

**ALEX.
MCVEIGH
MILLER**

COUNTESS VERA; OR, THE
OATH OF VENGEANCE

Alex. McVeigh Miller
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Mrs. Alex. McVeigh Miller

Countess Vera / or, The Oath of Vengeance

CHAPTER I

"Dead!"

Leslie Noble reels backward, stunned by the shuddering horror of that one word—"Dead!" The stiff, girlish characters of the open letter in his hand waver up and down before his dazed vision, so that he can scarcely read the pathetic words, *so* pathetic now when the little hand that penned them lies cold in death.

"Dear Leslie," it says, "when you come to bid me good-bye in the morning I shall be dead. That is best. You see, I did not know till to-night my sad story, and that you did not love me. Poor mamma was wrong to bind you so. I am very sorry, Leslie. There is nothing I can do but *die*."

There is no signature to the sad little letter—none—but they have taken it from the hand of his girl-wife, found dead in her bed this morning—his bride of two days ago.

With a shudder of unutterable horror, his glance falls on the lovely, girlish face, lying still and cold with the marble mask of death on its beauty. A faint tinge of the rose lingers still on the

delicate lips, the long, curling fringe of the lashes lies darkly against the white cheeks, the rippling, waving, golden hair falls in billows of brightness over the pillow. This was his unloved bride, and she has died the awful and tragic death of the *suicide*.

Let us go back a little in the story of this mournful tragedy, my reader, go back to the upper chamber of that stately mansion, where, on a wild night in October, a woman lay dying—dying of that subtle malady beyond all healing—a broken heart.

"Vera, my darling," says the weak, faint voice, "come to me, dear."

A little figure that has been kneeling with its face in the bed-clothes, rises and comes forward. The small, white face is drenched with tears, the dark eyes are dim and heavy.

"Mamma," the soft voice says, hopefully, "you are better?"

The wasted features of the invalid contract with pain.

"No, my little daughter," she sighs, "I shall never be any better in this world. I am dying."

A stifled cry of pain, and the girl's soft cheek is pressed to hers in despairing love.

"No, mamma, no," she wails. "You must not die and leave me alone."

"Alone?" the mother re-echoes. "Beautiful, poor and alone in the great, cruel world—oh, my God!"

"You cannot be dying, mamma," the girl says, hopefully. "They—Mrs. Cleveland and Miss Ivy—could not go on to their balls and operas if you were as bad as *that*!"

Something of bitter scorn touches the faded beauty of the woman's face a moment.

"Much they would care," she says, in a tone of scorn. "At this moment my sister and her proud daughter are dancing and feasting at the Riverton's ball, utterly careless and indifferent to the fact that the poor dependent is lying here all alone, but for her poor, friendless child."

"You were no dependent, mamma," the girl says, with a gleam of pride in her dark eyes. "You worked hard for all we have had. But, mamma, if—if you *leave* me, I will not be Ivy Cleveland's slave any longer. I shall go away."

"Where, dear?" the mother asks, anxiously.

"Somewhere," vaguely; "anywhere, away from these wicked Clevelands. I hate them, mamma!" she says, with sudden passion in her voice and face.

"You do not hate Leslie Noble?" Mrs. Campbell asks, anxiously.

"No, mamma, for though he is akin to them he is unlike them. Mr. Noble is always kind to me," Vera answers, musingly.

"Listen to me, Vera, child. Mr. Noble *l*—likes you. He wishes to marry you," the mother exclaims, with a flush of excitement in her eyes.

"Marry me?" Vera repeats, a little blankly.

"Yes, dear. Are you willing?"

"I—I am too young, am I not, mamma?"

"Seventeen, dear. As old as I was when I married your father,"

Mrs. Campbell answers with a look of heart pain flitting over the pallid face.

"I have never thought of marrying," Vera goes on musingly. "He will not be angry if I refuse, will he, mamma?"

"But, Vera, you must not refuse," the invalid cries out, in a sudden spasm of feverish anxiety. "Your future will be settled if you marry Mr. Noble. I can die in peace, leaving you in the care of a good husband. Oh, my darling, you do not know what a cruel world this is. I dare not leave you alone, my pure, white lamb, amid its terrible dangers."

Exhausted by her eager speech she breaks into a terrible fit of coughing. Vera bends over, penitent and loving.

"Cheer up, mamma," she whispers; "I am not going to refuse him. Since he wants me, I will marry him for your sake, dear."

"But you like him, Vera?" the mother asks, with piteous pleading.

"Oh, yes," calmly. "He is very nice, isn't he? But, do you know, I think, mamma, that Ivy intended to marry him herself. I heard her say so."

"Yes, I know, but you see he preferred you, my darling," the mother answers, with whitening lips.

"Then I will marry him. How angry my cousin will be," Vera answers, with all the calmness of a heart untouched by the *grande passion*.

"Yes, she will be very angry, but you need not care, dear," Mrs. Campbell answers faintly. "Leslie will take you away from

here. You will never have to slave for the Clevelands any more."

The door opens suddenly and softly. A tall, handsome man comes into the room, followed by a clerical-looking individual.

"Oh, Leslie, you are come back again," Mrs. Campbell breathes, joyfully. "I am glad, for I cannot last but a few minutes longer."

"Not so bad as that, I hope," he says, gently, advancing to the bedside; then his hand touches lightly the golden head bowed on the pillow. "Is my little bride ready yet?" he asks.

The girl starts up with a pale, bewildered face.

"Is it to be now?" she asks, blankly. "I thought—I thought—"

But Mrs. Campbell, drawing her quickly down, checks the half protest with a feverish kiss.

"Yes, dear, it is to be now," she whispers, weakly. "I cannot die until I know that you will be safe from the Clevelands. It is my dying wish, Vera."

"Then I am ready," Vera answers, turning a pale and strangely-solemn face on the waiting bridegroom.

The bridegroom is pale, too. His handsome face gleams out as pale as marble in the flickering glare of the lamps, the dark hair tossed carelessly back from the high, white brow, gleaming like ebony in the dim light. The dark, mustached lips are set in a grave and thoughtful line, the dark blue eyes look curiously into the bride's white face as he takes her passive hand and draws her forward toward the waiting minister.

It is a strange bridal. There are no wedding-favors, no

wedding-robcs, no congratulations. The beautiful marriage words sound very solemn there in the presence of the dying, and the girlish bride turns silently from the side of the new-made husband to seek the arms of her dying mother.

"Bless you, my Vera, my little darling," the pale lips whisper, and then there falls a strange shadow on the room, and a strange silence, for, with the murmured words of blessing, the chords of life have gently parted in twain, and Mrs. Campbell's broken heart is at rest and at peace in that Heavenly peace that "passeth all understanding."

CHAPTER II

The long, wintry night wanes slowly. Vera's own loving hands have robed the dead for the rest of the grave. She has gone away now to the solitude of her own little chamber under the eaves, leaving Leslie Noble keeping watch beside the loved lost one.

She has forgotten for a moment the brief and solemn words that gave her away to be a wife in her early innocent girlhood; she remembers only that the one creature that loved her, and whom she loved, is dead. Crushed to earth by her terrible loss, Vera flings herself face downward on the chilly, uncarpeted floor, and lies there mute, moveless, tearless, stricken into silence by the weight of her bitter despair.

Who that has lost a mother, the one true heart that loves us truly and unselfishly of all the world, but can sympathize with the bereaved child in her deep despair.

In vain the kind-hearted minister whispered words of comfort, in vain Leslie tried to soothe her, and win her to tears, in awe of her strange, white face and dry-lidded eyes. They could not understand her, and were fain to leave her alone, the while one quoted fearfully to the other:

"The grief that does not speak,
Whispers the o'er-fraught heart and bids it break."

So the chilly night wanes, and at three o'clock in the morning, carriage wheels echo loudly in the street below, and pause in front of the house. The haughty mistress, and Ivy, her daughter, have returned from the esthetic ball whose delights they could not forego, although their relative lay ill unto death in the house.

A tap at Vera's door, and Mrs. Brown, the chamber-maid, glances in. The worthy woman has been out at "a party" herself, and is quite unconscious of all that has happened since she left the house. Her stolid gaze falls curiously on the recumbent figure on the cold, hard floor.

"Wake up, Miss Vera! Whatever be you a-sleeping on the cold floor this night for? Miss Ivy says for you to come down to her room immejitly."

Disdaining a reply to the coarse woman, Vera drags herself up from the hard floor, and with stiffened limbs takes her way to the luxurious apartment of her cousin.

How different this large and comfortable room from Vera's bare and fireless little den. Miss Cleveland's apartment has soft hangings of pale-blue plush, bordered with silver, cream lace curtains, a blue satin counterpane embroidered with silvery water-lilies. The atmosphere is warm and dreamy, and languid with the scent of hot-house flowers in blue and silver vases. The mistress of all this elegance stands in the center of the room, clothed in an esthetic gown of pale-blue, embroidered down the front with small sunflowers. She is a pretty blonde, with straw-colored hair in loose waves, and turquoise blue eyes, that usually

wear an expression of infantine appeal and innocence. Just now the eyes look heavy and dull, and there is a tired, impatient look on her delicate-featured face.

"Here you are *at last*," she says, as Vera comes slowly in with her white face and heavy eyes, with their look of dumb and hopeless pain. "Hurry up now and undress me; I'm tired and sleepy, and ready to drop!"

Vera stands still, looking gravely at her, and making no move to obey the cool and insolent mandate. For years her cousin has ruthlessly trampled her under foot, and made her a despised slave.

It comes to the girl with a sudden thrill of triumph now that this is the last time Ivy will ever order her about. She is Leslie Noble's wife, and he will shield her from her cousin's abuse.

"Come, don't stand staring like a fool," Ivy breaks out coarsely and impatiently. "Don't you see I'm waiting? Here, pull off these tight slippers. I cannot stand them a minute longer!"

She throws herself into a blue-cushioned chair, and thrusts forward her small feet encased in white kid slippers and blue silk hose, and Vera, conquering her strong impulse of rebellion, kneels down to perform the menial service.

After all, what does this last time matter? she asks herself, wearily. After to-morrow she will be out of their power. Tonight, while that dear, dead mother lies in the house, she will keep still, she will have peace, no matter how bitter the cup of degradation pressed to her loathing lips.

With steady hands she unlaces the silken cords that lace the white slippers, draws them off the compressed feet, and unclasps the satin garters from the blue silken hose. All the while Ivy raves angrily:

"I have seen for some time that you rebel against waiting on me, ungrateful minx, as if all you could do would repay us for the charity that has clothed and fed you all your life. To-morrow I shall report you to your mother, and if she does not bring you into better subjection, you shall both be driven away, do you hear?"

Her mother! This is the iron rod with which they have ruled poor Vera all her life long. That poor, drooping, delicate mother, whose hold on life had never been but half-hearted, whose only home and shelter had been the grudging and hard-earned charity of her heartless and parsimonious sister. Day in and day out the Clevelands had driven their two weak slaves relentlessly, always holding over their heads the dread of being turned out to face the cold world alone.

A low and bitter laugh rises to Vera's lips at the thought that that poor, meek dependent is beyond their dominion now, and that Ivy's threatened complaints can never rise to that high Heaven where her mother's freed spirit soars in happiness and peace.

"Not that you are of much account, anyway," pursues the heartless girl, angrily. "You can never be trained into a proper maid, you stiff-necked little pauper. If mamma were not so mean and stingy she would let me have a real French maid like other

girls. Never mind, when once I am Mrs. Leslie Noble I'll show her how I will spend money!"

Vera shivers, and her heart thumps heavily against her side. The one idea of Ivy's life is to marry Leslie Noble. He is handsome, fascinating, wealthy, in short, her *beau ideal* of perfection. He has come on a month's visit to her mother from a distant city, and both *mater* and daughter are sure, quite sure, that the object for which he was invited is accomplished; they have hooked the golden fish, they have no doubt. What will Ivy say when she knows that she, the despised Vera, is Leslie Noble's chosen bride?

"She will kill me, just that!" the girl murmurs to herself in terror, while a second terror shakes her slight frame.

"What are you trembling for?" Ivy demands, shortly. "Are you afraid I will slap you as I did last night? Well, you richly deserve it, and I don't know but that I may. Hurry, now, and fix my hair and bring my *robe de nuit*. It will be broad daylight before I get into bed. And I want to rise early to find out why Leslie did not come to the ball."

Vera moves about mechanically, obeying orders, but answering never a word.

A golden gleam has come into the eyes beneath the drooping lashes, a heavy, deep red spot glows in the center of her death-white cheeks. Half-frightened as she is at the thought of Ivy's rage when she learns the truth, she is yet filled with triumph at the thought of her own vengeance on her enemies, this glorious

vengeance that has come to her unsought.

She will be Leslie Noble's wife, she will queen it over Ivy and her mother. She will wear satin and laces and diamonds, she will have French maids to wait on her, and then a sudden anguished recollection drives the blood from her heart and forces a moan of despair from her white lips—what is all her triumph since it cannot bring back the dead?

She is moving to the door, having tucked the blue satin counterpane about Ivy's small figure, when the straw-gold head pops up, and the frivolous beauty recalls her.

"I say, Vera, is the embroidery finished on my Surah polonaise? Because I shall want it to-morrow night to wear to Mrs. Montague's *german*. Tell your mother I shall want it without fail. I am tired of this shamming sickness. It's nothing but laziness—just *that*. Did you say it was finished?"

"No," Vera answers her, through her white lips. Ivy springs up tumultuously in the bed.

"Not finished!" she screams, shrilly.

"Scandalous! I tell you I want it to-morrow night! I will have it—you hear! Go and tell your mother to get up this instant and go to work at it. Go and tell her—you hear?"

Vera, with her hands on the latch, and that crimson spot burning dully on her cheeks, answers with sudden, passionate defiance:

"I will not!"

All in a moment Ivy is out of bed, and her small, claw-like

fingers clutch Vera's arm, the other hand comes down in a ringing slap on Vera's cheek.

"Take that, little vixen!" she hisses, furiously, "and that, and that! How dare you defy me?"

Vera pushes her off with a sudden passionate defiance.

"Because I am not afraid of you any longer," she says, sharply. "Because poor mamma has escaped you. She is free—she is dead!"

"Dead!" Ivy screams in passionate wrath. "Dead—and the embroidery not finished on my Surah polonaise! It is just like her—the lazy, ungrateful thing! To go and die just when I needed—"

But Vera slams the door between her and the rest of the heartless lament, and flies along the hall laughing like some mad thing. In truth the horrors of this dreadful night have almost unseated her reason. She shuts and bolts herself into her room, her young heart filled with wild hatred for her heartless cousin.

"To-morrow I shall have my revenge upon her," she cries, with clenched hands. "I would not tell her to-night. My triumph would not have been complete. I will wait—wait until to-morrow, when Leslie Noble will take me by the hand and tell her to her face that he loves me, and that I am his wife!"

And her strange, half-maddened laugh filled the little room with weird echoes.

CHAPTER III

To-morrow, Vera's to-morrow—dawns, rainy, chilly, cheerless, as only a rainy autumn day can be. The wild winds sigh eerily around the house. The autumn leaves are beaten from the trees and swirl through the air, falling in dank, sodden masses on the soaked grass of the lawn. The sun refuses to shine. No more dreary and desolate day could be imagined.

With the earliest peep of dawn Vera makes her way to her mother's room.

It is lonely and deserted save for the sheeted presence of the quiet dead. The lamps burn dimly, and there is a silence in the room so deep it may be felt.

With a trembling hand Vera turns down the cold linen cover for one long, lingering look at the beloved face—the strangely-beautiful marble-white face, on which the story of a life-long sorrow has carved its mournful record in the subtle tracery of grief.

Mrs. Campbell has been that most sorrowful of all living creatures—a deserted wife!

The beautiful, dark eyes of her daughter have never looked upon the face of the father who should have loved and nurtured her tender life.

But it is all over now—the pain, the sorrow, the loneliness, the deep humiliation. The small, toil-stained hands are folded

gently together over some odorous white tube-roses that Vera has placed within them!

The jetty fringe of the long, black lashes rests heavily against the thin, white cheeks, the beautifully-curved lips are closed peacefully, the golden brown hair, thickly-streaked with gray, is parted sweetly on the peaceful brow.

As Vera gazes, the tears, which have remained sealed in their fountains till now, burst forth in healing showers, breaking upon the terrible calm that has been upon her.

Again and again she presses her hot, feverish lips to the cold, white brow of the only friend her lonely life has ever known.

"Oh, mamma, mamma, if you might but have taken me with you," she sobs, bitterly.

"The best thing that could have happened," says a curt, icy voice behind her, and turning with a shiver of repulsion, Vera beholds her aunt, Mrs. Cleveland, who has entered noiselessly in her furred slippers and crimson dressing-gown.

She comes to the foot of the bed and stands silently a moment regarding the cold, white features of her dead sister, then hastily turns her head aside as if the still face held some unspoken reproach for her.

"Cover the face, Vera," she says, coldly. "It is not pleasant to look at the dead."

"Not when we have wronged them," the girl murmurs, almost inaudibly, and with deep bitterness.

"What is that you are saying?" demands Mrs. Cleveland,

sharply. "'Not when we have wronged them,' eh? Beware, girl, how you let that sharp tongue of yours run on. You may chance to see the inside of the alms-house!"

But Vera, biting her lips fiercely, in mute shame at that angry slip of the tongue in presence of the dead, makes no answer. Dropping the white sheet back over the sealed lips that cannot open to defend her child, she buries her face in the pillow, trembling all over with indignation and grief.

Mrs. Cleveland stands contemplating her a moment with a look of contemptuous scorn on her high, Roman features, then, to Vera's amazement, she exclaims:

"One of the servants told me that Leslie Noble brought a preacher in here last night. Was it to administer the sacrament to the dying?"

No answer from Vera, whose face remains buried in the pillow.

"Speak!" Mrs. Cleveland commands, coming a step nearer, "did he come to administer the consolations of religion to the dying?"

"No," Vera answers, lifting her white face a moment, and looking steadily into her enemy's questioning eyes. "No."

"No," Mrs. Cleveland echoes, with a look of alarm. "What then, girl, what then?"

But Vera, with the strange reply, "You must ask Mr. Noble—he will inform you," drops her pallid face into her hands again.

Mrs. Cleveland makes a step forward, resolving in her own

mind "to shake the breath out of that stubborn girl," but even her wicked nature is awed by the still presence of death in the room, and she desists from her heartless purpose, and, retreating to the door, pauses with her hand on the latch to say, icily:

"Your mother's funeral will take place from the Epiphany Church this afternoon. Mourning garments will be sent to your room for you to wear."

Vera springs to her feet with a heart-wrung cry:

"So soon! Oh, my God, you will not bury her out of my sight to-day, when she only died last night!"

Mrs. Cleveland's haughty features are convulsed with anger.

"Hush, you little fool!" she bursts out, angrily. "Do you think that dead people are such enlivening company that one need keep them in the house any longer than is necessary to provide a hearse and coffin? Only died last night, forsooth! Well, she is as dead now as she will be a hundred years hence, and the funeral will take place this afternoon. You will be ready to attend, if you understand what is good for yourself."

So saying, she sweeps from the room, slamming the door heavily behind her.

Alas, the bitterness of poverty and dependence. Vera throws herself down by the side of the bed, and weeps long and bitterly, until exhausted nature succumbs to the strain upon it, and she sleeps deeply, heavily, dreamlessly, wrapped in a dumb, narcotic stupor rather than healthful slumber. She is hustled out of the way at length that her mother may be placed in the plain coffin

that has been provided for her, and a few hours later—oh, so piteously few—she is standing by that open grave in Glenwood, hearing the dull thud of the earth, and the patter of the rain upon the coffin, and the solemn voice of the minister, repeating in tones that sound faint and far away to her dazed senses, "Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust."

From her carriage, where she sits impatiently waiting the conclusion of the sacred service, Mrs. Cleveland watches the scene, frowning impatiently at the sight of Leslie Noble supporting Vera on his arm, and holding his umbrella carefully over her, reckless of the rain-drops that patter down on his uncovered head and face. Mrs. Cleveland does not like the look of it at all. She regards Leslie as Ivy's own especial property. Leslie is too kind-hearted. Why should he trouble himself over Vera Campbell, her despised niece, who is no better than a servant to Ivy, her idolized daughter. She does not like the look of it at all, and when Leslie hands the sobbing girl into the carriage, and takes a seat by her side instead of Mrs. Cleveland's, the matron's vexation rises into almost uncontrollable rage. Biting her lips fiercely, she resolves that as soon as they reach home she will give the young man a broad hint to cease his little kindnesses in that quarter.

The occasion comes very soon. It is almost dark when they reach home. The gas is lighted and a cheerful fire glows in the luxurious parlor.

Mr. Noble leads his passive companion deliberately in, and

installs her in a cushioned seat before the fire. With deft fingers he removes the heavy veil and hat, the black shawl, and the wet gloves, and chafes in his own warm clasp the half-frozen little fingers.

"Upon my word!" draws a thin little voice, full of anger and surprise.

Mr. Leslie, glancing up, sees Ivy reclining on a couch, and regarding the scene with supercilious surprise commingled with anger. Mrs. Cleveland, who has followed them into the room, stands still, a mute statue of rage and dismay.

"I—I should like to know the meaning of this, Mr. Noble," she gasps at length, haughtily. "I do not allow that girl in my parlor! Let her go to the servants' room. They are good enough for the likes of her."

Mr. Leslie turns his pale, handsome face round with an air of surprise.

"She is your sister's child," he says, with reproach in every tone of his voice.

"Yes, to my sorrow," Mrs. Cleveland flashes out. "Add to that that she is a pauper and an ingrate! Vera Campbell, get up and go to your own room. *You* ought to know your place if Mr. Noble does not!"

Vera rises silently, and standing still a moment, looks up into Leslie Noble's face. The supreme moment of her triumph has arrived. With a nervous tremor she looks up into his face for courage to sustain her in the trying ordeal of the Clevelands'

wrath before its vials are poured out upon her shrinking head.

But the expression of the handsome, troubled face does not exactly satisfy her. He is not looking at her. His eyes are fixed on Ivy Cleveland's pretty face with its pink cheeks and turquoise-blue eyes. There is tenderness, regret and trouble in the rather weak though handsome face.

"Go, Vera," Mrs. Cleveland reiterates, sternly and impatiently.

Then Leslie's eyes fall on the slight, black-robed figure standing in silent, proud humility by his side.

He stoops over her, not to caress her, as for a moment she vaguely fancied, but to whisper in her ear:

"Do as she bids you this time, Vera. Go to your room and sleep soundly to-night. I will have it out with her now, and in the morning I will take you away."

She flashes one quick glance into his troubled eyes, bows her head, and goes mutely from the room. But something in that look haunts Leslie Noble ever after. It seemed to him as if those dark eyes said to him plainer than words could speak: "You are a coward. Are you not afraid to acknowledge your wife?" He is right. The look in her eyes has been palpable contempt.

She goes from the room, but only to enter the room adjoining the parlor, and conceal herself behind the heavy, dark-green hangings. So this is the grand triumph her imagination has pictured for her. This is the weak way in which her husband takes her part against the world.

CHAPTER IV

When Vera has gone from the room, an embarrassed silence falls. Mrs. Cleveland is wondering what to say next. It is no part of her plan to offend Leslie Noble. She prefers to conciliate him. For Leslie himself, he is wondering in what terms he shall convey the truth to his arrogant relative and her haughty daughter.

"You must not take offense, Leslie, at my interference in this case," Mrs. Cleveland stammers at length. "I know your kind, easy nature, and I cannot tamely see you imposed upon by that wretched girl, who is the most ungrateful and hard-hearted creature you could imagine, and only fit to herd with the low and vulgar."

"I do not understand you," Mr. Noble answers, resting his arms on the back of the chair, and turning on her a white, perplexed face.

"She comes of bad stock," answered Mrs. Cleveland. "Her mother, my sister, married most wretchedly beneath her. The man was a low, drunken, brutal fellow, with nothing under Heaven to recommend him but a handsome face. As might have been expected, he abused and maltreated his wife, and then deserted her just before the birth of his daughter, who resembled him exceedingly in character as well as in person."

Leslie Noble winces. Pride of birth is a strong point with him. He is exceedingly well-born himself. The story of this drunken,

wife-beating fellow thrills him with keenest disgust.

"Where is the fellow now—dead?" he asks anxiously.

"No, indeed; at least, not that I ever heard of," Mrs. Cleveland answers. "I have no doubt he is alive somewhere, in state prison, perhaps, and he will turn up some day to claim his daughter, and drag her down to his own vile depths of degradation."

Mr. Noble is silent from sheer inability to speak, and Mrs. Cleveland resumes, with apparent earnestness:

"I have my doubts whether I am acting right in keeping the girl here. She is a dead expense to me, and the most ungrateful and violent-tempered creature that ever lived. Would you believe that she flew at poor, dear little Ivy, and boxed her ears this morning? My pity and affection for my sister induced me to give them a home as long as she lived, but now that her influence is withdrawn from Vera, she will be perfectly unmanageable. I think I shall send her away."

"Where?" inquires Mr. Noble, trying to keep his eyes from the pink and white face of Ivy, who is listening intently to every word, without speaking herself.

"To some place where she may earn her own living, or, perhaps, to the House of Correction. She sadly needs discipline," is the instant reply.

Leslie Noble's face turns from white to red, and from red to white again. What he has heard has utterly dismayed him.

"I wish that I had known all this yesterday, or last night," he mutters, weakly.

"Why?" Mrs. Cleveland asks, startled by the dejected tone.

Leslie Noble looks from her to Ivy, who has started into a sitting posture, and fixed her blue eyes on his face.

"Because I have something shocking to tell you," he answers, growing very pale. "You must not be angry with me, Mrs. Cleveland, nor you, Ivy. It would not have happened if I had known all that I know now."

"Oh, what can you mean?" screams Ivy, startled into speech by her vague fear.

"You remember that I declined the Riverton's ball last night on the score of a violent headache?" he says, looking gravely at her.

"Yes, and I missed you *so* much. I did not enjoy the ball *one bit*," she murmurs, sentimentally.

Mr. Noble sighs furiously.

"I wish that I had gone, no matter how hard my head ached," he says, dejectedly. "Then Mrs. Campbell would never have sent for me to come to her room."

"To come to her room!" mother and daughter echo in breathless indignation.

"Yes," answers the young man, with another sigh.

"Impertinent! What did she wish?" Mrs. Cleveland breaks out, furiously, pale to the lips.

"She wished to tell me that she was dying, and to leave her daughter in my care," he stammers, confusedly.

"Go on," Mrs. Cleveland exclaims.

"She told me that Vera was delicate, sensitive, helpless and

friendless, and so good and sweet that none could help loving her. She declared she could not die in peace without leaving her in the care of a kind protector."

"A fine protector a young man would make for a young girl," Mrs. Cleveland sneers, with cutting irony.

"You do not understand, I think," Leslie answers her, gravely. "She wished me to make her my wife."

"Your wife! Marry Vera Campbell!" Ivy shrieks out wildly.

He trembles at the passionate dismay of her voice, but answers, desperately:

"Vera Noble, now, Ivy, for her mother's grief overcame my reason, and I made her my wife last night by the side of her dying mother."

CHAPTER V

Following that desperate declaration from Leslie Noble, there is a scream of rage and anguish commingled. Ivy has fallen back on the sofa in violent hysterics. Mrs. Cleveland glares at him reproachfully.

"You have killed her, my poor Ivy!" she cries. "She loved you, and you had given her reason to think that—you meant to marry *her*."

"I *did* so intend," he answers, on the spur of the moment. "I was only waiting to be sure of my feelings before I declared myself. But now, this dreadful marriage has blighted my life and hers. Poor little Ivy."

"I could almost curse my sister in her grave!" Mrs. Cleveland wails, wringing her hands.

"Curse me rather," Leslie answers, bitterly, "that I was weak enough to be deluded into such a mesalliance. She was ill and dying, she barely knew what she did; but I was in full possession of my senses. Why did I let my weak pity overcome me, and make me false to the real desire of my heart?"

"Falsest, most deceitful of men!" sobs Ivy from her sofa, and Leslie takes her white hand a moment in his own, pressing it despairingly to his lips as he cries:

"You must forgive me, Ivy, I did not know how well I loved you until I had lost you."

Mrs. Cleveland interposes sternly.

"Come, come, I cannot allow any tender passages between you two. If Leslie intends for this nefarious marriage to stand, it will be best that he shall remain a stranger henceforth to us both."

"To stand?" Leslie repeats, looking at her like one dazed.

"Yes," she answers, meaningly. "I ask you, Leslie, if such a marriage as this can be legal and binding?"

"Oh, yes, it is perfectly so," he answers.

"Do you love her? Oh, Leslie, do you love that dreadful girl?" wails Ivy, from her sofa.

He shakes his head, Mrs. Cleveland having interdicted other intercourse.

"Do you intend to live with her?" Mrs. Cleveland queries, significantly.

"Pray, what else can I do?" Mr. Noble queries, bewildered, and Ivy groans, lugubriously.

"Oh, nothing, nothing," the lady answers, with a scornful laugh. "But if it were me who had been deluded into such a marriage with a low and mercenary girl, I am sure that nothing could induce me to live with her. I would either divorce her, or pension her off."

Mr. Noble walks up and down the floor with folded arms, in deep agitation.

"It would be quite impossible to procure a divorce," he answers, after a moment's thought. "I could assign no earthly cause for demanding one. I married her of my own free will,

though I admit I was unduly persuaded."

"All she cares for is your money," snaps Ivy, quite ignoring the fact that this was her own motive for winning him. "It will kill me if you take her home with you, Leslie. I shall die of a broken heart."

"Poor, deceived dear," sighs her mother, while Leslie breaks out, ruefully:

"What else can I possibly do, Ivy?"

Mrs. Cleveland, who had been silently cogitating, answers with sudden blandness:

"If you want my advice, Leslie, you shall have it, unfairly as you have treated us. I say the girl is ignorant and uneducated, and quite unfit to become the mistress of your elegant home in Philadelphia. If you are compelled to stick to your unlucky bargain, you must try and make the best of it. You will have to put her into a strict convent school where her ill-nature will be tamed down, and her manners educated up to the proper standard for your wife. How do you like that plan?"

Her magnetic gaze is fixed on Ivy as she speaks, compelling her to be silent, though she was raising her shrill voice in protest.

"Would they be harsh with her?" Leslie asks anxiously, some instinct of pity for the orphan girl struggling blindly in his heart.

"Not at all. I was educated at a convent school myself. I liked it very much. But you will have to be very positive about Vera, to induce her to go. She will wheedle you out of the notion if possible. Raw, untrained girl as she is, she thinks she is quite

capable of doing anything, or filling any position. But if you listen to *her*, you will find yourself mortified and disgraced directly," blandly insinuates the wily woman.

Leslie Noble winces as she had meant he should. He is very proud and sensitive, this rich, handsome man who finds himself placed, through his weakness, in such a sore strait.

"I think your plan is a very good one," he says, hastily. "Do you know where there is a school, such as you named just now?"

"I can give you the address of one in Maryland," Mrs. Cleveland answers, readily.

"I will go there to-morrow and make arrangements for her reception as a pupil," he replies. "Would it be better to apprise her of my intention beforehand?" he inquires with some embarrassment.

"No, decidedly not. She might find means to circumvent you. She is a very sharp witted girl. Merely tell her that you are called away unexpectedly, on business, and that you will leave her in my charge until you return."

"Would it be agreeable to you to have her stay that long?" he queries.

Mrs. Cleveland smiles a little grimly.

"Of course, as your wife, Vera may expect every courtesy from me," she answers in a strange kind of voice, and there the conference ends.

From her hiding-place in the adjoining room Vera creeps out with a white face, and takes her way up-stairs to her mother's

room. Her step is slow and heavy, her eyes are dull and black, there is no single gleam of brightness in them. The last drop has been added to the already overflowing cup of misery and despair.

With an unfaltering hand she goes to a small medicine chest kept for her mother's use, and unlocking it, takes out two small vials filled with a dark-colored liquid. Each vial has a label pasted on, containing written directions for use, but without the name of the drug.

Vera knits her straight, black brows thoughtfully together as she puzzles over them. "I remember," she says, aloud, "that mamma said one would produce a long, deep sleep, the other—death! Now which is which?"

After a minute she decides to her satisfaction, and placing one vial back, goes away with the other in her bosom. In her own little room she sits down to pen a few words to Leslie, then slowly kneels by the bedside.

"I do not think anyone can blame me," she murmurs, "not even God. The world is so cold and hard I cannot live in it any longer. I am going to my mother."

Some broken, pleading words falter over the quivering, white lips, then a low amen.

She rises, puts the treasured vial to her lips, and drains the last bitter drop, throwing the empty vessel on the hearth where it cracks into a hundred fragments. Then she lies down upon the bed with her letter to Leslie clenched tightly in her slim white hand. And when they come to awake her in the morning, she is

lying mute and pale, with the marble mask of death over all her beauty.

CHAPTER VI

When they tell Leslie Noble the fatal truth—when they lead him to the cold, bare chamber where his girl-wife lies dead, he is stunned by the swift and terrible blow that the hand of fate has dealt him. A quick remorse has entered his soul. He did not love her, yet he would not have the light of her young, strong life go out in darkness like that.

Though he has walked the floor of his room all night, raving, and almost cursing himself because he had married her, the sight of her now—like *that*—and the sad pathos of that brief letter touch him to the depths of his heart with a vain remorse and pity. With a faltering voice he reads aloud the sad and hopeless words:

"When you come to bid me good-by in the morning I shall be dead. That is best. You see, I did not know till to-night my sad story, and that—that you did not love me! Poor mamma was wrong to bind you so. I am very sorry, Leslie. There is nothing I can do but die!"

His glance falls on Mrs. Cleveland, who is standing in the room with a strange expression upon her face. He does not like to think it is relief and satisfaction, and yet it is marvelously like it.

"Who has told her the truth? How has she learned it?" he asks. "I never meant that she should know. I meant to do my duty by the poor, friendless girl."

"No one told her. She must have listened at the door last night.

It was like her low, mean disposition to be peeping, and prying, and listening to what did not concern her," Mrs. Cleveland bursts out, scornfully.

"Pardon me, but our conversation *did* concern her," he answers, gravely.

"At least, it was not intended for her hearing," she replies, shortly.

Mr. Noble is silent a moment, gazing earnestly at the pale, dead face, from which the woman's eyes turn in fear and aversion.

"Perhaps we have wronged her," he says, slowly. "If she had been what you believed her—coarse and low, and violent like her father—would she have been driven," shudderingly, "to this!"

"You are allowing a maudlin sentimentality to run away with your reason, Leslie," the woman answers, coldly. "Do you suppose I have lied to you? The girl has lived here since infancy. I knew her temper well, and I repeat that she was unbearable. I only endured her for her mother's sake. This is very sad. Of course, you feel badly over it. And yet, common sense whispers that this is a most fortunate thing for you. You are freed from a galling bond. Had she lived, she would almost inevitably have become a sorrow and a disgrace to you."

"We should not speak ill of the dead," he answers, a little sternly.

"Pardon me; I know there are some truths which we innately feel, but should not give expression to," she answers, with keen irony.

"Does Ivy know?" he asks her.

"Not yet; poor dear, I have been watching by her bedside all night. She is ill and almost heart-broken. I must go and break the news to her now."

She moves to the door, but, seeing him standing irresolute in the center of the floor, looks back over her shoulder to say, anxiously:

"Will you come away now, Leslie? The women would like to come in to prepare the body for the grave."

He shivers, and turns to follow her, casting one long, lingering look at the fair, immobile face upon the pillow.

"I did not know she was so beautiful," he murmurs to himself as he passes out.

"Have you no message to send Ivy?" Mrs. Cleveland asks him, as they pass along the hall. "She would be so glad of even one kind word from you."

"I thought you interdicted all intercourse between us last night," he answers, blankly.

"Yes; but the *obstacle* no longer remains," she replies, significantly, and, with a violent start, Leslie realizes the truth of her words. In his horror and surprise he had not thought of it before. Yes, Vera's death has set him free—free to marry Ivy when he will.

"Tell her that I am very sorry she is ill. I hope she will soon be better," he answers, gravely and courteously. He will not say more now out of respect to the dead, and Mrs. Cleveland is wise

enough not to press him.

Ivy, whose pretended illness is altogether a sham, is jubilant over the news.

"Was there ever anything more fortunate?" she exclaims. "Lucky for us that she listened, and found out the truth."

"Yes, indeed, she saved me a vast deal of plotting and planning, for I was determined that she should be put out of the way somehow, and that *soon*," Mrs. Cleveland answers, heartlessly. "The little fool! I did not think she had the courage to kill herself, but I am very much obliged to her."

"Nothing in her life became her like the leaving it," Ivy quotes, heartlessly.

"Remember, Ivy, you must not allow Leslie to perceive your joy. He is very peculiar—weak-minded, indeed," scornfully. "And he might be offended. Just now he is carried away by a maudlin sentimentality over her tragic death."

"Never fear for me. I shall be discretion itself," laughs Ivy. "But, of course, I shall make no display of grief. *That* could not be expected."

"Of course not. But it will be a mark of respect to Leslie if you will attend the funeral to-morrow."

"Then I will do so, with a proper show of decorum. I am determined that he shall not slip through my fingers again."

So the two cruel and wicked women plot and plan, while the poor victim of their heartlessness lies up-stairs dead, in all her young, winsome beauty, with her small hands folded on her

quiet heart, and the black-fringed lashes lying heavily against the marble-white cheeks. They have robed her for the grave, and left her there alone, with no one "to come in and kiss her to lighten the gloom."

So the day wanes and the night, and Vera lies still and white in the long black casket to which they have consigned her. They have left the cover off, and only a transparent veil lies lightly across her face, through which her delicate features show clearly. How wonderfully the look of life lingers still; how the pink lips retain the warm, pink coloring of life. But there is no one to note how wonderfully death has spared her fairness; no one to exclaim, with the power of affection:

"She looks too sweet and life-like for us to bury her out of our sight."

Afternoon comes, and they carry the casket down into the parlor where a little group are waiting to hear the brief service of the black-robed minister. Then they gather around in the gloomy, darkened room, glance shudderingly at the beautiful white face, and turn away, while the stolid undertaker screws down the coffin-lid over the desperate young suicide. After that the solemn, black-plumed hearse is waiting to bear her away to her rest, by her mother's side. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust." "*Resquiescat in pace.*"

Leslie Noble goes home that night. In his character of a widower, he must wait a little space before he renews his suit to the impatient Ivy.

"You will come back to me soon, Leslie dear?" she sighs, sentimentally, as she clings to his arm.

"As soon as decorum permits me," he replies. "Will you wait for me patiently, Ivy?"

"Yes, only do not stay too long," she answers, and he presses a light kiss on her powdered forehead, which Ivy takes in good faith as the solemn seal of their betrothal.

"Oh, dear, it is very lonely," Ivy sighs, that evening, as she and her mother sit alone in the luxurious parlor, where so late the presence of death cast its pall of gloom. "I miss Leslie very much. Shall we be obliged to seclude ourselves from all gaiety, mamma, just because those two people—the plague of our lives—are dead?"

"I am afraid so—for awhile, at least, dear. People would think it strange, you know, my dear Ivy, if we did not make some outward show of grief," Mrs. Cleveland answers, thoughtfully, for she has been turning the matter over in her own mind, and, like her daughter, she cannot endure the thought of foregoing the daily round of fashionable pleasures that are "meat and drink to her."

"How horrid!" complains Ivy. "I should die of the dismal! Listen, mamma, I have a plan."

"Really?" Mrs. Cleveland asks, with faint sarcasm, for her daughter is not at all clever.

"Yes, although you think I am so stupid," Ivy answers, vivaciously. "It is this, mamma. Let us leave Washington and go

south this winter to one of the gayest, most fashionable cities, and have a real good time where nobody can expect us to be snivelling several long months over two deaths that give us unqualified pleasure."

"Vera and her mother were very useful to us, after all," Mrs. Cleveland answers, with a sigh to the memory of her purse. "They saved me a good deal of money in dressmaking bills and the like. They more than paid for their keeping."

"What a stingy, craving soul you have, mother," Ivy exclaims, impatiently. "But what do you think of my plan?"

"It is capital and quite original. I did not give you credit for so much invention," Mrs. Cleveland answers, smiling at her daughter.

"Shall we go, then?" Ivy inquires.

"Yes, if—" Mrs. Cleveland is beginning to say, when she is interrupted by the swift unclosing of the door, and a man comes into the room, pausing abruptly in the center of the apartment, and fixing his burning black eyes on the face of Mrs. Cleveland.

He is tall, dark, princely handsome, with a face full of fire and passion, blent with "cureless melancholy." His dark hair, thickly streaked with gray, is tossed carelessly back from his broad, white brow, and an air of nobility is indelibly stamped on every straight, aristocratic feature. Mrs. Cleveland springs to her feet with a cry of surprise and terror:

"Lawrence Campbell!"

CHAPTER VII

After that one shriek of surprise and almost terror, Mrs. Cleveland remains silent, devouring the man's face with a gaze as fixed and burning as his own. Ivy, in her corner, is forgotten by her mother, and unnoticed by the stranger.

"Yes, Lawrence Campbell," he answers her in a deep, hoarse voice, that thrills to the hearts of the listeners. "Are you glad to see me, Mrs. Cleveland?"

"Glad!" she shudders, in an indescribable voice.

"After these long years," he pursues, speaking under the spur of some deep, overmastering agitation, "I have come back to curse you, traitorous, false-hearted woman, and to make atonement."

"Atonement!" she falters, with a start of fear.

"Yes, Marcia Cleveland, atonement," he bursts out passionately. "Tell me, where is the dear, true angel-wife whom I was led to believe false and unfaithful to me, through your heartless machinations. At last I know the truth, at last I know you, devil that you are! You maligned the truest, purest, gentlest woman that ever lived! Your own sister, too—the beautiful, innocent child that was left to your charge by her dying parents. God only knows what motive you had for your terrible sin."

She glares at him with fiery eyes from which the momentary fear has fled, leaving them filled with the mocking light of a

wicked triumph.

"*You* should have known my motive, Lawrence Campbell," she bursts out, passionately. "When I first met you in society, the plain, untitled English gentleman, I was a young, beautiful, wealthy widow, and by your attentions and visits you led me to believe that you loved me.

"Then Edith came home from her boarding-school, and with her baby-face and silly school-girl shyness won you from me. You married her, and the very torments of the lost were mine, for I loved with a passion of which she, poor, weak-natured creature, could never dream. Did you think I could tamely bear the slight that was put upon me? No, no, I swore revenge—a deep and deadly revenge, and I have had it; ha, ha! a costly cup, full to the brim and running over!"

She pauses with a wild and maniacal laugh. The man stares at her with starting eyes and a death-white face. The enormity of the wrong that has been done him seems to strike him dumb.

"I have had a glorious revenge," she goes on, wildly, seeing that he cannot speak; "you fell an easy prey to my plan of vengeance through your foolish and ridiculous jealousy. Through the efficient help of a poor, weak fool who loved me I made you believe Edith false and vile, and taunted you into deserting her! Have you suffered? Ah, God, so did I! I was on fire with jealousy and hate. Every pang I made you and Edith suffer was like balm to my heart. I parted you, I came between your wedded hearts, and made your life and hers a hell! Aye, and your child's, too—

ha, ha, I made her weep for the hour in which she was born!"

She tosses her white arms wildly in the air, and laughs low and wickedly with the glare of malice and revenge in her flashing, black eyes. She is transformed from the handsome, clever woman of the world into a mocking devil. Even Ivy, who knows her mother's heartlessness as none other know, stares with distended eyes at the infuriated woman. She involuntarily recalls a verse she has somewhere read:

"Earth has no spell like love to hatred turned,
And hell no fury like a woman scorned."

"My child," the man breaks out, with a yearning heart-hunger in his melancholy eyes. "She lives then—my child, and Edith's! Oh, God, will she ever forgive me the wrong I have done her mother? Speak, woman—devil, rather—and tell me where to find my Edith and her little one!"

"Little one!" mocks Mrs. Cleveland, scornfully. "Do you forget, Lawrence Campbell, that seventeen years have come and gone since you deserted Edith and her unborn child?"

"No, I am not likely to forget," he answers, with the bitterness of remorse in his low voice. "The child must be a woman now. But I will atone to Edith and her child for all I have made them suffer through your sin. I am rich, now, and I have fallen heir to a title in my native land. Edith will be a countess, our child a wealthy heiress. And I will make them happy yet. My heart

is young, although my hair is gray. I love my wife yet, with all the fire of youth. Tell me where to find them, Marcia Cleveland, and for that one act of grace, I will forgive you all the black and sinful past."

He pauses, with his hollow, burning eyes fixed eerily upon her, waiting her reply. The autumn winds wail sharply round the house, the chilly rain taps at the window pane with ghostly fingers, as if to hint of those two graves lying side by side under the cold and starless sky of night.

"Tell me," she says, putting aside his questions scornfully. "How did you learn that I had deceived you?"

"From the dying lips of your tool—Egbert Harding. He was in London—dying of the excesses brought on by a fast and wicked life. At the last he repented of his sins, afraid to face the God whom his wicked life had outraged. He sent for me and confessed all—how he had lent himself to your diabolical plan to dupe and deceive me. He swore to me that my beautiful Edith was as innocent as an angel. I left him, poor, frightened, despairing wretch, at his last gasp, and came across the seas to seek for you and my wronged wife. Tell me, Marcia, for I can wait no longer; my heart is half-broken with grief and suspense. Where shall I find my wife and child?"

"In their graves!" she answers, with the hollow and exultant laugh of a fiend.

Lawrence Campbell reels backward as if some invisible hand had smitten him across the face. He throws up his thin, white,

quivering hands in the air, as though in the agonies of death. But in a moment he rallies himself and looks at the tormenting fiend with lurid, blazing eyes.

"You lie!" he exclaims, hoarsely. "You are false to the core of your heart, Marcia. I will not believe you. God, who knows how much I have suffered, would not afflict me so cruelly. I ask you again—where are they?"

"And I tell you they are *dead*!" she answers, hoarsely. "If you will not believe me, go to Glenwood. You know our family burial-plot. There you will find two new-made graves. Ask the sexton whose they are, and he will tell you Mrs. Campbell's and her daughter Vera's. Your wife died three nights ago—died of a broken heart, while I, her sister who hated her, was dancing at a ball! Your daughter, Vera, died the night before last by her own hand—died the death of the suicide! Ha, ha!" she laughed, sneeringly, "have I not had a glorious revenge for my slighted love?"

"I will not believe you—I cannot. It is too terrible," Lawrence Campbell moans, with his hands pressed to his head, and a dazed look in his great, black eyes.

"You may, for it is true," exclaims Ivy, coming forward into the light, with a wicked triumph in her pale-blue eyes. "If you will not believe my mother, go to the graveyard and see, as she bade you."

He lifts his eyes and stares at her a moment, a white, dizzy horror on his face. The next moment he reels forward blindly,

like some slaughtered thing, and falls in a white and senseless heap upon the floor.

"You have killed him, too, mamma," Ivy exclaims, exultantly.

The heartless woman, turning around, spurns the fallen body with her foot.

"A fit ending to the tragedy," she utters, cruelly. "Ring the bell for a servant, Ivy."

In a moment a white-aproned menial appears in the room. Mrs. Cleveland looks at him frowningly.

"John, who admitted this drunken fellow into the house?" she inquires, sharply.

"I did, madam. He said he was an old friend of yours," the man answers respectfully. "Is anything wrong about it, madam? He seems," bending over him, "to be dead."

"Dead drunk," the woman utters, scornfully. "Drag him out of the house, John, and throw him into the street."

The man stares in consternation.

"It's pouring down rain, ma'am," he exclaims, deprecatingly, "and pitchy dark. Hadn't I best call the police?"

"Do as I bid you," Mrs. Cleveland storms. "Throw him into the street, and leave him there. And mind how you admit such characters into the house again, or you may lose your place!"

She stands still with lowering brows, watching the man as he executes her orders, dragging the heavy, unconscious form from the room, and along the hall to the door.

When the lumbering sound has ceased, and the heavy clang

of the outer door grates sharply on the silence, she draws a deep breath of relief.

"Now I know why you always hated Vera and her mother so much," Ivy exclaims. "Why did you never tell me, mamma?"

"It was no business of yours," Mrs. Cleveland answers, sharply.

"Oh, indeed, we are very lofty!" Ivy comments, impudently.

Mrs. Cleveland makes her no answer. She has sunk into the depths of a velvet-cushioned chair, and with lowered eyelids and protruding lips seems to be grimly brooding. Her form seems to have collapsed and grown smaller, her face is ashy white.

"You are a smarter and wickeder woman than I gave you credit for," Ivy resumes, curiously. "So, then, the tale you told Leslie Noble about Vera's dissipated father was altogether false."

"Yes," her mother mutters, mechanically.

But presently she starts up like one in a panic.

"Ivy, we must go away from here," she exclaims, in a strange and hurried voice. "I am afraid to stay."

"Afraid of what?" Ivy queries, impatiently.

"Of Lawrence Campbell's vengeance," the woman answers, fearfully. "It is a fearful wrong I have done him, and he will strike me back. We must fly—fly from his wrath!"

CHAPTER VIII

The unconscious man who has been so heartlessly thrust forth in the bleak, inclement night, lies still upon the wet and flinty pavement, his ghastly face upturned to the uncertain flicker of the street lamps, his eyes closed, his lips half parted as if he were, indeed, dead. No one is passing, no one notes that the form of an apparently dead man has been hustled out of the inhospitable gates of the stately Cleveland Mansion. None care to be abroad this wet and windy night. The chilly rain beats down into the still, white face, and at last revives him. He drags himself wearily up to his feet, and clinging to the iron spokes of the ornamental lawn fence, stares up at the dark, gloomy-looking building which now, with closed and darkened windows, appears dreary as a tomb. He shudders, and his eyes flash luridly in the darkness.

"May the curse of God light upon her," he murmurs, distractedly. "She robbed me of everything, and laid my life bare and desolate. My heart is a bare and empty ruin where the loathsome bats and shrieking night birds of remorse flap their ebon wings in the haunted darkness. Edith, Vera, my wronged, my murdered darlings—would God that you might have lived to forgive me for the madness that ruined your lives, and broke your tender hearts!"

No answer comes to his wild appeal from the wide and limitless spaces of the black night. Those two whom he adjures

so despairingly, lie still "under the sod and the dew," deaf to his yearning calls, though he cry out ever so loudly to them, from his sore and tortured heart.

And at last, tormented with doubts, and longing to know the truth, for he cannot trust the oath of the false Marcia Cleveland, he flings himself into a passing car that goes toward the cemetery, fired with the wild resolve that he would never believe her wicked assertion until he can prove its truth—not until looking into the coffin, and calling on her loved name, he shall know that his wife is surely dead, because she is dumb to the wild and yearning cry of his heart.

A wild resolve—worthy of a madman. But Lawrence Campbell is scarcely sane to-night. Remorse and despair have driven him wild.

Gold—potent gold—what will it not buy? It opens the gates of the cemetery to the wronged, half-maddened husband and father, it throws off the heavy clods that lie between him and the face he yearns for. Quick and fast fall the rapid strokes of the spade, the dull thud of the fresh earth thrown out on the soft grass is continuous.

At last the sexton, pausing to take breath and wipe the beaded dews from his hot brow, utters a smothered cry of dismay:

"What was I thinking of to blunder so? I have made a great mistake, sir. This is the daughter's grave, not the mother's."

"No matter—go on with your work. Let me see the face of the child that I never beheld in life," Lawrence Campbell answers,

resolutely.

Seeing how useless would be remonstrance the sexton bends to his task again. In a few minutes the earth is all out, but it requires the united strength of both men to raise the casket and lay it upon the upper ground.

"Now the lid—have it off quickly," groans the wretched man; "and the lantern. Bring it near that I may look on my dead."

Eagerly he kneels on the ground and scans the beautiful white features of the dead. A groan burst from his lips:

"It is *she*, my wife, my lost Edith, still young and beautiful as when I wooed her to be my own! Ah, even time and death could not efface that surpassing loveliness!"

But the sexton answers, compassionately:

"Ah, sir, it is not your wife, but your daughter. Your wife had grown older and sadder. Her bonny locks were mixed with gray; I used to see her here on many a Sabbath when she came to weep by her parents' graves. This, sir, is your daughter, with her mother's face."

"My daughter, with her mother's face!" he cries, and stoops to press a long-lingering kiss on the white brow beneath the careless rings of sunny hair. He starts back with a loud cry: "My God!"

The sexton trembles with apprehension.

"My dear sir, let me beg you to be more prudent," he whispers. "What if we should be discovered?"

But Lawrence Campbell's face is transfigured with a trembling hope and joy.

"I believe that I am sane," he exclaims, "I do not believe that I am dreaming. Yet when I kissed Vera's brow it felt warm and moist like the flesh of the living. Tell me, am I right?"

The sexton wipes his grimy hand to press it on the fair, girlish brow. He bends his ear to the delicate lips that still retain the warm, natural coloring of life. A smothered cry breaks from him.

"You are right, Mr. Campbell. Her flesh is warm and moist, her color is life-like and natural, and she breathes faintly. Oh, wonderful—most wonderful! She seems to be in a deep trance-like sleep. How terrible—how terrible to think of! Your daughter has been buried alive."

"She lives!" the father echoes, in wild thankfulness.

"She lives and we must carry her to my cottage as soon as possible. She must not awaken in this dreadful place. It would frighten her into real death," answers the sexton.

They lift the slight form out of its grim receptacle and bear her to the sexton's secluded cot where he lives alone, his wife having died a few months previous. They lay her down on his clean bed in the warm, cozy room; and still her strange, deep slumber is unbroken.

"I will watch beside her," says Mr. Campbell. "You must go back, restore the empty coffin to the grave, and throw in the earth again."

"You do not wish that this discovery shall ever be known, then?" the sexton asks, gravely.

"No—at least not now," Mr. Campbell answers, after a pause

of silent thought.

A moment later he adds, wistfully:

"My wife's grave—you will open that too? Who knows but that she, too, may be only sleeping?"

"It is scarce probable, sir, but I will do it to satisfy you," the sexton answers, moving away.

The dawn of a new day is breaking when he returns, having just finished his weary task. Lawrence Campbell starts up from his weary vigil by his daughter's silent form.

"You promised to come for me, and I waited and waited!" he cries, reproachfully. "You did not do as I bade you."

The old sexton's face is ashen gray as if with the memory of some recent horror.

"Oh, sir, I swear to you, I kept my word," he cries, "but—but—oh, Mr. Campbell, I spared you in mercy that dreadful sight! You would not have known her, you could not have borne to see how death had effaced her beauty. You must remember her as she was—not as she is."

Lawrence Campbell's despairing moan is echoed by a low and fainter one.

Vera's dark eyes open slowly, her lips part in faint, shivering sighs.

"Quick—the wine!" exclaims the sexton. "Pour a few drops between her lips."

Lawrence Campbell obeys gladly, and Vera's lips part thirstily to receive the potent medicine. She lifts her white hand to her

brow as if to clear away the shadows that cloud her brain.

"I have been asleep, and my dreams were strange and wild," she murmurs. "I thought I had found my father. You, sir, look at me lovingly and kindly. Can it be—"

"That I am your father—yes, my precious Vera," he answers, pressing a father's holy kiss on the sweet, wistful lips.

Her dark, dreamy eyes look searchingly up into the handsome, noble face.

"Ah, I am so glad," she murmurs, "and you are good and true and noble. I cannot understand why you went away from mamma, but I can tell by your face that you are not the bad and wicked wretch that woman pretended."

"Mrs. Cleveland?" he asks, a spasm of rage and hatred distorting his pallid features.

"Perhaps it will be best not to excite the young lady by talking to her just at first," the sexton interposes, anxiously and respectfully. "She must be very weak, having taken no nourishment for so long. I will go out and prepare a little warm broth for her."

"You must lie still and rest, darling," Lawrence Campbell whispers, pouring a little more of the stimulant between her pale lips—paler now from exhaustion than they were when she lay sleeping in the coffin, and with a faint sigh of assent she closes her eyes and lies silent, while the sexton goes out on his kindly meant errand.

The moments pass, Lawrence Campbell sits still with his head

bowed moodily on his hand, his thoughts strangely blended, joy for his daughter's recovery, despairing grief for his wife's loss, and unutterable hate for Marcia Cleveland all mixed inextricably together. All that he has lost by that woman's perjury rushes bitterly over him. In the stillness, broken only by the crackle of the fresh coals upon the fire, and the monotonous ticking of the clock upon the mantel, he broods over his wrongs until they assume gigantic proportions.

And Vera—so strangely rescued from the coffin and the grave—she is very silent also, but none the less is her brain active and her mind busy. One by one she is gathering up the links of memory.

Her strange marriage, her mother's death, her terrible defeat in the triumph she had anticipated over the Clevelands—all come freshly over her memory, with that crowning hour in which wounded to the heart and filled with a deadly despair, she had crept away to die because she could not endure the humiliation and shame of the knowledge she had gained.

"I remember it all now; I could not decide upon the right vial, and by chance I took the wrong one. It was the sleeping potion. How long have I been asleep, and how came I here?"

Unclosing her languid eyes, she repeats the question aloud:

"Father, how came I here?"

He starts, nervously, at the unexpected question.

"My dear, you must not ask questions," he answers. "At least—not yet."

"But just this one, father. It keeps ringing itself in my head. I am filled with wonder. I drank a vial of what I imagined contained death, and lay down on my bed to die. But I only slept, and my dreams were wild. Then I awoke in this strange room, and saw you looking at me so kindly, and I knew you in my heart for my father. My wonder is so great that I cannot rest. Suspense is worse than knowledge. Only tell me how I came to be here?"

He looks at the beautiful, eloquent lips and pleading eyes, looking so dark with the purple shadows around them, and the pale, pale face.

"I must not tell her the truth," he said to himself. "She looks too slight and frail to bear the shock of hearing it. She need not ever know that she had been buried alive, and rescued out of the blackness of the grave. The horror of it would be enough to unhinge her reason."

"The last that I remember," she continues, "I was lying on my bed at Mrs. Cleveland's, waiting for death to come. I awoke here in this strange place. How did it happen?"

"I had you conveyed here in your sleep," he answers. "My dear, I see that you have all of woman's proverbial curiosity. But there is no mystery here. The simple truth is, that I went to Mrs. Cleveland's to seek my wife and child. I found that your mother was dead, and you were locked in a strange, narcotic sleep, almost as deep as death. I had you conveyed here, and watched over you until you awakened from your long slumber. That is all, my dear little daughter. Now, can you rest satisfied?"

The dark eyes seek his, still wistfully, and with dawning tenderness.

"Father, you do not know how I love the sound of your voice," she murmurs. "It does not excite nor weary me. It is full of soothing, calming power. It falls on my thirsty, yearning heart like the dew upon flowers. I wish that you would talk to me. Nothing you can say would weary me so much as my own tumultuous thoughts."

He sighs, and smooths back the soft waves of gold that stray over the blue-veined temples.

"What shall I talk of, little one?" he inquires.

"Tell me where you have been all these long years, father, and why you never came for mamma and I when you were so unhappy?" she sighs.

Tears that do not shame his manhood crowd into his dark, sad eyes.

"Vera, you will hate me when I tell you that it was a mad, unreasoning jealousy, aroused and fostered by Marcia Cleveland, that led me to desert my innocent wife, and you, my little child, before you were born," he answers, heavily.

Vera's dark eyes flash with ominous light. She lies silent a moment, brooding over her mother's terrible wrongs.

"I have been a lonely wanderer from land to land ever since," he goes on, slowly. "God only knows what I suffered, Vera, for I could never tear the image of my wife from my breast, although I believed her false and vile. But I was too proud to go back

to her. I never knew how she was breaking her heart in silent sorrow for me, her life made doubly wretched by the abuses of the false sister who hated her because I loved her. At last I was recalled from my wanderings. I had fallen heir to a title I had never dreamed of inheriting, and which only filled me with bitterness. I reflected that, but for Edith's falsity, she might have been my countess; as fair a lady as ever reigned in my ancestral halls."

"Poor mamma, leading her slavish life in Mrs. Cleveland's house," the girl murmurs, in vain regret.

"Poor martyr to the sins of others," the man echoes, heavily.

"Yet you came back at last," Vera murmurs. "Had you repented of your hasty desertion?"

"I had learned the truth, Vera, through the dying confession of Mrs. Cleveland's weak tool. I had learned how terribly I had been deceived, and that I had deserted my angel wife for naught. Vera, did she curse my memory when she lay dying of a broken heart?"

"She never named you either in praise or blame, father. I had some vague impression that you were dead. I knew no better until I overheard Mrs. Cleveland telling some one that you had deserted my mother before I was born, and that you were a low, drunken, brutal wretch, who had abused and maltreated her from the first."

"Oh, my God, my God! that such demons should walk the earth!" the man groans through his clenched teeth.

He rises and walks up and down the floor, struggling with his

strong, overmastering agitation.

"Vera, we three—you and I, and our lost loved one—have been wronged as, it seems to me, never mortals were before. My heart is on fire with rage and hate for the devil who has so blasted our lives. It seems to me that I can never rest until I strike back. Vera, shall we not avenge ourselves?"

His dark, passionate eyes fill with the fire that rages in his soul. Vera looks up at him, half-fearfully.

"How, father?" she queries, slowly.

The heavy gloom deepens in his night-black eyes.

"How—I cannot tell!" he says, hoarsely. "But I will bide my time. I will wait and watch. Edith's wrongs shall not go unavenged."

The beautiful young face on the pillow softens and saddens.

"Mother was very gentle and forgiving," she murmurs. "*She* would have said, leave it to Heaven."

"She was an angel—I am but human," he answers. "Vera, we must work together for vengeance. The time will come when we will make Marcia Cleveland bite the dust—when she shall curse the stars that shone over her ill-fated birth."

So the wronged man raves, and Vera's passionate heart is kindled into flames by his burning eloquence. She is with him heart and soul, loyal to the core of her woman's heart.

Strange, that when she tells him the story of her short, sad life she should hold one secret back. The words die on her white lips when she tries to tell him. A passionate shame fills her heart. Oh,

the bitter pain, the deep humiliation of the thought that she is Leslie Noble's wife. Leslie Noble whom she scorns and despises. Have they told her father the truth? she wonders.

No, for presently he says, tenderly:

"Do not think that all my thoughts are given up to vengeance, Vera. I shall care for you very tenderly, darling. And if you should ever marry, I pray God that your wedded happiness may not be blighted by such a terrible wrong as mine."

Her heart gives a great throb of relief. He does not know. He never shall know by her telling, she resolves.

The day comes soon when they kneel hand in hand by Edith's grave to bid her good-bye before departing for England's shore.

"Edith, my darling," he whispers to the dead heart below, "the human vampire has escaped me this time. She has fled from my vengeance, and left no trace behind her. But let her beware, for I but bide my time. The bloodhounds of hate are howling behind her, and sooner or later she will be brought to bay. Farewell, my murdered darling. Remember that I only live to avenge your wrongs, and to protect your child!"

CHAPTER IX

No one had created such a sensation in London for several years as did Lady Vera, the Earl of Fairvale's only child, when she was presented at court. She was just nineteen, and a perfect beauty. She was more American than English in style—tall and slenderly formed, with a stately grace all her own, with large, dark eyes, and black brows and lashes, with hair of a magnificent, dark-golden shade, and well-formed, aristocratic features. Then, as the crowning charm to her brilliant loveliness, she had inherited from her English ancestry a dazzling complexion of lilies and roses.

People who studied and admired Lady Vera most, said that they could not quite understand the expression of her face. It was too intense for one so young. It was full of passion, tempered by the gravest thought.

The young English girls had dimples and smiles for everyone, but Lady Vera was different. She had the sweetest, most radiant smile in the world when you saw it, but that was so very seldom. She seemed to be thinking all the time—thinking deeply, even when she danced or sang, or conversed. And her favorite flowers were the beautiful, velvety pansies, whose very emblem is thought.

Yet when you looked into the Earl of Fairvale's face, you ceased to wonder at his daughter. The shadow on her face was

reflected from the cloud on his. His dark, handsome face was a study. Where Lady Vera seemed to be thinking, his expression was that of one brooding—brooding all the while on one subject, and that not a pleasant one.

It was with some difficulty that he met the requirements of society. When spoken to suddenly sometimes, he would start and look bewildered as if his thoughts were far away. Ladies admired him immensely, although he was very inattentive to them. The dark, sad, melancholy face had a peculiar charm for them. They said he reminded them of Byron's heroes.

The earl was very fond of his daughter, and very careful of her. His eyes followed her everywhere, but their expression was always sad and melancholy. No one knew that every time he looked at her, he remembered how he had wronged her mother, and that his heart was breaking with remorse and grief, as well as with the consuming fires of a baffled revenge.

His story was not generally known. He had succeeded to the Earldom of Fairvale through a series of unexpected deaths, and though everyone knew of handsome Lawrence Campbell's accessions, little was known of him personally beyond the rumor that he had married an American lady, who had died and left him one only child, his beautiful and worshiped Vera.

Lady Vera had many admirers. Aside from her personal charms, the fact that she would succeed to the title and estates of Fairvale, cast a flattering prestige around her.

She was the same to all who came to woo—cool, courteous,

gently indifferent. After awhile they began to say that the earl's daughter was very proud. Ordinary people were not to her fancy, evidently. She must be waiting for a duke or a prince. Poor Lady Vera! Who was to know the bitter secret, the ceaseless dread that ached in the fair breast, that rose and fell beneath the knots of velvety pansies that were her simple and favorite adornment?

Vera has seen and learned a great deal since that night when her father's mad frenzy had been the means of saving her from the horrors of a dreadful death.

She has traveled, she has had masters and governesses; luxuries of which she never even faintly dreamed, have surrounded her and become daily necessities. Pleasure has wooed her softly to its flowery paths, love has been lavishly laid at her feet. But through it all a loathing remembrance of Leslie Noble has poisoned her peace.

"Where is he? Does he know where I am? Will he ever come to claim me?" she often asks herself, never dreaming that he of whose coming she is so terribly afraid believes her dead, and that he has erected a costly marble monument over the spot where her remains are supposed to rest.

Her father's mistaken kindness has kept from her the knowledge of her deadly peril and her opportune rescue, little dreaming in what an untoward hour the startling truth shall come to her.

And she, in her sensitive pride, has held her peace over that ill-fated marriage by the bedside of her dying mother—the poor,

heart-broken mother who had erred so fatally, when, with weak, human foresight she had tried to plan for the future well-being of her helpless child.

"Oh, mamma, dearest," she moans, when alone in her silken *boudoir*, she recalls the wretched past, "how terribly blind and mistaken you were. Oh, to be free from these fetters that chafe and fret and gall so terribly!"

"Shall you never marry, Vera?" her father asks her one day.

It is the day after she has refused Lord Greyhurst, one of the finest and wealthiest young noblemen in London.

The deep color flows into the girl's fair cheeks.

"I think not, father," she answers, gravely. "I have no wish to marry. I have never met anyone that I could love."

Earl Fairvale is well pleased.

"I am glad to hear you say that, my dear," he answers. "I have no wish to lose my daughter. And, after all, so much sorrow comes from love, one is best without it."

Lady Vera is very glad to hear him talk so. He will never urge her to marry, and she may keep her secret always—always, *unless*—dreaded possibility—Leslie Noble should return to claim her.

"But he will not. Why should he? He never cared for me. Yet how strange that he should have let my father take me away without one word. He must indeed have been glad to be rid of me," she muses.

The earl and his daughter are staying with Lady Clive for the

"season." She is an American, and the daughter of a famous American general. She is very happily married to Sir Harry Clive, baronet. Loving everything American with intensest love, she falls an instant victim to Lady Vera's charms.

"Your mother was an American—so am I," she says, vivaciously; "so I claim you on that score. Do you like England, Lady Vera, and English people?"

"Yes," Vera answers, in her grave way.

"And," Lady Clive goes on, in her bright, airy fashion, "do you intend to marry an Englishman or an American?"

"I shall never marry at all," Lady Vera says, with a face of extreme disgust.

"Never! Ah, my dear, you are too young to decide such a momentous question. Only wait and see," cries Lady Clive, who has a match laid out in her mind for Vera, but who is far too wise to give her a hint of it.

"I shall never marry," Vera repeats, calmly. "I do not even like to think of such things as love and marriage. Dear Lady Clive, let us talk of something more interesting. You promised to take me into the nursery, and show me your little children—did you not?"

"Yes, and we will go now," her friend answers, leading the way; but to herself she says, wonderingly: "What a strange girl. At her age I did not think a set of noisy children more interesting than love and marriage."

The grave young face grows brighter than Lady Clive has ever seen it as Vera watches the beautiful little children at their playful

sports. She even smiles when they caress her, and gives them the flowers from her bosom in payment for kisses.

"She loves children dearly," Lady Clive says to herself, well pleased. "How strange that she should be so set against marriage. She is an odd girl, but I think I shall live to see her change her mind."

CHAPTER X

Lady Vera having gained the *entree* to the nursery, pays it daily visits, always finding herself vociferously welcomed by the three small dwellers therein.

And one day she finds the youthful trio in a hubbub of excitement.

"Our uncle from America is coming over to visit us," they triumphantly announce to their friend.

"You seem to be glad," Lady Vera answers, kindly.

"Oh, we are," they laugh. "Aren't you glad, too, Vera?"

"I do not know. I do not like Americans much," says Lady Vera, with a distinct remembrance of the Clevelands and Leslie Noble.

"Oh, but you will be sure to like Uncle Phil. He is awfully jolly, and he is a soldier, too. He has a sword and a gun and has promised to teach me to shoot. I am going to be a soldier, too," cries out Mark, the second son.

"And when is this terrible soldier coming?" Lady Vera inquires, with languid interest.

"We do not know exactly, but very soon," they tell her. "He came about this time last year. Mamma had a letter from him this morning."

"You have not told me his name yet," Lady Vera continues.

"He is Captain Philip Lockhart, and his father, our own

grandpapa, is General Lockhart," answers Hal, the heir, while little Dot claps her small hands gleefully, crying out:

"Uncle Phil will bring us lots of bu'ful playt'ings from New York. He always does."

But though "Uncle Phil" remains the favorite topic of the nursery for several days, Lady Clive quite forgets to tell her guest that she expects her brother.

Lady Vera scarcely gives it a thought. In the expected arrival of Captain Lockhart she takes not the slightest interest.

So it happened that when Vera runs into the nursery one evening—having promised the children a peep at her ball dress—she comes upon an unexpected tableau. A man on his knees, hammering at the lid of a big box, three hopefuls gathered around him, and chattering like magpies; the prim, white-aproned nurse vainly endeavoring to command silence.

Before Vera can beat her instantly-attempted retreat, the little "Philistines are upon her."

"Here she is," they cry. "This is Vera, of whom we have been telling you. Isn't she pretty, Uncle Phil?"

"But she doesn't like Americans," adds one *enfant terrible*.

"I am sorry for that," says Captain Lockhart, rising hastily, and giving Lady Vera a soldier's stately bow. "Cannot you persuade her that I am of some other nationality, my dears?"

The ease and lightness of his words and manner carry off some of the embarrassment of the meeting. Lady Vera gives him a bow, and a slight little smile, sweet and transient.

"I am sorry to have interrupted you," she says. "I am going now, directly."

But her swift, upward glance has given her a glimpse of a tall, soldierly form, and a handsome-featured face, with dark-blue eyes, and dark-brown mustache, while short, curling locks of deepest brown cluster about a finely-shaped head—"every inch a soldier."

Our hero, on his part, sees a vision of dazzling beauty—dark eyes, golden tresses, scarlet lips, a slim yet daintily-rounded figure in costly lace, with knots of purple, golden-hearted pansies. Around the slender, stately column of the white throat a necklace of pansies formed of dark, purple amethysts with diamond centers radiating fire—a birthday gift from her father.

"Pray do not go," Captain Lockhart says, persuasively, with the winning tongue of a soldier. "The children have been eagerly expecting you. Do not damp their pleasure. Rather let me withdraw."

"No, no," Lady Vera says, hastily, as he crosses to the door, her haughtiness melting for the moment under his chivalrous manner. "We will both stay—that is, I can only give the children a moment. I am going to a ball."

"So am I, directly, with my sister and Sir Harry. It is very strange Nella did not tell me she had a young lady guest. I am," smiling under the brown mustache, "puzzled over your name."

"It is Vera Campbell," she answers, with a slight flush.

"*Lady Vera*," pipes the prim nurse from her corner, obsequiously.

"*Lady Vera*," he says, with a bow and smile; then: "Thank you for the favor. Mine is Philip Lockhart."

"Captain Phil," shouts Mark, anxious that his uncle shall abate no jot of his soldierly dignity.

"He has brought us a great big box," Dot confides to *Lady Vera*, triumphantly at this moment.

"Which I will leave him to open. My maid has not finished me yet," fibs *Vera*, and so makes her escape, leaving Captain Phil to the tender mercies of his small relatives, who give him no peace until the heavy box is unpacked, and its contents paraded before their dazzled and rejoicing sight.

Meanwhile *Vera* secures her opera-cloak, and goes down to the drawing-room, where the earl and Sir Harry are waiting for the ladies.

"*Nella* will be here in a moment," explains Sir Harry. "She has gone to hurry up her brother, over whom the children are having no end of a jollification. Oh, I forgot, you may not know whom I am talking about. *Lady Clive*'s brother arrived this evening, and will accompany us to *Lady Ford*'s ball."

Vera bows silently, and presently *Lady Clive* sails in, proudly, with the truant in tow. Evening dress is marvelously becoming to the handsome soldier. Involuntarily *Vera* thinks of Sir Launcelot:

"The goodliest man that ever among ladies sat in hall,

And noblest."

"Lady Vera, this is my brother, Captain Lockhart," Lady Clive begins, with conscious pride; then pauses, disconcerted by the "still, soft smile" creeping over either face.

"We have met before," Lady Vera explains, with, for her, unusual graciousness. "Met before! Not in America?" cried Lady Clive, bewildered.

"Oh, no," her brother answers, and Lady Vera adds, smiling: "In the nursery, ten minutes ago."

So there is only the earl to introduce, and then they are whirled away to Lady Ford's, where Captain Lockhart meets a score of last season's friends, and to the surprise of Lady Vera, who is prejudiced against almost anything American, he develops some of the graces of a society man, even playing and singing superbly in a full, rich tenor voice.

"Yet, why should he have selected that old, *old* song: 'The Banks of Allan Water?'" Lady Vera asks herself, scornfully, "and when he sang:

"'For his bride a soldier sought her,'

why should he have looked so straight at *me*? It was not an impertinent look, I own, but why should he have looked at me at all?"

But even to her own heart, Lady Vera will not own that her great vexation is directed against herself because she has blushed

vividly crimson under that one look from Captain Lockhart's blue eyes, while her heart has beat so strangely—with annoyance, she thinks.

"I foresee that I shall hate this American soldier," she muses, "and no wonder at all when I shall be forced to see him every day. I wish now that we had not accepted Lady Clive's invitation for the London season."

CHAPTER XI

The day after Lady Ford's ball dawns cheerlessly. It is cool, and the air is full of floating mists. The gentlemen determine to go out anyhow. The ladies elect to remain at home. The glowing fire in the library has more charms than the bleak, spring air.

"I am not surprised at Nella," says Captain Lockhart, leisurely buttoning his overcoat. "*She* was raised in America, and our ladies do not walk much. But I have been told that English ladies walk every morning, whether rain or shine. Are you false to the tradition, Lady Vera?"

The color flies into her cheek at his quizzical glance, but she will not tell him what she sees he does not know—that she has been raised in America, too.

"I suppose so," she says, a little shortly, in answer to his question.

"Suppose you come with us for a turn around the square, my dear?" suggests the earl.

"So I will," answers Lady Vera, determined to have Captain Lockhart see that she is quite English in her habits.

She comes down in a moment covered almost to the pink tips of her ears in rich velvet. To her dismay Earl Fairvale strolls forward in a fit of absent-mindedness with Sir Harry, leaving her to be accompanied by the American soldier. She sees no other course but to accept the situation.

"It is only for a few minutes at the worst," she thinks to herself.

So she walks on by his side, looking so pretty with the nipping wind kissing her cheeks into a scarlet glow, that Captain Lockhart can scarcely keep the admiration out of his eyes.

"The loveliest girl I have ever seen in my life," he mentally decides. "But, by Jove! as cold and proud as an iceberg!"

"So you do not like Americans?" he says to her, regretfully, as they turn a corner.

"No," curtly.

"Ah, but, Lady Vera, is that fair?" plaintively. "You do not know us, yet you condemn us without a hearing. Mere English prejudice—is it not?"

She looks around at the handsome face, full of fire and life, and the sparkling blue eyes. The thoughtful gravity on the lovely face grows deeper. The dark eyes flash.

"Captain Lockhart, you are talking of what you do not understand," she says, impatiently.

"I beg your pardon, Lady Vera," he answers, flushing, "I spoke from the merest impulse. I thought—since you are so very young—you could not know my country well."

Lady Vera blushes, but holds her peace. Of course, somebody will tell him her story soon—tell him that her mother was American, and that she herself had spent seventeen years in his own native land. At least he shall not hear it from her. She has a vague notion that it would please him to know it, that the blue eyes whose sparkle she has already learned to know, would light

with pleasure at the knowledge.

Those eyes, how bright and keen they are. They seem to read one's thoughts. Lady Vera finds her gaze drooping from them as they never drooped before mortal man's before. Why? she asks herself.

"It is because he is so bold," she decides, vexedly. "He seems to be trying to read one's inmost thoughts. I will show him that I am not afraid of him."

Thereupon she lifts the dark eyes bravely to give him a cool society stare, but in an instant they waver and fall before the glance they have surprised in his. Just so the blue eyes had turned on her last night, when he sang:

"On the banks of Allan Water,
When the sweet spring tide did fall,
Was the miller's lovely daughter,
Fairest of them all!
For his bride a soldier sought her,
And a winning tongue had he,
On the banks of Allan Water
None so gay as she."

"Why do you stare at me *so*?" she breaks out, angry with herself, and with him.

He flushes, startled by her *brusquerie*.

"I beg your pardon—I did not mean to be rude," he answers, quietly. "But, Lady Vera, a man must be blind not to look at *you*."

"Why?" she asks, still sharply.

"Because I think God made all beautiful things for the pleasure of men's eyes," he answers, firmly, yet respectfully.

"Impertinent!" Vera says to herself, indignantly, and looks another way.

"Do you lay an embargo on my eye-sight as far as you are concerned, Lady Vera?" he continues, after a moment.

"Yes," she replies, with her head still turned away.

"Then I shall try to obey you," he answers, calmly. "I will not even see you when I can help it, but you must forgive me for saying that if I should never see you again I shall never forget a single line of your face."

"I hope he is not making love to me," Lady Vera says to herself, uneasily, then laughing at herself. "Of course not; I dare say he has a sweetheart in his own land, some dear, sweet, angelic creature, like Ivy Cleveland, perhaps."

They speak no more, and when they have gone once around the square, Captain Lockhart leaves the earl's daughter at the door with a low bow. She goes into the house, her cheeks tingling with an odd kind of shame.

"I was rude, *perhaps*," she thinks, a little uneasily. "What must he think of English manners? But then why did he look at me so? I felt so—so strangely."

To Lady Clive, who is trifling over a bit of fancy work, she says, presently:

"Why did you not tell me you expected your brother?"

Lady Clive glances up under her long lashes at the flushed face, a gleam of mischief in the blue eyes so much like her brother's.

"It was just like me—to forget it," she exclaims. "But then I knew you would not be interested. And, besides, I knew he would not be in your way. Phil is only a plain, blunt soldier—not at all a ladies' man."

"I thought he seemed like *that* last night," Lady Vera answers, turning the leaves of a book very fast, and not knowing how ambiguous is her answer.

"Like *what*?" her friend inquires.

"A ladies' man," Vera answers.

"Did you? Oh, yes, when he is thrown among them he tries to make himself agreeable, but he does not fall in love, he does not run after them. When he was with us last season, Lady Eva Clarendon made a dead set at him. Phil was very civil at first—sang with her, danced with her, played the agreeable in his careless way, you know. But when he found she was losing her heart to him, he drew off, terrified—seemed to think she would marry him, willy-nilly—and went away to Italy, then back home."

"I should have thought it would have been a grand match for *him*," Lady Vera answers, with unconscious emphasis of the pronoun.

Lady Clive's head goes up, slightly.

"For *my* brother? Not at all, Lady Vera," she answers, with a

slight touch of stiffness in her voice. "Philip met the Clarendons on equal ground. He is wealthy—that is the first and greatest thing with people, you know—our great-uncle left him a fortune. Next, he is well-born, and the general, our father, is famous over two continents. As for Lady Eva's title, that would not weigh a feather with my brother. He comes from a land, you know, where native worth and nobility take precedence over all."

And having thus blandly squelched Lady Vera's arrogance, the American lady bends smilingly to her lace work again. Lady Vera only smiles. She cannot feel offended.

"I deserved it all," she thinks, soberly to herself. "Oh! why do I suffer my hatred of the Clevelands and Leslie Noble to make me venomous and unjust to every American I meet? I have offended this kind friend of mine, and been rude to her brother all through my spite against those wicked people. I wish he would forgive those ridiculous words I said to him. Not look at me, indeed. How silly! He will think me wondrous vain."

But Captain Lockhart does not forget. When they meet at dinner again Vera glances at him shyly several times across the silver and crystal and flowers, but the blue eyes are always on his plate, or on someone else's face—never on hers. What though she is lovely as a dream in pale-blue satin and gleaming pearls? Captain Lockhart is serenely unconscious of the color of her robe, or the half-repentance in her starry eyes.

"I cannot blame him," she admits to herself, "I acted like a silly child."

The days go by, Captain Lockhart and the earl's daughter are merely civil—they seldom seem to see each other. Each absorbed in the engagements of the gay season, each drifting further apart in the whirl, there is no time for pardon or reconciliation. Lady Vera finds no time for the nursery now save when the soldier is out. Yet she is ever listening for one step, and the color flies into her cheek when she hears it.

Lady Clive is perplexed and sorry because her brother and her favorite do not take to each other.

"I thought they seemed made for each other," she complains, to Sir Harry. "And I thought I had managed them so cleverly. But they scarcely seem conscious of each other's existence."

"I hope you are not turning match-maker, Nella," Sir Harry Clive replies, laughing.

Earl Fairvale sees nothing. Day by day he grows more gloomy, more self-absorbed, and goes less into society. The only interest in his life outside of his adored daughter, centers in the occasional letters that reach him from America. But after each one he grows more sad and gloomy, losing flesh and color daily. Only Vera knows that the vengeance that is the object of his life is so long delayed that the strain on his mind is killing him. For though the most skilled detectives in the world are watching and working, they can find no trace of the secure hiding-place where Marcia Cleveland dwells untroubled by the vengeance from which she has fled.

Lady Vera's roses pale when she sees how her father is

breaking down—how the mind is wearing out the body, even as the sword wears out the scabbard.

"Father, even if you found out her hiding-place, what could you do? What form could your revenge take?" she asks him, mournfully, as she has done many times before.

"I cannot tell—but some way would be opened. I should find some vulnerable point at which to strike," he answers, moodily.

She twines her fair, white arms about his neck, and presses her fresh young lips to his clouded brow.

"Father, this long brooding over your revenge, this hatred, nourished in your heart, is sapping your life," she sighs. "I beg you, for my sake, to give it up, dear father. Give it up, and leave it to Heaven!"

He looks at the beautiful, tearful eyes and the sweet face, pale now with its sorrow.

"Vera, you come to me with your mother's face, your mother's voice, and ask me not to avenge her ruined life, her broken heart, her mournful death," he answers, bitterly. "Child, you know not what you ask. What can you know of the pangs I have endured? Have you forgotten, too, the indignities heaped upon you in your young, defenseless life?"

The dark eyes filled with smouldering wrath.

"No, father, never!" she cries; "but it is all past. Mother is safe in Heaven, you and I are together. Let us forget those wicked ones. Surely God will punish them for the ruin they have wrought."

"I will not listen to you, Vera," he says, putting her from him, resolutely. "I have sworn to break Marcia Cleveland's heart if it be not made of stone. If I fail—listen to me, darling—if I fail, I shall bequeath my revenge and my oath to you in dying."

She pales and shivers through all her slight young frame, as if some dim foreboding came to her of the nearing future—that future in whose black shadow her feet already tread, it comes so near.

"I shall bequeath it to you," Earl Fairvale repeats, gloomily; "you will lack no means to accomplish it if only you can find out the serpent's lair. You will be Countess of Fairvale. You will inherit great wealth, and an enormous rent-roll. With wealth you can do almost anything. If I fail you will take up the work where it dropped from my hand in dying—you, Vera, will avenge the dead."

CHAPTER XII

One of Earl Fairvale's favorite amusements was riding on horseback. He had a passion for fast horses. He might often be seen mounted on some spirited and superb animal, riding in the "Row" by his daughter's side, who was herself a finished horsewoman.

Sometimes he drove a four-in-hand. Often he might be seen tearing along at a wild and break-neck pace on some fiery-looking horse that ordinary people would shudder to look at. But the earl did not know the name of fear. He seemed to take a reckless delight and gloomy satisfaction in those wild, John Gilpin-like races, at which others trembled with dread. He laughed at the fears of his daughter and her friends, and disregarded their entreaties.

Sir Harry Clive came home one day, his fine face clouded with anxiety.

"The earl has bought a new horse," he said. "It is a beautiful creature, black as night, glossy as satin, clean-limbed, superb, but with the most vicious eye conceivable, and a fiery temper. They call him King."

"I suppose there is no danger to the earl," said his wife. "He has a marvelous control over his horses. They seem to obey the least touch of his hand or sound of his voice."

"This animal he has now is not like to be tamed so easily," Sir

Harry answers, gravely. "It is said that he threw his last master and killed him. Indeed, Nella, you could not imagine a more devilish-looking creature than this beautiful King. I told Fairvale that its true name ought to be the Black Devil, for I am sure he looks like one."

Lady Clive shudders.

"Has the earl tried him yet?" she inquires.

"He started out upon him an hour ago," Sir Harry answers. "There were a score of us who tried to persuade him not to mount the fiery creature. But he laughed at our fears, and went off in gallant style. King tried to prevent him from mounting, but he succeeded in first-rate style. Yet I doubt," gloomily, "if he ever returns alive."

"What will Lady Vera say? She has been so anxious over him, so nervous of late," sighs Lady Clive.

"You need not tell her," he answers. "No need to alarm her needlessly. After all, our forebodings may be vain. Fairvale is the most fearless and accomplished rider I ever saw. He may even conquer King."

But even then the loud and startling peal of the door-bell rings like a wild alarm through the house.

Sir Harry's fears have had only too good a foundation. They have picked up the earl from the hard and flinty pavement, where the maddened brute had flung him, and brought him home bleeding, senseless—mortally injured, all the surgeons agree.

And Lady Vera? The shock of the awful tidings had almost

rent her heart in twain. Passing from one swoon into another, she lies on her couch, white and horror-stricken, shuddering sighs heaving her breast. At last they come to tell her that the awful stupor is over. He is conscious, and has asked for her.

"How long?" she asks, faintly, for they have told her that his hours are numbered.

"Calm yourself, for he cannot bear the least excitement."

But when Vera goes into his presence, and sees him lying so marble-white, with the black hair tossed back from the high, pale brow, and the eager, asking eyes fixed upon her anguished face, a great, choking knot rises into her throat—it seems as if she will choke with the violence of her repressed emotion.

"Father!" she wails, with a world of grief in that one word, and falls on her knees by his bed-side.

"I am going from you, dear," he answers, with the strange calmness of the dying. "The black river of death yawns at my feet. The pale and mystic boatman is waiting to row me over. Already the cold waves splash over me. Vera!"

"Father," she answers, placing her hand in the cold one feebly groping for it.

His hollow, dark eyes roll around the room.

"Are we alone?"

"Alone," she answers, for all the kindly watchers have withdrawn, leaving father and child to the sweet solace of this last moment together, undisturbed by alien eyes.

The dark eyes seek hers—sad, wistful, full of vain remorse.

"Vera, I was reckless, mad, defiant of fate. I have thrown my life away, my poor, blighted life. Can you forgive me, my poor, orphaned girl?"

Only her stifled sobs answer him.

"I did not mean it, Vera. I was tormented by my burning thoughts, and I only sought diversion. I thought I could hold the fiery brute in check. But the devil threw me. No matter; I am to blame. I was too reckless. But you forgive me, darling?"

She kisses him because she cannot speak.

"I have lost my life," he murmurs, sadly; "lost it before my work on earth was done. My daughter, you recall what I said to you so short a while ago?"

She shivers, and lifts her dark, foreboding eyes to his face.

"Yes, father."

"Bring me the Bible from yonder stand, dear. You must swear a solemn oath."

The beautiful young face quivers with nameless dread and fear.

"Oh, father," she prays, with lifted hands and streaming eyes, "leave it to Heaven!"

The dark eyes, fast glazing over with the film of death, grow hard and stern.

"Vera, child of my martyred wife, will you be false to your father's dying trust? Will you refuse to obey his dying commands?"

"No, father, no," she weeps.

"Then place your hand on this Bible, my darling."

Silently she obeys him, the pale, chill light of the waning day glimmering in on her ghost-like, pallid face, and the dark eyes full of pain and despair.

And the voice of the dying man rises strangely on the utter stillness.

"Swear, Vera, swear by all your hopes of happiness, that you will punish Marcia Cleveland through her dearest affections, that at any cost to yourself you will avenge your mother's wrongs!"

A gasp; the words die on Lady Vera's parched tongue.

"Speak, my little countess. Repeat my words," he urges, anxiously.

With a terrible effort she murmurs them over:

"I swear, by all my hopes of happiness, that I will punish Marcia Cleveland through her dearest affections; that at any cost to myself I will avenge my mother's wrongs!"

She glances down at the loved face for his smile of approval. An icy hand seems to clutch her heart. Her father has died as the last words left her lips—died with a smile of triumph on his marble-white face!

One piercing cry of anguish, and the Countess of Fairvale falls lifeless across the still warm body of the dead.

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