned slumber. The key grated in the lock and the old woman's fiendish visage peered in.

"Ah! there you are safe in your nest, pretty bird," croaked she; "well, happy dreams to you." So saying, she turned the key again and went away, satisfied that her charge was safe for that night.

CHAPTER X

Lily lay perfectly still, but quite sleepless for more than two hours. During that time she heard several groans from below, accompanied by the ominous clank of the chain. At length, as the cries grew louder and more frequent, she determined at all hazards to seek the poor, suffering creature.

She rose and removed the carpet, slid back the trap-door, and gazed down into the gloomy pit below. All was blackness and darkness, but the harsh, wailing sounds arose more distinctly than before. She took up the lamp in her hand, and with an irrepressible shudder, began to descend the winding stair. Presently she stood at the foot of the stairs in a narrow passage-way.

At the further end was a door. Trembling so that she could scarcely hold the lamp, Lily advanced and tried the handle. It yielded to her touch and swung open. She found herself in an empty, dismal room, its walls festooned with cobwebs, its cold flooring formed of solid stone.

As she looked about by the dim light of the lamp she saw another door, and resolutely advancing she caught the knob and swung it open. Another instant and she had stepped across the threshold and stood in the presence of the mystery.

It was an empty, cobwebbed room like the first, its only furniture consisting of a narrow cot-bed. Close beside it an iron staple was driven into the stone floor. A long and heavy iron chain was fastened to this staple. At its opposite end it was linked to a strong leathern belt wound about the frame of a poor creature lying at full length on the bed and wasted to a living *skeleton*!

In all her speculations regarding the mysterious prisoner, Lily had not imagined aught as dreadful as the reality. There lay the poor frame upon the bed, its tattered dress scarce covering its bony knees, its claw-like hands twisted wildly together. The limbs presented the appearance of bones with parchment-like skin drawn tightly over them.

Masses of long, black hair, tangled and unkempt, strayed over the coarse pillow, and fierce, dark eyes, sunken and dim, peered from their hollow orbits in a face shriveled simply to skin and bone, the cheeks fallen in, the temples hollow, the purple lips drawn away from the glistening white teeth. This dreadful creature stopped its frenzied cries at Lily's entrance, and crouching into a frightened heap wailed out submissively:

"I will hush, I will hush! Do not beat me again!"

"Poor creature, I will not harm you," answered Lily, gently.

She stood in the center of the room, holding the lamp in her shaking hand, its light streaming over her lovely face and golden hair. The poor creature turned suddenly at the sound of her compassionate voice and looked at her with an expression of awe in her great, hollow eyes.

"Are you an angel?" she asked, abruptly.

"No, poor soul; I am a wronged and unhappy prisoner like yourself!"

"Another one of *his* victims?" queried the living skeleton, sitting up on the cot and folding her emaciated arms around her skinny knees.

Lily came forward and seated herself on the foot of the bed, and set her lamp on the floor.

"Of whom are you speaking?" asked she.

"Of Harold Colville, to be sure," said the poor woman, shuddering as the name writhed over her blanched lips. "Has he married you, too, eh?"

"God forbid," ejaculated her visitor with a strong shiver of disgust. "I am a poor girl whom he is trying to force into a marriage with him. He has stolen me away from my friends and is keeping me locked up here until I consent to be his wife. But I will never, never do so!" she cried, passionately.

"You do not love him?" said the poor frame beside her.

"No, I hate him! But who are you?" asked Lily, her interest deepening in the poor creature whose mind it was evident still burned clearly in her wrecked frame.

"I am Fanny Colville," was the answer, in a low and bitter tone. "I am Harold Colville's lawful wife—I was married to him four years ago."

"Is it possible?" cried Lily, with a violent start. "Then why are you here?"

"My husband wearied of me," said poor Fanny, her dark eyes burning like coals. "He stole me away from my friends, too, lady, but I went willingly because I loved him—yes, I loved him then! He married me and I hid away the certificate the good minister gave me. We traveled for a year or so, and lived very happily. Then he wearied of me and brought me here. He told me our marriage ceremony was a farce—that we had not been lawfully married—he demanded the certificate the minister had given me. But I was not a fool, I knew he lied to me, and I would not give up the paper for the sake of the little child that was soon coming to me. I kept it hidden away, and he raved and swore at me, then went away and left me. He hired the Leverets to kill me and the child also when my hour should arrive. The day came—my child was born—a healthy, living boy. They took it away from me and said that it died. I knew they had killed it. But they were not merciful enough to kill me. They drove me mad with their cruelty. I became a raving, dangerous maniac for awhile, and they chained me down here like a dog. Here I have remained nearly two years, fed on a scanty supply of bread and water. You see what they give for a week's subsistence," said she, pointing to a half-eaten loaf of bread and a jug of water, both upon the floor.

Lily looked and shuddered.

"Does your husband ever come to see you?" she inquired.

"No, no; he thinks me dead—he paid old Peter Leveret to murder me. But they are slowly starving me to death instead of thrusting a knife into my heart. And I am so strong, it takes me a long while to die!"

She paused a moment, catching her breath painfully, then continued:

"Dreadful deeds have been committed here—murder's red right hand has been lifted often. Look down into that pit, lady."

She pointed to a trap-door near the iron staple.

Lily pushed it aside and looked down, but saw only thick darkness, while a noisome smell rushed out of the pit. She closed it hurriedly.

"I see nothing," she said, "but darkness."

"Because it is night," said Fanny Colville. "You should come when it is daylight, lady. You would see horrible, grinning skeletons then. I look at them sometimes. They are the only companions I have."

"Poor Fanny, I wish you could escape out of this horrible place. Would you like to do so?"

"Oh! so much," said the living skeleton, clasping her bony hands. "I have dear friends far away from here whom I love so much. They know nothing of my whereabouts. How gladly they would welcome me back."

"My case is the same," said Lily, mournfully. "I have tried to escape, but was near losing my life through falling into the clutches of the blood-hound they keep here. But I am going to try again, Fanny, and I will try to help you out of your prison also. I will come and see you again," said she, taking up her lamp and turning to go.

"Do not go yet, sweet lady," cried the prisoner, imploringly; "I love to look at you and hear you speak. I have not heard a kind word for more than two years until you came in like an angel to-night."

"I must go now," replied Lily, gently. "I am afraid old Haidee will miss me and trace me here. Keep up a brave heart—I will come again to-morrow night if nothing happens. Good-night, now, Fanny."

"Good-night, miss," said the unfortunate creature, seizing Lily's hand and kissing it. "I am happier for your coming, and I shall expect you again to-morrow night!"

The young girl took up her lamp and went away, leaving the poor creature alone in her dreadful solitude once more. But hope, like a brightly beaming star, had penetrated that gloomy dungeon

and beamed into Fanny Colville's lacerated heart. She lay awake all night, thinking feverishly of the beautiful girl who had visited her, and building bright air-castles on the slight hint of escape she had thrown out.

And Lily, too, tossed on a feverish bed which gentle slumber refused to visit with its benign influence. Fear, horror and indignation filled her heart against Harold Colville and the Leverets, mixed with deep sorrow and pity for the injured Fanny. She understood now the depth of villany of which her would-be suitor was capable, and the wickedness of Haidee and Peter appeared more dreadful than before. No wonder Haidee found her tossing on a bed of pain the next morning, racked by a nervous headache. Colville called to see her, but went away when he heard she was ill, and sent Doctor Pratt instead, who prescribed a sedative and left her sleeping heavily and profoundly.

CHAPTER XI

Late in the evening she awoke, feeling rested and refreshed by her long sleep. Her headache was quite gone, and Haidee found her sitting in the arm-chair when she came in with supper.

She drank a cup of tea, ate a few mouthfuls of food, and declared herself much better. Old Haidee, however, brought in her knitting and pertinaciously sat out the evening with her, with the intention, no doubt, of listening for sounds from below and marking their effect on her captive. But no sound, no groans, broke the stillness. Fanny Colville, in the new hope that had dawned upon her, had refrained all day from the groans and cries that usually gave vent to her despair. She was impatiently waiting for the return of her visitor of the night before.

Haidee had not visited the poor chained captive since the night she had incarcerated Lily in her new lodging. In fact, there was no entrance to the dungeon except through the trap-door in this room. Haidee had taken her a week's rations that night, and scowlingly bade her to abstain from her noise or it would be worse for her. She now concluded that the captive had obeyed her mandate, or that death had at last removed her out of her power. It was with a feeling of relief at the last thought that she left Lily's room, telling her with a malicious grin that old Nero was loose in the garden as usual.

It was almost midnight before Lily ventured to seek poor Fanny Colville again. Long before she descended the stairs she could hear the sound of the rusty chain as the poor woman tossed restlessly on her bed of pain. Her wild eyes lighted glaringly at the young girl's entrance.

"I thought you were not coming," she said pathetically.

"I dared not come earlier," Lily answered, relating the cause of her detention.

"Old Haidee is a fiend," said Fanny, briefly and comprehensively.

"I have been revolving in my mind a plan of escape for us both," said Lily, proceeding to detail it to her eager listener.

But Fanny sighed and looked down at her skeleton limbs and the heavy chain.

"That would do for you, but not for me," she said; "I am too weak. It is a long way from here to the city. We have no money—we have to walk several miles to your father's house. You see I know the distance—I came here in daylight. I can tell *you* the way to go, but my wasted limbs would not carry me a mile. I should only fall by the way, and be a hindrance to you."

Lily sighed as her clear-headed companion thus presented the difficulties in their way.

"I had forgotten your exceeding weakness in the ardor of my hopes," said she.

"Besides," continued Fanny, "look at this chain. We have nothing with which to cut the leather or file the iron. I cannot get away from this staple."

"Can I, then, do nothing to help you, my poor creature?" cried Lily, in great distress as she saw how futile was the plan she had proposed.

"Of course there is," answered Fanny, hopefully. "The plan you spoke of is quite feasible for you. Put it into operation as soon as possible. I feel almost assured of your success. Then as soon as you have told your story to your father, tell him mine also, and entreat him to send a force of police out here to arrest the Leverets and liberate me."

"Certainly, I could do that," said Lily, brightening, "that would be the better plan after all—but still I cannot bear to leave you here alone, poor soul, in your wretchedness. Who can tell what may happen ere relief can reach you? Perhaps this slow starvation may finish its dreadful work upon you."

"Never fear," was the hopeful reply. "I have subsisted like this for two long years, yet I feel the flame of life still brightly burning in my wasted frame. And, think you, I cannot endure a few more days' confinement when you have given me such hope to feed upon?"

Her eyes were brightly burning in her wasted face, and her parched lips tried to smile. She took her visitor's little white hand caressingly between her own bony members and looked at it in fond admiration.

"You are a beautiful girl," she said. "Ah, would you believe that I was once a pretty girl, and that I am young still—but little older than you, perhaps, for I am only twenty, though, trouble and starvation have made me prematurely old!"

Lily looked the astonishment she felt, for indeed that poor face with all the curves and lines of flesh stricken out of it by the sharp pangs of starvation, had indeed no mark to discern whether she were young or old. True, the matted locks of black hair were too thick for those of age, but they were thickly streaked with silver threads. Harold Colville's wretched victim retained now no trace of either youth or beauty.

Lily remained with her several hours, feeling all the while that she ran a great risk in remaining, yet still unwilling to leave the unhappy woman who showed such pitiful pleasure in seeing once more the friendly face of a human being. But she was forced to go at length, having listened to the story of Fanny's life, and exchanged a like friendly confidence.

"I may not see you again, Fanny," she said, "for I may make the attempt to-morrow. It must be made in the day-time, you know, when Nero is chained up. But you may rest assured that if I succeed in escaping I shall lose no time in having you liberated, and your guilty captors brought to punishment."

"May God help you," said the prisoner, fervently. "I will pray for your success."

And with a sigh she kissed the white hands and looked lovingly after the slight form as it glided away.

Lily went back to her room half apprehensive that the old witch might be waiting for her there. But all was safe; the room was vacant of all but her own sweet presence. She disrobed herself, extinguished the lamp, and lying down upon the bed fell into a light slumber, broken by many fitful and strangely-troubled dreams.

She awakened only when the summer sun was shining high in the heavens. Haidee was waiting with her breakfast, and seemed even more petulant than usual.

"It seems to me you require more sleep than anyone I ever saw," she said, tartly. "After sleeping all day yesterday, you cannot even get awake for your breakfast this morning."

"I dare say you would sleep heavily yourself, Haidee, if you had been drugged as I was yesterday," retorted the young girl, good-humoredly. "And really, I am feeling ill and weary this morning. This warm weather and close confinement begin to tell on my health sadly. Perhaps I may escape you yet through the welcome gates of death."

"No danger of that," was the quick reply. "Youth and health can bear much more than you have had to stand yet, my fine lady."

She went out and did not return until noon. Her prisoner lay dressed upon the bed with flushed and burning cheeks and strangely glittering eyes.

"Haidee," she said, "I cannot eat my dinner. I am feeling very strangely. I have a dreadful feeling here." She pressed her hand upon her heart and seemed to gasp for breath. "Go, send for the doctor as quickly as possible. Perhaps I am about to die!"

Haidee looked at her in doubt a moment. The suffering aspect of the captive reassured her. She was evidently ill.

"I will send at once for Doctor Pratt," said she, leaving the room in haste, but not forgetting to lock the door.

"I have sent old Peter for the doctor," said she, returning "but it may be several hours before he returns. It is a long way to the city."

"Sit down and stay with me, then, Haidee. I am afraid to remain alone when I feel so strangely."

Ten, fifteen minutes elapsed, then the patient said, faintly:

"Haidee, for the love of Heaven, try and get me a glass of wine! Perhaps it may relieve this wild fluttering and palpitation of my heart!"

Again Haidee went out, locking the door as before. The patient sprang up and stood waiting when the witch returned. The key grated, the door swung open—but at that instant Haidee received a dexterous push that sent her sprawling into the middle of the room, the wine glass crashing on the floor. Before she could rise, Lily sprang past her, into the hall, slammed and locked the door, removed the key and ran wildly down the stairs.

The outer door was fastened, but the key was in the lock. As she paused to remove it, she could hear the old woman's frenzied shrieks of anger and despair on realizing her situation. She flung the door open, flew down the path, pushed open the heavy iron gate, and ran wildly down the lonely country road, the afternoon sun beating hotly down on her unprotected head, the dust flying thick and fast beneath the rapid pit-a-pat of her small, slippered feet.

CHAPTER XII

She was free, she was free! that happy thought beat time in Lily's heart to her wildly rushing feet. She was outside of that horrible prison, old Haidee was locked in, and could not pursue her, old Peter could not return for several hours. She had that much time in advance of them. Only a few miles lay between her and her loved home. Surely, surely, with the start she had she could distance her enemies and reach the haven of rest for which she yearned and prayed.

She ran on and on, her brain reeling, her heart beating almost to suffocation, the perspiration running down her face in streams.

Sheer exhaustion at last caused her to slacken her pace and look behind her at the lonely stretch of road over which her flying feet had swiftly carried her. The old house in which she had passed such awful hours was out of sight; a turn in the road had hidden it from view. No baleful pursuer was on her track yet. She turned and looked before her. A long stretch of country road, dotted here and there with poor-looking houses, lay ahead. She wet her handkerchief in a rill that trickled by the side of the road, bound it about her throbbing head, and set forward again, steadily, but at a less swinging pace than she had used before. Exhausted nature could not hold out at the rapid rate with which she had begun.

On and on she went through the blistering sunshine. Her head ached, the hot road burnt her feet, the warm wind blew the dust into her strained and weary eyes. No matter—she did not heed these trifling things. She was free! That was the glad refrain to which her bounding heart kept time. She was so happy she could not realize her great physical weakness and weariness.

It seemed to her at last that hours had passed since she had set forth on her journey, carefully following some directions Fanny Colville had given her. The houses and lots began to stand nearer together. She was getting nearer to the great city. She began to be afraid that she would meet old Peter Leveret returning to his home after his errand to Doctor Pratt.

At last she came to a little house standing apart from the others. She peeped in and saw an elderly woman sitting at the open door sewing on a coarse garment, and singing blithely at her task. She opened the gate and went up to her.

"Will you let me come in and rest, and have a drink of water?" said she, gently. "I am very tired!"

The woman looked up in surprise. God knows what she thought of the poor girl standing there bareheaded and dusty, in her blue morning dress, looking so drooping and weary, but she moved aside and said kindly:

"Yes! dear heart, come in and rest, and have a bit and a sup—you look as if you needed all three."

The kind words and gentle smile went to the lonely girl's heart. Tears started into her eyes as she took the offered glass of water and drained it thirstily.

"I thank you, I do not wish anything to eat," she answered wearily, "but if you will give me an old bonnet I will be glad—I have no bonnet, you see—and an old dress, for I do not wish to go into the city with this morning-dress—I will pay you well, indeed I will. See, I will give you my diamond ring."

The woman started in surprise as her strange visitant turned the costly ring upon her finger.

"Here is some strange mystery," she thought within herself. "The girl is running away, mayhap, and wants a disguise."

She went to a closet, and brought out an old straw hat and thick veil, and a long, light sack somewhat worn.

"I will not take your ring, my dear," she said kindly. "You may take these things, though, and welcome. Maybe I am doing wrong in helping you to run away, but then again I may be doing you a great kindness. You look very forlorn, my poor dear."

Lily went to work in a dazed kind of way putting on the long sack over her dress and the hat on her head. This done she wound the thick veil tightly over her face and turned to go.

"I thank you for your kindness, my good woman," she said. "I will come back here some time and reward you richly, I will indeed. Now I am going. If anybody comes here to ask about me be sure and tell them I have not been here. Do not let them know—"

Whatever else she was going to say died unuttered on her pale lips. Exhausted nature was giving away. She threw up her hands wildly, staggered forward a step, and fell fainting on the floor.

"Poor soul," said the good woman, kneeling down on the floor, and loosening the hat and veil from her head, "she is dead tired-out."

She straightened Lily out upon the floor, and dashed cold water into her white face, but with no success. The swoon was a deep one, and it was fully an hour before the girl was sufficiently revived to be lifted up by the woman's strong arms and laid upon a clean white bed.

"A beauty and no mistake," thought the warm-hearted creature, smoothing back the damp, golden ringlets from the marble white brow on the pillow.

Lily's large, blue eyes opened and looked up at her in amaze.

"Am I sick? Have I been here long?" she inquired, struggling up to a sitting posture and looking out through the window anxiously. "Why, the sun is setting," said she, turning her bewildered face on her kind attendant.

"Yes, you fainted and were a long time coming to," was the answer: "you have been here more than an hour."

Lily slipped down from the bed and began to put on her hat and veil with trembling hands.

"I must be going," she said; "I have far to go yet, and it is growing so late."

Before the astonished woman could remonstrate, she was out of the house, going slowly on her way. She was so weak she could not walk very fast. Her impetuous will alone sustained her dragging footsteps. Thick twilight had fallen before she entered the busy, bustling city. Sorely frightened at finding herself alone in the gathering darkness, yet afraid that the glare of the gaslights would reveal her shrinking form to her pursuers, she shrank along in the friendly shadows, drawing back nervously from the hurrying forms that brushed past her, and trembling at every footstep behind her. But in spite of her nervousness she at length entered the elegant street where her father resided.

All was gaiety and life in the brilliant houses as she hurried past them. The light from the drawing-rooms streamed out upon her shrinking form.

Wild and entrancing strains of music filled the night air. Long lines of carriages were drawn up in front of some of the houses whose owners were holding balls and receptions. She knew them all; they were all friends of hers: but she flitted past them like a spirit, pausing not in her frightened yet happy course until she stood before the windows of her father's handsome mansion.

These windows were lighted, too, but not so brightly as some; music, too, stole through them, but it was soft and subdued. Death had been there so recently they had not the heart to be gay, she thought.

Wild with her joy she threw off her disguising hat and veil and running up the broad, marble steps rang the bell. It was opened by the stately old servitor whom she had been accustomed to from childhood. But instead of welcoming her home, the gray-haired old man fled wildly down the hall after one glance into her lovely white face.

"He takes me for a ghost," she thought, laughing and running after him down the wide hall till she reached the drawing-room door which stood open for coolness that sultry night.

She stopped in the doorway, framed like a picture in the hall gaslights, and looked into the room.

They were all there before her—her dear ones! The piano stood in the center of the room, its back towards her, with Mrs. Vance on the music-stool, directly facing her. Her white hands strayed over the pearl keys, and Lancelot Darling stood beside her, and turned the leaves of her music.

A low divan was drawn near them, and Ada rested upon it, looking very fair and ethereal in her deep mourning dress. Her father sat beside her looking very grave and sad.

"Papa, papa!" cried poor Lily in a choking voice.

The passionate cry, low as it was, was distinctly heard by the quartette. They all looked up and saw her standing there in the light with her wild, white face and streaming golden hair.

CHAPTER XIII

The group in the drawing-room gazed at Lily for a moment in mingled awe and consternation, but suddenly, before word or sound broke the trance of silence, the beautiful picture was wholly blotted out and obliterated by a blackness of darkness that filled and flooded the wide hall.

Then the sound of women's screams filled the grand drawing-room.

"Lily, Lily!" screamed Ada, throwing herself into her father's arms, while Mrs. Vance fell writhing upon the floor, shrieking in abject terror.

Lancelot Darling paused a moment to extricate himself from the clinging hands of the kneeling woman, then bounded out into the hall.

Darkness met him only as he ran excitedly up and down its length. There was no one there. The front door, standing wide open, attracted his attention. He went out on the porch and looked up and down. Just then Mr. Lawrence came out and joined in the search. There was no one passing. They went in and found Willis, the aged servitor, who had returned to his post, and was lighting up the gas again.

"Willis, what is the meaning of this?" he asked, sharply. "The hall door open, the gas out, and you absent from your post!"

"On my soul, Mr. Lawrence. I could not help it! I saw a ghost," said the man, looking about him in visible trepidation.

"Explain yourself," said his master, sternly.

"I went to answer the door-bell," said Willis, trembling, "and when I opened the door there stood a ghost, all in white, looking at me and smiling. I was so frightened I let go the door-handle and ran away; I beg your pardon for neglecting my duty, sir, and leaving the door ajar," concluded the man, humbly.

"What sort of a ghost did you see?" asked Mr. Darling.

The man's eyes grew large and wild.

"Perhaps I ought not to tell you," said he, "but, begging your pardon, Mr. Lawrence, and yours, Mr. Darling, it was the spirit of our poor lost Miss Lily!"

Mr. Lawrence grew pale as he looked at the man.

"Come, Lance; come, Willis," he said, "we will search the house from top to bottom. There is some mystery here which we may penetrate."

They looked into every room and closet, they neglected no hiding place from garret to cellar, but no one, either ghost or being, was discovered. Mr. Lawrence went up to Ada's room to see if she were recovering from her agitation.

She was lying in bed pale, but very quiet, attended by her maid. He sent the girl away, and told his daughter what Willis had seen, and how vainly they had searched the house.

"Papa, what do you think?" asked she, in low, awe-struck tones. "Was it, indeed, as the man asserts, the restless spirit of my sister? It was like her, only paler and more shadowy, as a spirit well might be."

"Ada, I do not know what to think," said her father in low, moved tones, "I am lost in a maze of doubt and conjecture. Can it be that my daughter's soul cannot rest while her poor desecrated body remains uncoffined?"

"It may be so," said Ada, weeping. "What a mournful tone was in that voice as it breathed your name!"

He started up, pacing the floor in wild agitation.

"I must go down to Lance," he said. "We will go and see the detective again to-night, and learn if any clew has been found. We must find her body if skill and money combined can accomplish it; I cannot bear for her restless soul to be seeking its body at my hands!"

Mrs. Vance had retired to her room in a state of abject terror.

She believed that she had seen and heard the veritable spirit of the girl she had murdered, instigated thereto by jealousy.

Her bold and venturesome spirit had never yet felt the promptings of remorse for her dreadful deed. She rejoiced that Lily was dead, and that the shameful stigma of suicide lay upon her memory; though she was the daily witness of the bereaved family's sorrow, though she saw that Lancelot Darling was aged as if ten years had passed over his head in the past few weeks, still she felt no grief for her sin, and kept on her resolute way, swearing in her secret soul to win the young man whom she passionately adored, and whose wealth and position made him the most eligible *parti* in the whole city. Love and ambition alike spurred her on to the attainment of her cherished object.

But the dreadful revelation of old Haidee had struck a lightning flash of terror to her guilty soul.

She had believed herself secure in her sin; she had thought it known only to herself of all the world, and the knowledge that her secret belonged to another had almost crazed her with the fear of its betrayal. She regretted that she had not followed the old witch home that day and struck another secret blow that would have sealed the old woman's lips forever.

She who had struck down so ruthlessly the fair and blooming life of Lily Lawrence would have felt no compunction in ending prematurely the old and sin-blasted existence of Haidee Leveret. All that she lacked was the chance.

Now another scathing monition had been hurled against her guilty conscience. In the hour when old Haidee's continued silence and absence had begun to inspire her with confidence again, when the wooing tones had brought Lancelot Darling to her side, when she could almost feel his breath upon her cheek as he bent to turn the pages of her music—in that supreme hour the image of the woman she hated had risen to blast her sight, and to come between her and the love she sought. It was horrible, it was maddening.

She sought her solitary apartment and flung herself face downward on the bed, afraid to lift her heavy eyes lest they should be blasted by the sight of the restless spirit which her guilty hand had driven forth a wanderer from the fair citadel it once inhabited.

"Do the dead walk?" she said to herself, in fearful agitation, "do they revisit the haunts of life and love? Do they ever return and denounce their murderers? Oh! God, why do I ask myself these fruitless questions? Do I not know? Have I not looked upon the face of the dead this night? Ah! what if she had pointed a ghostly finger at me, and said before them all, 'Thou art my murderess!'"

Shivering as if with the ague she buried her head in the bed-clothes.

A sudden rap at the door caused her to start violently.

"Enter," said she, almost inaudibly.

It was only one of the neat housemaids. She looked concerned at the ghastly white face the widow lifted on her entrance.

"Are you ill, Mrs. Vance?" she inquired.

"No—yes—that is, my head aches badly," was the confused answer.

The maid had heard the story of the ghostly visitor from Willis, and rightly attributed the agitation of the lady to that cause.

She did not allude to it, however, as Mrs. Vance did not. She simply said:

"I found this trinket in the hall as I was passing through it, Mrs. Vance. I have shown it to Miss Lawrence, but she does not know anything about it, so I came to ask if it belonged to you?"

She held the piece of gold in her hand. Mrs. Vance arose and examined it by the light.

It was the broken half of a golden locket such as gentlemen wear on their watch-chains. It was of costly workmanship, richly chased, with a delicate monogram set in minute diamonds. The intertwined letters were "H. C."

"It does not belong to me, Mary," answered Mrs. Vance. "It has probably broken off from some gentleman's watch-chain, and dropped as he was passing through the hall. But I do not know to whom

it can belong. We have had no visitors to-day, and indeed I cannot recollect any acquaintance we have with the initials, 'H. C.' What do you intend to do with it?"

"I shall ask Mr. Lawrence to take charge of it as soon as he returns," replied Mary. "It may be that he can find the owner. It is quite valuable, is it not, ma'am?"

"Yes, it has some value, Mary—the monogram is set with real diamonds, though they are very small. It evidently belongs to a person of some means," said Mrs. Vance, returning the trinket to Mary's hand.

The trim little maid said a polite good-night and tripped away with the jewel carefully wrapped in a handkerchief. Mrs. Vance, with her thoughts turned into a new channel, sat musing thoughtfully over the little incident. The longer she thought it over the more mysterious it appeared.

"To whom can it belong?" said she to herself. "No gentlemen at all have called here to-day. Can it have any connection with our mysterious visitation to-night?"

CHAPTER XIV

Mr. Lawrence detailed to the special detective, Mr. Shelton, the particulars of his daughter's appearance that evening. He was listened to with the closest attention.

When he had concluded his story, the detective said, respectfully:

"I am a very practical man, Mr. Lawrence, and my profession only makes me more so. When I am brought in contact with a mystery I invariably suspect crime. And I must tell you that I do not believe in the visionary nature of the girl you saw in your hall this evening. I am not a believer in the supernatural."

"What then, is your opinion of the phenomenon?" inquired Mr. Lawrence.

"That it was no phenomenon at all," answered Mr. Shelton, smiling. "It was palpably an attempt at robbery. Some girl with a resemblance to your lost daughter was employed to frighten off the man at the door, while her accomplices entered the hall, turned off the light and perpetrated a burglary."

"But there was nothing stolen," objected Mr. Lawrence. "The house was searched immediately, for I had an idea rather similar to yours at first. But nothing had been taken nor was there any person concealed in the house."

The detective smiled blandly in the comfortable knowledge of his own superior wisdom.

"The thieves were only frightened off that time," said he; "they will come again, feeling secure in the belief that the girl played the ghost to perfection. The next time do not be frightened but make an instant effort to capture her, and she can soon be forced to reveal her accomplices."

"You have learned nothing yet about the grave-robbers?" asked Mr. Lawrence, dismissing the first subject, thinking it quite possible that Mr. Shelton's exposition of the case was a very correct one.

"I have found the first link in the chain," said the detective brightening up.

"You have?" said the banker, gladly.

"It is a very slight clew, though," said Mr. Shelton. "I would not have you build your hopes on it, Mr. Lawrence, for it may not lead to anything. The case is a very mysterious one, and so far has completely baffled thorough investigation."

"But that you have discovered anything at all is an earnest of hope," said the banker. "Slight things lead to great discoveries sometimes. Will you give us the benefit of your discovery?"

"It must be held in the strictest confidence," said Mr. Shelton, looking from Mr. Lawrence to Mr. Darling, who had sat quite silent throughout the interview. "Of course you know that if suffered to get abroad it would put the guilty party on their guard."

Both gentlemen promised that they would preserve inviolable secrecy.

"Briefly, then, I have learned that the sexton was bribed to lend out the key of your vault the night of the funeral, Mr. Lawrence."

"The villain!" said Mr. Lawrence, hotly.

"Softly," said the detective; "he is not so bad as you think. His error lay in the possession of a soft heart unfortunately abetted by a soft head."

"I fail to catch your meaning," said the banker.

"I mean," said the detective, "that poor old man had no thought or dream of abetting a robbery. His consent was most reluctantly forced from him by the sighs and protestations of a pretended lover, who only desired that he might be permitted to look once more on the beloved face of the dead. The sighing Romeo prevailed over the old man's scruples with his frantic appeals and obtained the key, rewarding the sexton with all a lover's generosity. It was returned to him in a short while, and so implicit was his faith in the romantic lover that he never even looked in the vault to see if all was secure. The shocking discovery made the following day by Mr. Darling and yourself so appalled him with its possibilities of harm to himself, that he feared to reveal the fact of his unconscious complicity in the theft."

"Yet he revealed it to you," said Mr. Lawrence.

"The detectives are a shrewd lot for worming secrets out of people," said Shelton, with one of his non-committal smiles. "I used much *finesse* with the old man before I made my discovery. I suppose I may feel safe in supposing that you will not molest him at the present critical time? Much depends on secrecy."

"The case is in your hands—rest assured I shall not make any disastrous move in it," returned Mr. Lawrence, reassuringly.

"One thing further," said Mr. Shelton. "I learned that the man who enacted the hypocritical *role* of the despairing lover was tall and dark, but have not succeeded in identifying him yet. That is the meager extent of my information at present."

"I hope and trust it may soon lead to an entire elucidation of the mystery," said the banker, rising to leave.

"I will report all discoveries tending that way immediately, sir," answered the detective, bowing his visitors out of the office.

"How are you impressed with Mr. Shelton's powers as a detective, Lance?" asked Mr. Lawrence as they walked on a few blocks before hailing a car.

"I believe he is an able man, but—I am not prepared to subscribe to his theory of the event which happened to-night," was the somewhat hesitating reply of the young man.

"You are not? What, then, is your opinion?" asked the banker, in some surprise.

"Mr. Lawrence, I believe that it was really and truly our lost Lily whom we beheld to-night," said Lancelot, earnestly.

"Really and truly our Lily! Come, Lance, you talk wildly. Has your affliction turned your brain, poor boy? Recollect that Lily is dead."

"I know—I know. Who could realize that fact more forcibly than I do? But, my dear friend, I did not mean that it was Lily in the flesh. What I meant was that Lily's spirit, the better part of her which is imperishable, really and truly appeared to us to-night," said the young man, who was of a very impressive and imaginative cast of mind.

Mr. Lawrence regarded him curiously.

"But why should you persist in this belief, Lance, when the clever Mr. Shelton has so clearly shown us the fallacy of the idea?"

"He has not shown us the fallacy of the idea at all," answered Lancelot Darling earnestly, as before. "He has only given us his practical theory regarding it."

"Have you any conjecture regarding her object in so appearing to us—if, indeed, you take the right view of the matter, Lance?" asked the banker, impressed by the serious manner of his young friend.

"I have not thought of it, Mr. Lawrence. I have no distinct or tangible impression at all except this one, which is indelibly fixed on my mind. I believe that the pure, white soul of Lily Lawrence looked out visibly upon us to-night from the eyes of the girl whom we saw in the hall. I cannot be mistaken. My soul leaped forth to meet hers as it could not have done for any other woman, mortal or immortal," replied the loyal lover earnestly.

"Well, here is my car," said the banker, hastening to signal it.

"Good-night, sir," said Lance, turning a corner and going down the street toward his hotel to pass the weary night in restless tossing and sleeplessness, while visions of his beautiful lost love haunted his feverish brain until he was well-nigh driven to madness.

Mr. Lawrence went back to the detective next day with the costly broken jewel that Mary, the housemaid, had found in the hall. He explained to Mr. Shelton that no gentleman had called at the house the day previous except Mr. Darling, who said he had never seen it before.

"This confirms my view of the case," said Mr. Shelton, triumphantly "Did I not say that the girl had one or more accomplices? This was probably dropped by the man in his hurried flight. Yet

it would seem to have belonged to a person of taste and wealth. Such a one would not be engaged in burglary. The mystery only deepens."

"But may not this be a clew by which to discover the perpetrators of the dastardly act?" inquired the banker.

"It ought to do so," said the detective, frankly.

He remained lost in thought a few moments then inquired:

"Have you any acquaintance who can claim these initials, Mr. Lawrence?"

"Let me think. My circle of acquaintance is large, but I cannot recall anyone claiming H. C. as his monogram. My memory may not serve me correctly, though."

"Perhaps your card-receiver may do better, Mr. Lawrence. Will you examine that and let me know?"

"Certainly. Suppose you accompany me, and let us find out at once? I do not feel disposed to let this vexing matter rest."

"With pleasure, as I have a leisure hour at my disposal."

They returned to the house together and entered at once upon their quest.

It was not long before their labors were rewarded with success. The detective looked up with a small square of pasteboard in his hand, from which he read aloud triumphantly.

"Harold Colville!"

"H. C.' Harold Colville!" exclaimed the banker. "Why, really I had forgotten Mr. Colville."

"He visits here then, of course," said the detective.

"He did—at one time—frequently. Latterly he has discontinued his visits. Indeed, it has been four or five months since he called upon us."

"Had he any reason for the cessation of his visits?"

"Yes," said the banker, promptly. "He was a suitor for the hand of my daughter, Lily. She rejected him—being already engaged to Mr. Darling."

"I have seen Mr. Colville," said Shelton. "He is a man of wealth and leisure—dissipated and fast, I have heard."

"You have been correctly informed," was the reply.

"Indeed?" said Mr. Shelton. He laid the card back as he spoke, and rose to take leave.

"Does this discovery throw any light on the mystery?" said the other.

"I will be frank with you, Mr. Lawrence. It does not. The case seems complicated at present, but it is my business to unravel the crooked skein, and I hope to do so. You will suffer me to retain this bit of jewelry for the present. I wish to see if Mr. Colville can furnish the missing half."

"You suspect him, then—" said the banker, breaking off his sentence because perplexed how to end it.

"I suspect him of nothing at present," was the reply. "This trinket may have been stolen from him and lost by another, I have that to find out. If it be proved that Mr. Colville lost this locket in your hall last night, my theory of a projected theft will not hold water. A gentleman of his wealth and position would not need to descend to that phase of crime. Some other object must have actuated him."

He paused, drawing on his gloves.

"There is one thing more," he resumed. "Keep this mutual discovery we have made a dead secret until I give you leave to reveal it. Do not even mention it to your daughter or to Mr. Darling. He does not believe the theory I advanced last night. I read it in his expressive features. He thinks he really saw a spirit. Let him think so still; I am gathering the tangled ends of a fearful mystery in my hands. But if human skill can unravel it I will not fail to do so. Good-day, Mr. Lawrence."

He tripped airily away down the street with the air and manner of a well-bred gentleman. Few who saw the well-dressed man swinging his natty little cane so jauntily and wearing that supremely

indifferent air would have supposed him to be the most daring and accomplished detective in the State of New York. So thought Mr. Lawrence as he watched him walk away.

CHAPTER XV

The rage of old Haidee Leveret at finding herself duped and outwitted by such a weak girl as Lily Lawrence was frightful to witness and impossible to describe. She raved, she stormed, she tore her scanty gray locks and blasphemed in the most frightful and blood-curdling terms.

In vain she tried the door-handle, in vain she shook the iron bars in the window. They resisted her most vigorous efforts.

In her terrible rage she fell to breaking and tearing everything in her room that could be destroyed. She threw down the dishes containing Lily's untasted dinner and shivered them into fragments. She tore off the bed-covers and rent them in pieces in the height of her insane fury. If Lily had fallen into her cruel hands just then she would have killed her remorselessly.

At length, having sated her rage momentarily by wreaking it on those poor inanimate things, she began to quiet down somewhat and to consider the situation.

The enemy had worsted her, that was self-evident. Stratagem had succeeded against brute force and power.

Lily Lawrence had freed herself from captivity, and there was no one to pursue her and bring her back. Old Peter was not likely to return for several hours. If Lily's strength held out she would be safe in her home ere the old man could get back to town and carry the tidings to Doctor Pratt and Harold Colville.

Harold Colville had promised the old couple a most extravagant reward for the safe-keeping of his beautiful prisoner.

Not only did the loss of this trouble the old crone's mind, but also the fact that Lily would betray them all into the hands of the police and that exposure and punishment would follow on the discovery of the nefarious works which she and her husband had wrought for years. A species of abject terror filled her quaking frame at the thought. She thought of the miserly accumulations of her wicked life secreted beneath the roof of the old house, and dreaded lest her greedy eyes should never again be permitted to gloat over that golden hoard.

In the height of these woful cogitations her thoughts suddenly recurred to the prisoner in the gloomy dungeon beneath her.

Poor Fanny Colville, whose hearing had been strained all day to detect the faintest sound from above, had been a frightened listener to old Haidee's fearful explosion of wrath.

She knew by the violence of the witch's rage that Lily had succeeded in her stratagem and effected her escape. The knowledge filled her with joy, even while she feared that rage would instigate Haidee to yet further cruelties against herself. The desire for life was yet strong in the breast of the poor starving creature, and she shrank in terror while she thought it was probable that old Haidee would kill her in her frantic desire to wreak vengeance upon something. Even while she shivered over her fear she heard the heavy footsteps lumbering down the stairs toward the dungeon.

"What! are you not dead yet, you she-devil?" was the fierce salutation that greeted her ears.

Her enemy advanced, and seizing hold of her crouching body as it lay upon the bed, shook it with the fury of a wild-cat until it seemed as if the poor bones must rattle. "What do you mean by living in this way? Must I kill you at last with my own hands?"

"Spare me," moaned the poor victim between her chattering teeth, "spare me yet a little longer, I am so young, and life is so sweet!"

"Sweet, you fool!" cried the old hag, desisting from sheer weariness, and letting go of the poor skeleton to glare fiercely at her. "What! Life is sweet, chained in a dungeon, in rags, on a crust of bread and a sup of water?"

"Yes, oh, yes!" faltered the poor creature, hoping to gain a little time so that deliverance from her bonds might come.

"Live then, you worm!" cried the old witch, throwing life at her poor victim with a curse. "Live as long as you can since you find it such a luxury!"

The shivering heap of rags and bones did not answer. Stamping about the floor, glaring at the frightened Fanny, her mood changed. She said retrospectively:

"After all you are not such a devil as she! You have not the spirit in your poor, crushed, beaten body! You have never even tried to escape from me and bring me to punishment! Why should I tread on you when you will not even turn like the worm? No, live, live! Never fear but you shall have your crust of bread and sup of water while Haidee remains here to bring it to you."

So saying she went out again, and Fanny wept tears of joy at her departure. But a little while now, she thought gladly, and Lily would be at home. Then to-morrow at the farthest her own deliverance would arrive. She thought of the loved ones she had never expected to see again, of the dear old mother and father in their old home in the country, and the affectionate girl's tears flowed like rain for very joy at the blissful hope of reunion.

Alas! poor Fanny!

It seemed many hours to Haidee before her husband and Doctor Pratt returned. It was very near sunset, for Doctor Pratt had been absent visiting a patient, and Peter had been forced to await his return.

When at last they came and knocked at the door she had to inform them, with a curse for every word, of Lily's escape. Then they were compelled to force the door open, for the brave girl had taken the key with her and thrown it away in the road.

As soon as Doctor Pratt heard her story he sprang into the buggy and drove into the city with furious haste in search of Colville. It was late before he found him, so that Lily was almost home before he learned the story.

"I suppose it is all up with us now," said Colville, after swearing an oath or two. "And we had better be getting away from town before we are arrested. I suppose she is at home by now."

"There is only one chance in ten that she is not," was the reply. "Her excessive weakness may have caused her to fall by the way. It seems impossible that one so debilitated by sickness should take so long a walk without resting."

"You think there is a chance of her recapture, then?" inquired Colville eagerly.

"There may be," was the cautious reply. "You see, if she is yet on the road we can watch for her near her home; and as it is getting dark it would be very easy to seize her and put her into a waiting carriage. After that there would be no difficulty. Chloroform would stifle her screams while we drove back to Leveret's with her."

"But the carriage driver, doctor. Might he not betray us?"

"I will drive my own carriage," answered Pratt. "We will stop near the corner of Mr. Lawrence's house. You will then get out and watch for her. If she should appear you will hastily throw a cloak over her head and carry her to the carriage."

"Well planned, doctor! Let us be going at once. Every moment is precious in this extremity."

"We must first purchase a bottle of chloroform, a sponge, and a long, water-proof cloak in which to envelope her form," said the doctor, recollecting precautions which Colville in his impetuosity was about forgetting.

These purchases were hastily made, and the two worthies stepped into the doctor's light carriage and drove rapidly away on their mission of evil.

They were not a minute too soon. As the carriage stopped at the corner a slight form hurried past, plainly visible in the light of the street-lamp.

"It is she!" said Pratt in a hasty whisper. He recognized her graceful form in spite of the disguising veil and sack.

Colville was stung to madness by the sight.

"I will have her," he declared with a terrible oath, "if I have to tear her from the arms of her lover!"

He sprang out and followed her. She had gone up the steps and rung the bell. Just as he came opposite the steps he saw old Willis open the door, and witnessed his headlong flight from the supposed spirit of his young mistress. As she glided into the house he ran lightly up the steps and followed her. She heard the footsteps of her pursuer and faintly moaned:

"Papa! papa!"

But in that moment, ere assistance could reach her, the gaslights were turned out by a steady hand; she was plucked backward by the skirt of her dress, and fell into Colville's arms, so muffled by the heavy cloak he threw over her that she could not breathe. Hardly clogged by the light burden in his arms he ran through the hall and down the steps before Lancelot Darling reached the door. It was but the work of a moment to reach the carriage and give his captive into the doctor's ready arms. He then sprang in himself and drove rapidly away with their beautiful captive.

CHAPTER XVI

Lily awakened from the temporary stupor induced by chloroform and found herself a prisoner again in the old familiar room. She was lying on the bed, and Doctor Pratt, grim, and satanic-looking as usual, sat by the side.

Harold Colville was also an occupant of the room, and Haidee Leveret, from the foot of the bed, gave her a fiendish scowl in answer to the glance she cast upon her.

"How do you feel after your journey this evening?" inquired the physician, with a sarcastic smile.

A glance of scorn from Lily's eyes fell upon him. She did not vouchsafe him any reply.

"I think you must begin to realize by this time that it is quite impossible for you to escape from us," continued Doctor Pratt. "You have now made two attempts which have resulted in nothing except to make us more vigilant than before in keeping you safely secured. Hereafter you will be doubly guarded by Haidee and Peter. He will accompany her and stand outside the room door whenever she has any business within. You are aware that the window is too heavily and strongly barred for you to tamper with it. You now see that there is no possible chance for you to make a third attempt to elude us."

There was no reply. Lily still regarded him with a flashing gaze full of scorn and contempt; but the villain went on, in no-wise disconcerted by her anger:

"It seems to me, Miss Lawrence, that your best and wisest course would be to thankfully accept Mr. Colville's proposals of marriage. Surely that cannot be such a terrible thing to do. There are many ladies who would be proud of the honor which he seeks to force upon you. Your former home is forever lost to you; you are as one dead to your family. They have seen you laid away in the tomb. If you went to them now they would not believe that you belonged to them; they would scout your story as impossible and yourself as an impostor. There remains, therefore, but one possible chance of restoration to your friends and to liberty, and that is to appear before them in the character of Mrs. Harold Colville."

"Mr. Colville has already had an answer to his proposals," answered Lily, firmly. "I will die before I accept liberty on these terms!"

"Do not allow any scruples in regard to Mr. Darling to influence your decision," interrupted Colville, speaking for the first time, "for I can assure you, on the honor of a gentleman, Miss Lawrence, that he has transferred his fickle affections to the wily widow who tried to murder you in order that she might steal into his heart and win his hand and fortune."

"It is false; Lancelot has not forgotten me so soon," cried Lily, warmly.

But though she defended her lover's loyalty so bravely, there flashed over her mind a remembrance of the scene she had momentarily witnessed last night—Mrs. Vance at the grand piano, playing and singing softly, her lover—her handsome, kingly Lancelot—bending over her as he turned the pages of her music.

She had thought nothing of it then; but in the light of Harold Colville's bold assertion it seemed to her terribly significant.

"I do not wonder that my assertion taxes your credulity," returned Colville, with a maddening smile. "It seemed almost beyond belief when it first came to my knowledge. Not yet three months from your supposed death, I can scarcely understand how the man who lacked but a few hours of being your husband could console himself with the smiles of another so soon. But he is young and impressible, and I grant you she is rarely beautiful, and gifted with consummate art."

"I can add my testimony to Mr. Colville's assertion," said Doctor Pratt. "Your lover has, indeed, been beguiled into forgetfulness of his grief by the fascination of the charming widow. They are now acknowledged lovers!"

"I do not believe it," answered Lily, proudly. "Do you think I would take your word, Harold Colville, or yours, Doctor Pratt, for the truth? You have proved yourselves villains, and I do not place the least confidence in your assertions. You tell me these things believing I will the more readily yield to your wishes. But you are mistaken—sadly mistaken! I tell you now that if Lancelot Darling should marry Mrs. Vance to-morrow it would not make any difference in my rejection of a villain's suit!"

Both the worthies glared at her with fierce wrath.

"So be it," said Colville, angrily. "But remember, you will remain a prisoner until you accede to my wishes, no matter how long you hold out. Haidee, you need not provide so sumptuously for so contumacious a captive. Let bread and water be her portion until her rebellious spirit is broken. I will see her again in a month's time. Come, doctor; come, Haidee; let us leave her to the pleasures of solitary contemplation."

All three retired; the door, which had been provided with another key, was securely locked, and she was left again in her loneliness and bitter sorrow.

Weak and weary with her long journey and unbroken fast she lay still, her limbs aching with fatigue and her heart almost broken with sorrow.

Her momentary glimpse of her dear ones had filled her heart with a wild flood of new tenderness for them. She had come back to them from the dead, and she felt that they would have been filled with the deepest joy in receiving her again.

She had been so cruelly torn from them in the very moment when they first caught sight of her! She wondered what they would think.

"Perhaps they will share old Willis' delusion that it was a spirit," thought she, with a flood of tears.

She had almost forgotten Fanny in the bitter anguish of being retaken thus in the very moment of impending re-union with her family.

But presently she heard the clank of the poor captive's chain, as she turned restlessly on her hard bed, and caught the sound of her groans.

"Poor Fanny," she thought, "how will she bear this sad disappointment when she hoped so much from my escape!"

Weak and trembling she rose from the bed, and taking the lamp in her hand staggeringly descended the stairs in quest of her poor companion in captivity and sorrow.

Fanny lay extended on the cot, moaning piteously. She cried out in surprise and terror, fearing that Haidee had returned to threaten and abuse her. But she soon saw that it was the sweet face of the captive girl that beamed upon her.

"My God, Miss Lawrence, is it you?" she said. "I thought, I hoped that you had escaped!"

Lily threw herself down upon the hard stone floor and wept piteously. The trial was hard upon herself, as affecting her own individual welfare.

Now the burden of this poor creature's sorrow added to the weight of her own made it almost insupportable. It was some time before she could summon sufficient calmness to relate her mournful story to the suffering creature.

"It is all over," she said in conclusion. "There is no hope of escape from our prison, and death is before us."

Fanny lay still, moaning now and then in pain. She made no attempt to rise, and at last Lily noticed the fact.

"What is the matter with you, my poor soul?" said she. "Are you worse? Are you unable to rise?"

"I cannot raise my head," answered the poor girl patiently, "my poor bones have been shaken and beaten terribly by old Haidee. I am very stiff and sore."

As well as she could she related the story of old Haidee's rage at her captive's escape, her descent into the dungeon and her wild onslaught on her starving captive. Lily wept at the recital of Fanny's sufferings.

"She was wreaking her rage at my escape, upon you, poor Fanny," said she. "Oh! God, why dost thou allow the wicked thus to triumph over the weak and the innocent?"

"Are you much hurt? Do you think you can survive it?" she asked presently in anxious tones.

"I don't know. I am very sore at present. There seems very little life left in me. Perhaps it would be better if I should die," said the poor creature despondently. The little spark of hope awakened in her breast by Lily's escape was dead now, and despair had claimed her for its own. Lily knelt by the cot and felt her hands. They were cold and clammy, and chilly dews stood upon the wasted brow. Lily started. Could this be death that was stealing over the poor captive? She feared it was, but she was afraid to linger longer lest old Haidee should find her out. She rose reluctantly.

"I wish I could stay with you, Fanny," said she. "It seems hard to leave you suffering thus alone. But if old Haidee should find me, she might kill you for fear I should betray her. So it seems that I must go. Good-night."

Lily took the poor, wasted hand and pressing it gently, went away, fearing that the few sands of life remaining to Harold Colville's injured wife were fast running out.

CHAPTER XVII

About a month subsequent to the events which have been related in the last chapter, Mrs. Vance and Ada Lawrence sat alone in the drawing-room of their splendid home. Ada had been reading, but the volume seemed to have little interest, for it had fallen from her hands to the floor, and she was reclining on a luxurious divan, looking bored and sad, while now and then a low sigh rippled across her coral lips.

She was very lovely, being a pure blonde with red and white complexion and hair of golden tint. Her face looked flower-like in its delicacy, gleaming out from the somber folds of her mourning dress.

Mrs. Vance, sitting opposite, absorbed in a voluminous billow of crimson crochet work, looked over at her, and started as if she had only just begun to realize the girl's exceeding fairness.

"How pretty she is," she thought apprehensively, "and how startling her likeness to her dead sister! Good Heavens! what if Lance should see the resemblance as plainly as I do, and fall in love with her for Lily's sake."

The thought which now presented itself for the first time was startling in its probability. She began to think that it was time for Ada to be going back to school. It was dangerous to keep that fair flower-face in Lancelot Darling's vicinity.

"Ada," said she, abruptly, "how old are you?"

"Sixteen," answered the girl sleepily, without lifting her drooping, golden-brown lashes.

"Almost old enough to come out in society," said the lady. "You will have to hurry and finish your education—you mean to graduate, of course. When are you going back to school?"

"I do not expect to go back at all," was the startling reply.

"Not go back," said Mrs. Vance, affecting extreme astonishment.

"Papa is so lonely now that Lily is gone," said Ada, choking back a sob, "that I have not the heart to leave him. I will stay with him and comfort him."

"But, my dear—you so young, so unformed in your manners—surely you will not sacrifice yourself thus! Let me advise you to go back to college another year at least," urged Mrs. Vance.

A little annoyed at her persistence, Ada sat up and looked across at her.

"Mrs. Vance," said she, coldly, "do you happen to know that if I took your advice and returned to my boarding-school this house could no longer be a home for you?"

"Why not?" asked the lady, a little fluttered.

"Do you not see?" said Ada, pointedly. "You are not related to papa at all. You are a young and handsome woman. If you and he were living here alone together, with no one but the servants, people would couple your names unpleasantly. So you comprehend that it is better for me to stay and play propriety."

"Ada, I do not believe you care whether I have a shelter over my head or not," said the widow, stung into anger by the pointed speech of the girl.

"I should be sorry to see any one houseless," answered Ada, calmly; "but to own the truth, Mrs. Vance, I must say that I am sorry that the same roof has to shelter us both. I do not like you, and I am honest enough to tell you so!"

"Because I am poor and you are rich," said Mrs. Vance, affecting to weep.

"It is not that," said the young girl. "It is not that you are no relation to papa, except by marriage, and that you forced yourself here and claimed a support when you might have earned one for yourself, as many another widow has done. No, it is not for these things, Mrs. Vance, for I might still like you in spite of them, though I might pity your lack of true independence. But I dislike you because I believe you are a false, deceitful, unprincipled woman, scheming for some secret end of your own."

"What have I ever done to you, Ada, that you should denounce me thus?" sobbed the widow.

"Nothing—you would not dare to, for my papa would turn you out of the house if you did," replied the girl, spiritedly. "But do you think, Mrs. Vance, I cannot see your present drift? Do you think I do not see how shamelessly you are courting Lance Darling, and trying to win him from poor Lily who has been dead these four months scarcely?"

"Perhaps you want him for yourself," Mrs. Vance was beginning to say sarcastically, when they were interrupted by a slight rap on the door.

"Enter," called out Ada.

It was a servant with a message for the widow.

"There's an old woman out in the hall, Mrs. Vance, who says she has brought the samples of lace you desired."

Ada, who was watching her curiously, wondered why the angry woman grew so ghastly white under her rouge at the reception of so commonplace a visitor.

"Say that I am coming," said the widow to the domestic.

In a moment she arose with a muttered apology and followed him into the hall. Old Haidee stood there patiently waiting with her basket of laces on her arm.

"Bring the laces up to my apartment," said the lady, with as indifferent an air as she could assume.

When they were once safe within the locked room, Mrs. Vance turned furiously on the old lace-vender.

"Did I not tell you not to come here again?" she said. "I have nothing else to give you."

"Oh, Mrs. Vance, don't say that," whined the old crone, piteously; "I did not mean to come back, I did not indeed, but I am so poor and the gold you gave me is all gone."

"Liar! there was enough to last you a year," said Mrs. Vance, angrily.

"Oh, no, ma'am—not with my old man down with the rheumatism, and all my starving children around me. The money all went for medicine, food and clothes. It melted away like the new-fallen snow," whined Haidee. "So I said to myself, I will go back, I will tell the kind lady how poor I am and she will give me more money."

"I told you I had no more to give," almost shrieked Mrs. Vance in her desperation. "The money I gave you was presented to me by Mr. Lawrence, and he expected it would last me a long while. I am a poor woman, living here on the rich man's bounty, and I have nothing more for you—absolutely nothing!"

"Oh! but the pretty lady is mistaken," said Haidee, doggedly. "She has money, or if not she has jewels."

"Would you rob me of my few jewels, you base old wretch?"

"Necessity knows no law," retorted the old creature, grinning hideously. "I must have help for my sick husband and starving children. If you will not help me I must go to Mr. Lawrence or to Mr. Darling."

These sly words had their intended effect of frightening Mrs. Vance into compliance.

She went to her jewel box and began hurriedly to toss over its glittering contents.

"Here," she said, turning round with a handsome brooch in her hand, "will this satisfy your cupidity?"

But old Haidee's eyes roved greedily over the sparkling gems in the casket. She shook her head.

"I could not sell it for a quarter of its value," said she. "It would not relieve my necessities. Add some other trifle to it, lady—that bracelet for instance."

The bracelet was a very handsome one in the form of a serpent with glistening emerald eyes. With a groan Mrs. Vance put it into the greedy, working fingers.

"You will strip me of every valuable I possess," she said, "and then when I have nothing else to give you will betray me to my enemies, for the sake of gaining a reward from them."

"Lady, you do me cruel injustice," was the hypocrite's meek reply. "I will never betray you while you so generously divide your all with me."

"But if you keep coming with such demands as this I shall soon have nothing to divide with you," said Mrs. Vance.

"Aye, but the rich man will soon supply you with more gold," said the harpy, cunningly, as she turned to take leave.

"It will be a good while before I get any more money from Mr. Lawrence, so you need not be in a hurry to return for it," said the widow, letting her unwelcome visitor out of the door, and shaking her fist after her departing form.

As soon as her heavy footsteps ceased lumbering on the stairs, she hurriedly changed her house-dress for a walking costume of plain material and simple make. She then put on a small, black hat, tied over her face a thick, dark veil, and descended the steps, letting herself quietly out at the front door.

Once in the street, she paused and glanced hurriedly up and down. No one was in sight but the crooked form of the old lace-vender going slowly along a few blocks ahead of her.

Mrs. Vance set out to follow the old woman, walking briskly a few squares until she came within half a block of her. She then slackened her pace and went on more slowly, keeping herself invisible, but never losing sight of her prey.

"I will track the beast to its lair," she said to herself, "and then we will have our reckoning out."

Mrs. Vance hurried on at a steady pace, keeping her enemy fairly in sight, but aiming to keep too far in the background to be recognized herself. She had a long walk ahead of her, but she did not mind it, for her excitement was so great that she was insensible to bodily fatigue. She was filled with a raging anger against Ada Lawrence, whose pure, true instincts had so clearly fathomed her meanness and littleness of spirit. Added to this was her hatred of old Haidee Leveret, mixed with an abject fear of the old woman's power against her in the possession of her guilty secret. As she turned corner after corner, and traversed street after street, her mind was busy revolving vague schemes by which to rid herself of the greedy and dangerous old creature who began to hang upon her shoulders heavily as a veritable Sinbad.

At length she began to see that she was coming out upon the outskirts of the city. Old Haidee, a little ahead of her, kept on at a swinging pace, hastening her footsteps as she found herself nearing home. Mrs. Vance kept on steadily too, feeling determined to find out the old woman's home if she had any.

At last they reached the gloomy old stone house, with its high, forbidding stone wall. Even Mrs. Vance, courageous as she felt herself to be, was conscious of a pang resembling fear as she contemplated the place. But when Haidee was entering the gate she felt a firm touch on her shoulder, and turned to meet the smiling gaze of the beautiful widow.

"You see I have overtaken you," was her smooth salutation.

"You have followed me!" exclaimed Haidee, with a savage scowl of rage and surprise commingled.

"Yes," said Mrs. Vance coolly.

"Woman, woman! are you not afraid?" cried the old witch, pulling her visitor in and letting the heavy gate fall shut between them and the outer world. "Have you no dread of my vengeance? Remember, a word from me can consign you at any moment to the prison cell. Yet you dare to incur my wrath!"

"I did not follow you to provoke you to anger," said Mrs. Vance, deprecatingly. "Two motives prompted me to discover your residence. First, I desired to see your sick husband and starving children in the hope that I might do something to benefit them. And secondly, if you intend to make periodical calls on me for hush-money it is better that I should come here and bring it than for you to call on me. Your frequent visits on the slight pretext of your laces will not continue to deceive anyone, and may draw down suspicion upon me. Already Miss Lawrence suspects me of something. She has plainly

told me so. So I repeat what I have already said—that it is much safer for me to come here than for you to go there."

"Come in, then, do," said Haidee, with a grim politeness that showed she was not much imposed on by the lady's profuse explanations. "Come in, and I will introduce you to my family. If you are really anxious to benefit us you shall have the opportunity."

She walked on down the grass-grown patch as she spoke and knocked at the house door. There was the sound of a key grating in the lock; then the door swung open and disclosed old Peter Leveret standing on the threshold.

Mrs. Vance, who kept close behind Haidee, started back with a cry of fear as his huge, misshapen body and bristling red hair met her gaze.

"That is my old man," said the lace vender, coolly. "I see you do not like his looks. Well, he is not handsome, certainly; but he is very useful in *other* ways."

Her malicious emphasis on the last words sent a shudder of fear through the veins of the visitor, but she did not betray her alarm. She followed the couple quietly into their rude and poorly furnished sitting-room and sat down in the chair old Haidee placed for her. Old Peter retired from their company at an almost imperceptible sign from his wife, and left the two together.

"Well, you have seen my husband," said the hostess, coolly. "You perceive he is a very miserable object—one calculated to strike fear into the heart of a fine lady with such delicate nerves as your own. My children, I am sorry to say, are not at home to-day. They would have remained if they had anticipated the honor of your visit; but they are all out begging, as I have been."

Old Haidee had thrown off the tone of whining meekness which she often adopted with Mrs. Vance and showed herself now cool, impudent and crafty. Mrs. Vance noted this change with alarm. She began to think she had perhaps erred in risking her head in the lion's den. She now said in a tone of meekness calculated to allay the spirit of defiance she had raised in the old witch:

"One word, Haidee, as I think you told me your name was—does that old man, your husband, share the secret you hold against me?"

"I told you once," was the answer, "that the secret belongs to me alone."

"Yes, but as a man and his wife are one," said Mrs. Vance, cajolingly, "perhaps you would not count him as anyone but yourself—but you see it would make much difference to me. So I ask you again, does he know that secret?"

"And I decline to answer that question," answered the old witch craftily.

Truth to tell, old Peter was not aware of the secret which his wife assumed to hold against Mrs. Vance, for Haidee, in her miserly avarice, had wished to share its golden fruits alone; but the cunning old creature saw in the anxiety of the lady a menace of danger to herself, and thought it as well to encourage Mrs. Vance's doubts in that direction.

"I decline to answer that question," she repeated, with a fearful scowl.

"I may as well go then," said the visitor, rising. She was too much frightened at the loneliness of the house and the murderous looks of its inhabitants to remain longer. "But, Haidee, I wish you to understand plainly that you are not to enter the house of Mr. Lawrence again. If you must have more hush-money from me, you can send me a line through the post-office, and I will come here myself and bring you what I can raise. Will you promise to do this?"

"I will promise to do as you say if you will keep your word," was the sullen answer, "but if you fail to come with the money within twenty-four hours after I write you, rest assured I shall come after it at the grand house."

"I will not fail you," was the firm answer, "and now unfasten the door and let me go."

"How do you know that I will let you go?" asked Haidee, tauntingly. "This is a fine old house in which to hold you prisoner—it has old stone dungeons, iron-barred windows."

Mrs. Vance shuddered, but she answered in as fearless a tone as possible:

"You have no interest in making a prisoner of me, for in that case you would get no profit out of your secret. You will not kill the goose that lays the golden eggs."

"No, no," chuckled Haidee, "but perhaps you are laying some plan against me—you wish to have me arrested."

"It is not likely. My safety depends on yours—no, no, you need fear nothing from me. Come, come, it grows late. I am very thirsty. Give me a drink of water and let me go."

The water was procured, and the visitor drank and departed.

She walked hastily over the lonely road, passed the scattered houses, and then hailing an empty hack that was passing, entered it and was driven rapidly homeward, her thoughts, if possible, being more gloomy than before, for now the dread of old Peter Leveret was added to her fears of his wife.

She had started out to follow old Haidee with black murder in her heart. She had not believed in the story of the sick husband and children, but had expected to find the old crone alone.

Heaven knows what would have happened if she had; but instead she found the strong, hideous old man, whose leering looks had struck terror to her heart, and she now believed that he also was cognizant of the fatal secret which was fraught with such danger to her.

Her thoughts and feelings were anything but enviable ones as she walked up the steps of the brown-stone palace she called her home.

As she passed through the hall she saw the drawing-room door ajar, and heard voices. She tip-toed to the door and peeped cautiously in.

Lancelot Darling was there, his handsome head bowed over the couch where Ada half reclined, listening to a poem which Lancelot was reading aloud. They looked cozy, comfortable, and supremely contented to the jealous eyes that glared steadily upon them.

She made no sign, however, but went on to her room, with a tempest in her heart which, however, did not prevent her from subsequently descending to the drawing-room, where she set herself to work by every beguiling art of which she was mistress, to wile away the unconscious young man from the side of the beautiful Ada.

CHAPTER XVIII

Haidee Leveret had scarcely returned from locking the door after her despairing visitor when she was confronted by her husband.

Old Peter's eyes snapped viciously, his hideous old face was flushed crimson, and his shock of bristly red hair stood erect with indignation.

"Now, then, madam," said he, with a snort of rage, "I have caught you at your sly tricks, have I?"

"What is the matter with you, old man?" inquired his spouse, affecting serene unconsciousness.

"Oh, you may well ask!" snapped her liege lord. "You haven't been and gone and discovered a mine of wealth and worked it yourself in secret, denying your poor honest old husband a share in the profits—oh, no, you have not!"

"Shut up your nonsense," said Haidee, witheringly.

"You haven't got a secret against a great lady," pursued old Peter, disregarding her adjuration. "A great lady who follows you home to lavish gold upon you, and who wants to know if poor old Peter shares the secret with you, that she may bestow some of her wealth upon him. You have not got your pockets full of gold at this moment—oh, no, no, no!"

"You have been eavesdropping, you devil," cried his wife in a rage.

"Well, what if I have?" snapped he. "When a woman has secrets from her husband—a kind, faithful old man like you have got, Haidee—it is his right to find out all he can by hook or by crook. I have a mind to search your pockets this minute, and see what hoards of wealth you have hidden there now."

"Have done with your foolishness, old man," said Haidee, with an uneasy consciousness of the costly golden brooch and bracelet, lying *perdu* in her pocket that minute.

"Will you turn your pocket inside out then, and let me see if it is empty?" asked her husband threateningly.

"No, I won't," was the sullen response.

Inflamed with rage and cupidity the old man advanced fiercely upon her, intending to carry out his threat.

But the virago was ready for him. As he was about to pinion her arms down to prevent her resistance, she suddenly thrust her hands into his hair, and clutched its bushy red masses tightly in her long and claw-like fingers.

This done, with a quick and dexterous movement she flourished her arms and brought her husband down groveling on his knees before her.

"So you will pick my pocket, will you, you old villain!" she cried triumphantly.

But she cried victory a moment too soon. As she spoke the words old Peter made a furious lunge forward with his immense head and succeeded in throwing her backward upon the floor, where she lay kicking furiously and waving her hands, in which were tangled great bunches of fiery hair.

The old man immediately followed up his signal success by planting his knees on her chest, and rifling her pocket of its costly contents, while the vanquished wife sent forth wailing cries of rage and grief at the spoliation of her property.

"Oh! yes," cried the old man, holding aloft these spoils of war with one hand, while he vigorously pummelled his wife with the other. "Oh! yes, you have already stripped the woman of her money, and have now commenced on her jewels! Where have you hidden the pile of money? Tell me this minute, before I kill you!"

Receiving no answer but a loud curse he began to rain blows thick and fast on the head and shoulders of his powerless victim, and there is no telling how this conjugal war might have ended had not a loud and continued knocking on the door startled the furious belligerents.

"Get up," shrieked the vanquished, rejoicing at this diversion in her favor. "Get up and open the door! Someone has been knocking these ten minutes past."

Old Peter obeyed this mandate reluctantly, shambling off and carefully pocketing the jewels as he went, while Haidee rose and straightened her disordered dress, and picked up her cap, which had been torn off in the furious *melee*.

"Now, then," said Doctor Pratt, entering, attended by Harold Colville, "what is the matter here? I never heard such a furious racket in my life! Have you two been fighting?"

"Only having a friendly knock-about by way of exercise, sir," answered old Peter, with a hideous grin at his conquered opponent, who had received a black eye and a swollen face for her portion of the friendly contest, while he himself had not escaped scatheless, as he bore several bloody scratches on his face, and sundry bites on his large red hands that testified to the efficacy of her teeth and finger nails.

"What was the cause of your quarrel?" inquired Mr. Colville, curiously.

"It was of no moment," answered Haidee, with a warning glance at her old man; but Peter's fighting blood was up and he did not heed her caution. He proceeded to explain by way of revenge on his angry spouse.

"It was all along of a fine lady, doctor, that Haidee is holding a secret against, and getting lots of money from on account of it, which she refuses to share, either the money or the secret, with her poor old husband."

"Who is the lady, and what secret have you got against her?" inquired Doctor Pratt, looking sternly at her.

"It is no concern of yours, doctor," was the sullen reply.

"Her name was Mrs. Vance," said Peter, taking a malicious joy in circumventing old Haidee.

"Good Heavens," said Doctor Pratt, remembering how incautiously he had talked to Colville about the widow in Haidee's presence. "Why, you she-devil, is it possible you have been trading upon the suspicions you heard me breathe about the woman?"

The old witch would not answer, but Peter, taking on himself the role of spokesman, replied for her:

"I can't tell you where she got suspicions or her information, sir, but she has certainly made a good bit by her knowledge, for she has gathered in all the lady's money, and now begins to strip her of her jewels. Fine ladies don't part with things like these until all their money has gone the same gait," said he, holding up the brooch and the jeweled serpent whose emerald eyes glared like living ones.

"It's a lie—I've only had money of her once," said old Haidee fiercely. "She is a poor woman, and has nothing to pay with."

"How did you gain your information, Peter, if, as you say, your wife would not share her secret with you?" inquired Doctor Pratt, trembling with rage against Haidee.

"The lady followed her home to-day to make arrangements for coming here the next time to pay another installment of hush-money. Haidee had been going there on some pretext of peddling lace, I think, but the lady was afraid to have her come to her house again, and promised to meet her here."

"My God!" said the physician, growing white with fear and rage. "Mrs. Vance here—in this house only to-day. Haidee, you shall repent this!"

"I have not betrayed any of your secrets, doctor—I was only making a little money for myself, and no harm done," said the old witch, beginning to grow apologetic.

"No matter, you must never go there again, nor suffer her to come here. If you do I swear I will murder you! Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir," was the sulky answer.

"And you promise to do as I bid you?"

"I promise."

"Very well, then. See that you keep your word. And you, Peter, let me know if she dares to disobey my injunction. And let the matter rest also yourself. If either of you approach Mrs. Vance again, I swear you shall pay a heavy penalty for your temerity!"

"Your prisoner, Haidee—is she safe?" inquired Harold Colville, growing impatient of the delay.

"She is, sir," was the answer.

"The key then—we wish to visit her," said Colville; whereupon he and Doctor Pratt both arose and made their way to Lily's room.

CHAPTER XIX

Lily Lawrence sat alone in the same room in which she had first been incarcerated when in her cataleptic state she had been brought to this house of captivity. Peter Leveret had made the window secure again, and she had been removed here the day after her recapture in her father's hall by Colville.

Consequently she had had no means of ascertaining whether or not the miserable wife of Colville still survived.

She thought it more than likely that the poor creature was dead and beyond all suffering which the vindictive spirit of old Haidee might still inflict upon her while a spark of life remained in her body.

A profound sympathy and regret for poor Fanny's wretched fate, mixed up with Lily's deep solicitude for herself, added to the melancholy air which began to overshadow her like a cloud.

It is a month since we have seen her and she has changed greatly since that time.

Her jailers have strictly carried out Colville's injunction to allow her nothing but bread and water, and the result is plainly seen in an added frailty of face and form.

As she sits in the old arm-chair with her small head thrown wearily back, she looks almost too transparently pale and pure for an inhabitant of earth.

The blue veins show plainly as they wander beneath the white skin, the blue eyes look larger and darker by contrast with the purple shadows beneath them, the once rounded cheeks are thin and hollow.

Even the lips, once so rosy and smiling with their arch dimpled corners, have taken on an expression of pain and endurance pitiful to see in one so young and fair.

The small white hands, growing thin and weak, are listlessly folded across her lap, while she looks wearily at the smouldering ashes of a fire that had been kindled on the hearth that morning, for the September mornings are chilly and the girl's enfeebled frame feels cold keenly.

Thus the two confederates found her when, after a premonitory rap, they unlocked the door and entered. She looked up and her white face blanched still whiter at their presence, but beyond that she took no notice save in a fixed and slightly scornful curl of the lip.

"I trust that I find you well, Miss Lawrence," said her suitor, with an air of devotion.

"Is it possible I should feel well after subsisting for a month on bread and water?" asked the girl, in a languid voice of unutterable contempt.

"Lily, forgive me, but you force me to adopt these stringent measures. It is my love that drives me thus to extremes in hope of forcing your consent at last. Oh! why will you not relent and make yourself comfortable, and me the happiest of men?" cried Colville, imploringly, as he tried to take her hand in his own. But she drew it away with a gesture of contempt and repugnance to his touch and he desisted. Dr. Pratt withdrew to the window and appeared to ignore the conversation.

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