

ALEX. MCVEIGH MILLER

THE SENATOR'S FAVORITE

Alex. McVeigh Miller

The Senator's Favorite

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Mrs. Alex. McVeigh Miller

The Senator's Favorite

CHAPTER I.

"A ROSEBUD SET WITH LITTLE WILLFUL THORNS."

*"We were two daughters of one race;
She was the fairest in the face;
The wind is sighing in turret and tree.
I hated her with the hate of hell,
Therefore revenge became me well.
Oh, but she was fair to see!"—Tennyson.*

"Mamma, darling, you'll take me to the Inauguration Ball, that's a love."

"Oh, my baby, what an absurd idea! And you only sixteen!"

"I'm as tall as you, mamma, and I only look small because my dresses are too short. I wish you would let out the tucks to hide my ankles—there now!"

"But, Precious, you have the prettiest feet and ankles in the world."

"I don't care; I want my dresses long, and my hair put up. I'm tired of being only a schoolgirl! Everybody in Washington will be at the Inauguration Ball. I want to go, too, and shake hands with the new president."

"Nonsense, dear; the next Inauguration Ball will be time enough for you."

"Four years! Why, then I shall be twen-ty. Quite an old maid, mamma, dear, with crows' feet and wrinkles."

Mrs. Winans, the handsome wife of a noted Southern Senator, threw back her graceful golden head, and laughed softly:

"Oh, what a ridiculous child!"

But her dark-blue eyes lingered tenderly on the lovely upturned face, for Precious was on an ottoman at her mother's feet.

Mrs. Winans was the mother of three children—a son and two daughters. Precious was the youngest—"the baby," they called her—and, like all babies, she was spoiled, and liked to have her own way, always wheedling her parents until she got whatever she wanted.

"Dear mamma, you will let me go," she cried teasingly.

"Go where?" exclaimed a musical voice, as a tall, dark, regal beauty entered the library. "Go where?" she repeated. "And what is the baby teasing for now, mamma?"

Precious Winans lifted her golden head from her mother's knee, and turning her pansy-blue eyes on her queenly sister replied, with the air of a little princess:

"Ethel, I've made up my mind to go to the Inauguration Ball."

"The ball, indeed?" and Ethel shook with laughter in which her mother joined.

Ere the echo of their mirth died away a tall, dark, handsome man entered the room—their father, from whom the elder girl inherited her dusky beauty, while the younger was the image of her lovely blond mother.

"What is the joke about?" he asked genially, and his wife replied:

"Precious has a new notion in her silly little noddle. She wants to attend the Inauguration Ball."

"The idea!" laughed Ethel, gently sarcastic.

But Precious had fled to her father, and was hanging on his neck. As he clasped the lissome form to his heart he asked earnestly:

"Why not?"

"Yes, why not?" echoed his pretty pet.

"But, papa, she is too young," cried Ethel, almost angrily.

"Don't listen to her, papa. She doesn't want me to have one bit of fun. But I will go to the ball, for you will say yes, won't you, my darling old love?" and she stroked his rippling black whiskers with her dainty mite of a hand, and gazed into his eyes with innocent confidence.

He hugged the little pleader tight, and looked over the top of her golden head at his wife.

"What say you, Grace, my dear? Isn't she big enough to go to the ball?"

"I'm as tall as mamma. You needn't laugh, Ethel," cried Precious, and waited eagerly for her mother's reply.

The gentle lady said sweetly:

"I'm sorry to disappoint my dear little girl, but she is too young to go into society yet, and she would have to make her *début* as a young lady before she went to a grand ball."

"I don't care if I'm not a young lady, mamma; I'm determined to go to the ball," cried Precious, with hysterical symptoms, and Mrs. Winans sighed gently.

"Indeed, my darling girl, I'm sorry to refuse you, but—" she began, and paused in dismay, for a sound of petulant weeping filled the room. Precious lay in her father's arms transformed into a Niobe.

"Oh, Precious, pray don't be such a baby," implored Ethel impatiently, but the sobbing only grew louder, and between whiles came the pathetic plaint:

"Nobody cares for me."

Those tears and sobs melted the father's doting heart. He cried out pleadingly.

"Poor little love, her heart is almost broken. Do let her go, mamma."

"Papa is the only friend I have in the world!" wailed the diplomatic little darling, and he pressed her closer to his throbbing heart.

"Ah, Gracie, how can you refuse?" he exclaimed, but Ethel cried out pettishly:

"Papa, you have spoiled Precious until she is a perfect baby, and if she cried for the moon I believe you'd try to have a ladder built up to it. You always find it easy enough to refuse me when I ask imprudent things, and I don't think you ought to take sides against mamma in this. Let Precious wait a few years before she comes out."

But dismal sobs were the only answer to this plea, and Precious wept, persuasively:

"Oh, papa, darling papa, do say that I may go, for mamma will do anything you wish."

The senator's pleading dark eyes met the anxious blue ones of his wife, and he said eagerly:

"Dearest, she wants to go so very, very much, and it will break her sweet little heart if you refuse. Besides, this is different from a regular ball, for thousands and thousands of people attend the Inauguration Ball just to see the new president. There will be a great crush as usual, and you will bring the girls home very soon, I know. So for this one time I think we may humor our baby's curiosity. Now dry your eyes, my pet."

"Oh, you darling! you darling!" cried Precious ecstatically, and lifted her face, all lovely and damp like a rain-washed rose. She embraced him rapturously, then flew to her mother.

"Mamma, you shall never repent this, for I'll be as good as gold hereafter."

Ethel had turned away and left the room with a frowning brow and darkly flashing eyes.

"He loves her best," she murmured bitterly. "He would never have yielded like that to my entreaties for anything against dear mamma's wish. Ah, why is it so? Am I not beautiful and good, and his elder daughter? Why should Precious be always first in my noble father's heart?"

That jealous heart-cry strikes the keynote of our story, dear reader, for had the senator not loved Precious best, this story of Ethel's temptation and her sister's suffering would never have been written.

Ethel Winans was bitterly unhappy.

Unhappy? and why?

Externally she had everything to make her blessed.

Young, beautiful, healthy, the fortunate daughter of a rich and distinguished statesman, this girl had

"But lain in the lilies
And fed on the roses of life."

But Milton has aptly written:

"The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven."

Ethel Winans' life stream had been poisoned at its very source by a baleful jealousy.

Those who knew her gifted father best were aware that his early married life had been embittered by the faults of a passionately jealous nature intent on supremacy in everything. This elder daughter had inherited his beauty and his temperament. Every parental influence was working against her happiness.

She went with a weary, listless step to her own apartments, and fell heavily upon a silken divan. Her red lips were trembling, and tears began to rain from her beautiful eyes.

"Why was I ever born?" she cried angrily. "No one cares for poor Ethel! Mamma, in spite of her denials, loves my brother Earle the best, and papa worships Precious. If I were dead they would scarcely miss me."

She began to pace up and down the luxurious room, her rich crimson silk gown trailing soundlessly over the thick velvet carpet, her loosened tresses pouring in a dusky torrent below her waist, her lovely jeweled hands writhing together in agony.

"How I love him, my noble, handsome father!" she cried. "But ever since Precious was born, before I was three years old, she has supplanted me in everything. I can remember it all although I was so young. She pushed me from my mother's breast, she crowded me from my father's heart. I was no longer the petted baby. I must give way to Little Blue Eyes, as they call her, and from the first I hated my rival. When I was little I used to strike her, until my mother's gentle teachings made me ashamed, and then I tried to love my little sister for mamma's sake. I do love her. God knows I love her, for who could help it, she is so sweet and lovely? Yet there are times—horrible times—when Satan seems to possess my soul, and I give way to something that is awful—to jealous hate and fury—and then, oh, then, I wish that Precious were dead, or that I had never been born. Once I confessed all to mamma, and she shuddered and wept at my wickedness. But she clasped me in her tender arms, and told me that she loved me—oh, very, very much and that she would pray for me daily! Dear mamma! she is an angel, and I am a wicked, rebellious girl, and frighten every one with my fits of temper and imperious ways. And I forget to pray for myself as mamma bade me do, and when I forget, the Evil One gets possession of my weak soul."

She fell on her knees, she lifted her streaming dark eyes heavenward.

"Oh, Heaven help me, make me a better girl, keep me from hating my dear little sister, and save me from my own evil nature!" she prayed, with desperate fervor.

CHAPTER II.

"LOVE TOOK UP THE GLASS OF TIME."

*"Sister, since I met thee last,
O'er thy brow a change has passed.
In the softness of thine eyes
Deep and still a shadow lies.
From thy voice there thrills a tone
Never to thy childhood known;
Through thy soul a storm has moved;
Gentle sister, thou hast loved!"—Hemans.*

It was the fourth day of March, and Washington was full of strangers drawn thither to witness the Inauguration ceremonies attendant upon the new president taking the oath of office as ruler of the nation.

But nature had frowned on everything that day, and from early dawn till midnight her tears poured in torrents upon the vast throngs that surged ceaselessly through the magnificent broad avenues of the beautiful city. The wind raged wildly, and the rain fell in sheets, as though

"The heart of heaven were breaking
In tears o'er the fallen earth."

Along the route of the procession, from the White House to the Capitol, Pennsylvania avenue was packed with a dense mass of people, upon whose forest of umbrellas the magnificent decorations of flags and bunting overhead dripped red and blue ink as they hung forlornly over the scene. The windows of the houses were filled with curious faces and the grand stands erected here and there for the sightseers were occupied, too, in spite of the weather, for no one seemed to have stayed indoors for fear of the elements. Hundreds of thousands of people seemed to be packed upon the pavements, jostling each other with their umbrellas, and patronizing the busy fakirs who peddled presidential badges and photographs, while ever and anon rose the plaintive call of the diligent vender of Philadelphia cough drops. Altogether the day was dismal in the extreme. The drenched people looked ridiculous, and the glory of the procession was considerably dampened from the same cause.

But the day with its stormy skies, its surging throngs, and fitful enthusiasm was over now. The new president was installed in the White House, the old president was deposed. "*Le roi est mort! Vive le roi!*"

Still Nature wept tumultuously, for with nightfall the storm increased in violence. Black, portentous clouds scurried over the face of the sky, and sheets of icy cold rain poured upon the earth.

But all this downpour did not check the ardor of the tens of thousands of people who flocked to the Inauguration Ball in the immense new Pension building. The avenues were thronged with carriages, and they literally blocked the square around the building, while within all was like fairy-land with splendid decorations, brilliant lights, black coats of civilians, gay uniforms of soldiers, brilliant costumes of foreign legations, and lovely women whose magnificent jewels radiated fire, while over all rose the swell of music. The new president was there with his family, and willful Precious Winans had duly made his acquaintance, the honor she had so much coveted.

And beautiful, passionate Ethel, with her flashing eyes and her proud smile?

Since we first met her several weeks ago a change has come over this reckless spirit.

The passion of love has thrown its golden glamour over her heart.

At a brilliant entertainment ten days ago she had met a stranger, an Englishman of rank and wealth, who was just now being lionized by American society.

Lord Chester was young, handsome, fascinating, and caused many a flutter in feminine hearts, but he soon singled out the brilliant belle, Miss Winans, as the bright particular star of his worship, and it was soon suspected that the girl, whose conquests had been legion in her two successful seasons, had been touched at last by Cupid's arrows. Society began to prophesy a match.

Ethel was radiant in the bliss of this dawning passion.

She foresaw, in a worshipping love and a brilliant marriage, an escape from the life that her jealous nature made at times unendurable.

"As Lady Chester I should leave my father's house, where Precious has supplanted me in all my rights. In my grand English home I should reign queen of my husband's heart, and in time the wounds of slighted love in my father's home might heal and be forgotten," she thought gladly, and there was triumph in the anticipation of this brilliant match, for she did not believe Precious could ever win a title, in spite of her charms.

"She is lovely, but she is not queenly, as I am. She would not grace a title," she thought proudly.

At the ball that night she wore Lord Chester's flowers, and he hung over her devotedly, but he had not yet seen Precious. Her mother kept her resolutely in the background. The senator's entreaties had forced her to bring her younger daughter, but she was determined that the girl's presence should not be known any more than could be helped. She wanted to keep this lovely pearl secluded from society as long as she could.

So, withdrawn into a flowery alcove with Precious, she scarcely mingled at all with the surging mass of people whose vast numbers made dancing quite an impossibility. The senator remained with them part of the time, but was often called off by friends, and sometimes left them to mingle with the crowd.

Precious, a perfect picture of beauty in a white Empire silk gown, with her golden curls all loose over her shoulders, remained demurely by her mother's side, the radiant light in her blue eyes and the flush on her cheeks showing how much she enjoyed the brilliant scene.

Suddenly a very distinguished looking man, white-haired, and in the uniform of some foreign service, with glittering orders on his breast, caught sight of Mrs. Winans in her secluded alcove, and hastened to speak to the beautiful lady.

Precious did not care about the old gentleman. She moved back, and looked another way to escape an introduction.

"Ah, Baron Nugent," cried the lady and for ten minutes he lingered beside her, then moved on.

"Precious," she cried, looking around, but there was no answer. Precious had disappeared.

"She is hiding, to tease me," smiled Mrs. Winans, and began to search for her daughter with a smile on her lips.

But Precious was nowhere to be seen, and she presently grew quite alarmed.

"She will be lost in this dense crowd. It was very thoughtless in her to leave my side. I must find her father and send him to search for her," cried the frightened mother.

But for some time she could not see her husband, or any one else that she knew.

Suddenly she came upon Ethel and Lord Chester sitting close to a vine-wreathed pillar, seemingly absorbed in each other. The handsome young nobleman was leaning over Ethel with an air of devotion that seemed only the due of her dark and sparkling beauty.

Mrs. Winans gave a little suppressed sob of joy at finding some one that she knew. She went up to the lovers, and cried tremulously:

"Oh, Ethel, have you seen Precious? She is lost!"

Ethel looked up with a frown at the interruption of her charming conversation, and answered coldly:

"No, mamma; I thought she was with you."

"She was, but a little while ago Baron Nugent stopped to speak to me, and when I looked around again Precious had disappeared as completely as if she had sunk through the floor. She must have strayed into the crowd, the thoughtless child, and got lost. Oh, if I could find her father and send him to look for her!"

"I will be very glad to bring him to you, madam," exclaimed Lord Chester, courteously and he hurried away to seek the senator.

Ethel pouted angrily.

"If you had only stayed where you were, mamma, Precious would have come back to you directly. You are making a great fuss over nothing," she declared, and Mrs. Winans trembled at the jealous flash in the large dark eyes.

"My dear, I am very sorry I interrupted you," she said, in her low, gentle voice. "But I was so alarmed over Precious I did not think. Forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive, but it is just like Precious, raising an excitement, and spoiling every one's pleasure. She should never have come," Ethel replied ungraciously.

At that moment Lord Chester came hurrying back with Senator Winans in tow.

"Oh, Paul, I have lost Precious," his wife cried with a choking sob.

"No, dear, we will find her presently, I'm sure," he said cheerfully, but with an anxious light in his eyes. Then he explained that while she was talking to the baron he had beckoned Precious away in order to present her to a friend of his, a cabinet minister. While they were all talking they had spied the president leaving, and bidding Precious remain where she was until he came back her father hurried forward for a few good-night words with him.

"I am sure I was not absent more than fifteen minutes from her side, but when I returned she was gone. I supposed she had made her way back to you, and was searching for you both when I met Lord Chester."

"She never came back. Oh, my darling, where are you? What has become of you?" moaned the anxious mother, and her lovely, delicate face paled with fear.

"Do not be alarmed, Grace. I will soon find her for you," her husband cried, and Lord Chester, eager to be of use, added:

"I will assist you if you will describe your daughter to me."

Senator Winans cried impulsively:

"She is the most beautiful girl you ever saw. Only sixteen, with blue eyes like velvet pansies, golden curls sweeping to her waist, a white silk gown, and pearls on her lovely white neck."

A low, muttered word came from Ethel's lips, but they did not catch its import, and turned away. Only her tearful mother saw the livid pallor that overspread the beautiful face and the flash of anger in the dark eyes.

CHAPTER III.

"THEY HAVE CHEATED ME OF THE LOVE THAT SHOULD BE MINE."

*"How does a woman love? Once, no more,
Though life forever its loss deplore;
Deep in sorrow, or want, or sin,
One king reigneth her heart within;
One alone by night and day
Moves her spirit to curse or pray."*

—Rose Terry Cooke.

An hour's frantic search convinced Senator Winans that his daughter was not in the immense ballroom, and inquiry among the door-keepers brought to light something very startling.

A young man had left the ballroom an hour before, carrying an unconscious girl in his arms.

He had told the doorkeeper that she was his sister, that she had fainted in the crowd, and that he was going to put her in his carriage, and take her home.

When the man described the beauty of the unconscious girl, the soft white silk gown, and the long golden curls, the agonized senator could no longer doubt that his darling had been kidnaped by some villain, and carried off to some terrible unknown fate.

It was terrible to think that such a thing could be in that gala scene among those thousands of joyous people, and in that blaze of light and splendor. It was like a sword in her father's heart.

His face grew ashen, his eyes blazed, and he swore the most terrible revenge on the fiend who had stolen Precious.

"Oh, my darling, my darling, this news will break her mother's heart!" he groaned.

"But she has another daughter left to comfort her," ventured the elegant young Englishman.

"Yes, we have Ethel. She is a good daughter, but Precious was our favorite, our darling."

"But why? Miss Winans is very charming," cried Lord Chester, a little jealous for the beautiful girl he admired so much.

"Yes, Ethel is charming, but so was my little Precious. She was charming and winsome, too, my youngest born, my darling, the idol of my heart!" groaned the senator, completely overcome by his trouble.

Lord Chester began to feel an eager curiosity over the missing girl. Was she, indeed, as lovely and winsome as her father declared? She must be if her charms exceeded Ethel's.

He held out a sympathetic hand to the stricken father.

"General, pray command my services in this sad affair to assist you in all possible ways," he exclaimed cordially.

"Thank you, Lord Chester, for we must begin to follow up the clues at once. But my heart bleeds for my wife. I fear this shock will almost kill her. My lord, if you will order my carriage, I will send her home with Ethel, telling her that perhaps Precious has somehow found her way home. Not a word of the truth yet. It must be broken to her later, and very gently. She must think that I am still searching here, while in fact I shall be on the track of the kidnaper. Oh, Heavens every moment is an agony, until I find my child again!"

And later on, when his wife and daughter were gone, and he was rolling in a cab to the office of a great detective, he confided to the young Englishman a brief page from his romantic earlier life.

"My only son, Earle, who is at present in Europe, was kidnaped by a lunatic when he was an infant, and it was over four years before we recovered him. He was in my care at the time, and I was blamed for his loss. My wife had brain fever, and almost died, and the pensive shade on her face now was left there by that early grief. Think what it would be to her now to lose Precious in the same terrible fashion. She is a noble Christian woman, but I fear that she would curse me and never forgive me if our darling daughter should be lost like that while in my care. Oh, why was I so careless? Why did I not remember that there are always human wolves watching—for prey?"

Mrs. Winans sobbed bitterly all the way home from the ball, but Ethel was too angry to offer one word of comfort.

Her father's praise of Precious rankled like a poisoned arrow in her heart.

"The most beautiful girl he ever saw! How dared he say it? I wonder if Lord Chester would say so, too, if he saw her? Would he like her blue eyes better than my dark ones? Would he think her golden curls prettier than my raven tresses? Woe be to her if he did, for now he is almost my declared lover, and if she won him from me I should be tempted to take a terrible revenge on both," she thought bitterly, forgetting that the deadliest revenge often recoils on the hand that deals the blow.

They passed into the broad hall, where they were met by Mrs. Winans' privileged attendant, Norah, who had nursed all her children.

"Norah! Norah! has Precious come home?" cried her mistress anxiously.

The woman stared in surprise at the question.

"No, madam, she is not here. I thought she was to come back with you! Why, what ails you that you look so pale and wild? Oh, she is fainting! Help! help! we must carry her to her room!"

They bore the limp figure upstairs, and laid it on the bed. Ethel knelt by her, weeping.

"Mamma, dear mamma, speak to me! Oh, Norah, why does she lie still so long? Is she dead?"

"No, it's only a swoon. I've brought her safely through many like it, poor dear. But tell me what has happened, Miss Ethel? Where is your father and your sister, my little nursling?"

Ethel told her briefly what had happened, adding:

"Papa sent us home and remained, to search for Precious."

"Heaven have mercy!" sobbed nurse Norah, then she busied herself about her mistress.

Ethel stood idly watching her, with dazed eyes, her head in a whirl. She was not thinking of her lost sister, nor her stricken mother. Her restless thoughts had gone back to her handsome English lover.

She was thinking:

"When mamma came upon us so suddenly he was about to make a declaration of his love. I saw it in his eyes, it was trembling on his lips; but mamma came between with the name of Precious—that name that always comes between me and everything! Was it an evil omen, I wonder, or will he tell me to-morrow that he loves me?"

CHAPTER IV. "FOR LOVE OF HER FAIR FACE."

*"My hope was still in the shadow,
Hers lay in the sun:
I longed in vain: what she asked for
It straightway was done,
Once I staked all my heart's treasure,
We played—and she won!"*

—Adelaide Procter.

In the gray dawn of the wild March morning Senator Winans came home alone, looking ten years older, the stamp of despair on his dark, handsome face.

He went at once to his wife, and found her lying awake in a fever of suspense and anxiety.

When she saw him enter alone she started up with a cry of keen despair:

"Precious! Oh, where is Precious?"

Her husband knelt by her side, clasped the feverish little hands, and kissed the woeful white face, all wet with tears, like a rain-drenched lily.

"Be brave, be patient, my dearest, for you must bear this cruel suspense yet a little longer," he sighed.

"Oh, Paul, you have not found her yet? Then she must be dead, our little darling!"

He had decided to tell her the truth. It would be better than the anguish of wretched uncertainty, so he broke it to her gently, the story of the golden-haired girl who had been carried out of the ballroom unconscious.

"It must have been our golden-haired darling. I believe she has been kidnaped for the sake of a ransom; so cheer up, my darling, for the wretches will not harm our pet; they will keep her safe and well to earn the reward they will expect to be offered in the morning papers. And I have attended to that already, Grace, for my advisers think it will be best to give great publicity to the affair, as in that case it may come to the knowledge of some persons who may be able to give us an unexpected clew. Oh, my wife; do not sob so bitterly. Our darling shall soon be found, I swear it," and for the sake of the anguish she saw in his eyes the poor mother fought with her sorrow, and tried to find a glimmer of light in the Cimmerian darkness.

But it was cruel, cruel, for the horror of the present was only augmented by the memory of the past. Her eldest born, her precious boy, had been stolen in his babyhood, and four years elapsed before he was recovered. It had taken all the strength of youth and hope to endure that cross. Now she was older, frailer, and she knew she could not bear another such agony and live.

But her husband's seeming hopefulness put a gleam of sunshine in her heart, and for his sake, because she loved him very dearly, she would not add to his remorseful grief by one reproachful word.

The morning papers in glaring black headlines chronicled the abduction of the senator's favorite daughter and the princely ransom he had offered for her restoration. Excitement ran high over the terrible sensation, and stories of the girl's wonderful grace and beauty passed from lip to lip. The studio of a famous artist who had but just completed the portrait of Precious for her father was thronged with gazers. He could not deny them, for it was hoped that familiarity with her looks might in some way help the search for the missing girl.

Among the first of the curious visitors to the studio was handsome Lord Chester.

The senator's earnest praises of his favorite child rang continuously in the young man's head.

His eager curiosity drove him to the studio of the famous artist, and when he stood at last before the full-length portrait he could not turn his eyes away; they lingered in rapture on the pictured loveliness of Precious Winans.

"Sweet face, swift eyes and gleaming
Sun-gifted rippling hair—
Lips like two rosebuds dreaming
In June's fruit-scented air:
Life when her spring days meet her,
Hope when her angels greet her,
Is not more calm—nor sweeter;
And love is not more fair.

"God bless your thoughts, my sweet one,
Whatever they may be!
Youth's life is but a fleet one,
Foam from an ebbing sea.
Time, tide, and fate o'erturn all,
Save one thing ever vernal,
Sweet love that lives eternal,
Life of eternity!"

To the day of his death Arthur, Lord Chester, carried this picture in his memory and his heart—this picture of a girl standing by a magnificent large mastiff with one tiny white hand holding his silver collar. Beneath her fairy feet was daisied grass, and her simple white gown and the broad straw hat she carried on her arm seemed to fit the spring-time that was imaged in the golden lengths of rippling hair. So she stood—"a sight to make an old man young"—Ethel's younger sister, the senator's favorite.

The words of a poet of his own fair land leaped to his lips:

"Sovereign lady in fair field
Myself for such a face had boldly died."

Later in the day he called at the Winans mansion, and Ethel received him alone. Her mamma was too ill and nervous to see any one.

Never had the queenly Ethel looked more charming. No shade of anxiety dimmed the dark radiance of her eyes. She had slept long and late, and when she awoke and heard that Precious was not yet found she laughed and said that she was sure that her sister had eloped with some handsome young man, and would be coming home in a few days from her bridal tour, with her husband, to ask papa's forgiveness.

And she repeated this to Lord Chester when he expressed solicitude over her sister's fate.

"I am not at all uneasy, my lord," she cried lightly; "I think it very likely that Precious has eloped with one of her tutors. Papa had several young men coming here to teach my sister music, and drawing, and dancing. Of course her French governess was always present. But she scarcely understood a word of English, so it was easy enough for one of them to make love to her if he wished, and Precious was just the kind of pretty, willful simpleton to fall in love with a nobody and marry him."

A keen, inexplicable pain tore the young man's heart at those words, and it seemed to him that Ethel's levity amounted to heartlessness. He looked gravely at her with his dark-gray eyes, and it

seemed to him that there was something lacking in her beauty that he had not missed last night, but he did not realize as yet that the change was in himself.

He would have denied it if any one had taxed him with being in love with a girl whom he knew only by her portrait.

Only last night he had adored charming Ethel Winans. It was only her mother's interruption that had prevented him from laying his heart and title at her feet. The words had trembled on his lips while he looked at her with his heart in his eyes.

Why did he not speak to-day?

The opportunity was very favorable, for it was but seldom he could find the brilliant belle alone.

And Ethel's languid air, just touched with the softness of love, was very inviting. It was just the gentle mood in which a girl is likely to accept a proposal.

But he did not propose, although he said to himself that really he ought to, and he was afraid she expected it, after last night. But really it might not be quite correct to speak just now when the family was crushed with grief over the kidnaping of a beloved daughter. He would postpone the declaration.

In truth last night's zest was lacking. Last night Ethel had seemed to him a peerless goddess. To-day she was only an ordinary mortal—beautiful, but—not as divine as her younger sister.

If he had dreamed of the mad passion of jealousy surging under her calm exterior he would never have uttered his next words:

"I saw your sister's portrait at Valentine's studio to-day. Her beauty merits all her father's praise."

She bit her scarlet lip and tore to pieces a rose in her fingers.

"The portrait is flattered. Precious is not half so beautiful," she answered coldly, and a sudden constraint came between them. Lord Chester, blind to the smoldering fury under the long black lashes, thought her weary of him, and soon took leave.

Ethel, left alone in the splendid room, with the scattered rose petals at her feet, flung out her arms with a gesture of rebellious despair, and moaned bitterly:

"She has won my lover's heart with that fatal, luring, childish beauty! How can I help but hate her now?"

The evening's post brought a mysterious type-written letter to Senator Winans. It ran thus:

"You have made a mistake. I did not steal Precious for a ransom, but for love of her fair face. Do not be uneasy. I shall not harm your beautiful daughter. She is safe in the care of a kind, motherly woman, but she is also my prisoner, and will remain so until she consents to become my bride. After she is married to me you shall see her again, but never before; so you must be patient, for she is a little obdurate now, but in the end I shall win her consent."

The letter had no date or signature, but it was postmarked Washington.

"Didn't I say it was an elopement?" cried Ethel, in scornful triumph, but her father turned on her a lightning glance of reproof, and cried sternly:

"Never dare, Ethel, to repeat that false word elopement of your innocent sister again. You have just read in this letter that it was an abduction, not an elopement. So do not make another such mistake."

CHAPTER V. IN A VILLAIN'S POWER

*"To see her is to love her,
And love but her forever;
For nature made her what she is,
And never made another!"—Burns.*

When Senator Winans left Precious standing like a vision of beauty under a garlanded pillar to await his return, he did not dream that the vulture of danger hovered near his blue-eyed darling.

But burning eyes only a little distance away glared on the girl with wolfish eagerness, and minute by minute those small keen eyes grew fiercer with the fire of passion.

Precious, all unconscious of those burning eyes, stood quietly watching the strangers that surrounded her, coming and going in ceaseless ebb and flow like the waves of the sea.

Suddenly those eyes came nearer, nearer, and burned on the lovely face. Then a voice spoke in her ear:

"Good-evening, Miss Winans."

Precious started and looked at the speaker.

She recognized her drawing-master, Lindsey Warwick, a young man she secretly disliked because she had a vague suspicion that he was the writer of several mysterious love-letters she had lately received.

She gave him a haughty nod, but she did not speak, only stared in surprise at his elegant evening suit and the rose in his buttonhole, that transformed him from the poor drawing-master to the elegant man of fashion.

Lindsey Warwick was not at all abashed by her supercilious air. He seemed to be wildly agitated, his face pale, his firm chin trembling with emotion. Bending close to the girl's ear he whispered:

"Come! your father wishes me to take you to your mother."

Something about him, his awe-struck tone, his agitation frightened the girl. She gasped inquiringly:

"Mamma?"

And Lindsey Warwick answered unhesitatingly, though his voice was hoarse and strange:

"Yes, poor child, your mother has just dropped dead of heart-disease over yonder. Come," and he held out his arm.

If she had uttered a cry the little scene might have attracted attention from the vast crowd surging about, but had he thrust a sword to the very hilt in her heart Precious could not have fallen more silently or swiftly at his feet. She just dropped down unconscious without moan or cry—that was all.

No one had observed anything strange, only one or two looked around when he exclaimed, "My sister has fainted!"

His ruse had succeeded admirably. Precious lay like a dead girl at his feet, and there was no one to interfere.

The villain lifted the slender white form in his arms and pushed through the crowd, trying to gain the door. People made way when they saw his burden and heard him mutter his formula, "My sister has fainted." But no one displayed any special interest. Half a score of women had fainted that night.

So Lindsey Warwick gained the outer air with his burden, and soon finding a cab took her away. It was a daring game that he had played, but he had won.

The project had flashed into his mind when he saw her alone and unguarded in the heedless crowd, and in the desperation of a mad and hopeless love he had carried it out. He knew that the chances were terribly against him, but he resolved to run the risk in hope of the prize.

The cab took him and his captive to the very suburbs of South Washington—to an old tumble-down red brick house of two stories that stood alone in a large neglected lot. There were but a few more houses in the square, and those strictly of the shanty order.

Cabby held out his hand, remarking grumpily:

"Five dollars, you know, is legal fare for Inauguration night."

"I'll make it ten for good luck, and you can go on a big spree to-morrow," laughed Lindsey Warwick, handing him a bill.

Cabby thanked the kind gentleman vociferously, but he did not wait till the next day, but went on his orgies at once, and wound up early next morning in the police court, where he was sent to jail for ten days in default of payment of his fine. He never saw the papers, never knew of the sensation that had followed the simple fact of his driving a young lady and gentleman home from the Inauguration Ball. He did not dream that he had been concerned in an abduction, or that Senator Winans would have made him rich for life if he had given to him the clew he possessed to his lost daughter.

Precious, the petted daughter of wealth and luxury all her life, recovered her consciousness in the smallest, shabbiest, most common-looking bedroom she had ever beheld.

A coarse woman of about fifty years was leaning over her. She looked and smelled like a laundress.

"Who are you, and where am I?" quavered Precious.

A man came forward then, and at sight of him everything came back to her memory. She lifted her head from the coarse pillow with a shriek.

"Mamma! oh, darling mamma!"

"Be quiet. Your mother is all right, my dear," said Warwick. "The story of her death was only a ruse to make you faint, so that I could get you into my power. I love you, so I brought you away to make you my prisoner until you would consent to be my bride."

Precious sprang to her feet, her blue eyes blazing with anger and scorn.

"You must be crazy! Why, my papa will kill you for this!" she panted indignantly.

Lindsey Warwick laughed mockingly.

"Oh, no, my dear; he will not get the chance. He will never know where you are until you marry me!"

She stamped her little foot with the pride of a queen.

"Senator Winans' daughter marry you—a drawing-master!" she cried, with increased indignation.

"Certainly, my dear. Pride can stoop sometimes. Your mother was only a governess when she became the senator's bride!"

She looked at him in amazement at his knowledge of their family history, and answered proudly:

"My mother belonged to one of the proudest families in the South. It was only the reverse of fortune that placed her for a short time in a dependent position."

With a laugh he answered:

"Granted, but she was only a governess, and the senator's daughter may stoop like her father to wed her tutor."

"I hate you! I would not marry you if you were the last man on earth! Release me at once, and let me go home!" she cried imperiously.

"I will not. I love you to madness, and I have sworn that I will make you my bride. I will keep you imprisoned here until you consent."

"I will kill myself first."

"I am not afraid of that."

She looked at the coarse, frowzy-haired woman whose greasy clothes smelled of soapsuds.

"Are you in this plot?" she asked disdainfully.

"He is my son, and has put you in my charge, and I have promised to keep you safe; that is all," was the careless answer.

"But my father will search everywhere for me, and he will punish you both when he finds me."

"He will not find you, for there will not be the slightest clew for him to follow. This house is an old ruin, and my mother lives here alone. I board in one of the best neighborhoods in Washington, and I will never come here to see you only late at night."

He made a motion to the old woman, and she immediately retired from the room.

Then the dark, sneering face of the young man softened with love and longing. He knelt at her feet, and cried passionately:

"Forgive me, for I love you wildly, and I knew I could never win you except by force. I have loved you madly for months. I sent you the tenderest love-letters man ever penned, but you did not reply to them. I looked at you often with my heart in my eyes, but you averted your face. Why were you so cold to me?"

"I despised you," answered Precious. "Only yesterday I resolved to tell mamma that you were presuming on your position to try to make love to me. I wish now that I had told her. Then she would have had some suspicion of the truth."

"She will think now that you have eloped with some low-born lover!" he sneered, rising to his feet, for she had drawn back from him in disdain. "But I will leave you to rest now, my beautiful love, and my mother will come and help you to retire. Fear nothing. You will be kindly treated here, but you will never be restored to your home until you consent to marry me—ay, until the knot is tied. So think well of my proposal, for I will make you a good husband. Good-night," and he bowed and withdrew.

If the thought of her captivity had not been so dreadful, Precious could have laughed at the man's presumption.

To think that she, the daughter of an illustrious statesman, should have such a lover as this—a drawing-master, the son of a laundress! Well, papa would come to find her very, very soon, and then he would punish the bold villain for his presumption.

CHAPTER VI. THE FORTUNE-TELLER

*"I miss you my darling, my darling—
The embers burn low on the hearth,
And still is the air of the household,
And hushed is the voice of mirth.
The rain splashes fast on the terrace,
The winds past the lattices moan;
The midnight chimes out from the minster
And I am alone!"*

Lindsey Warwick had not counted on such determined obstinacy as his lovely young captive displayed.

From first to last she refused to taste a morsel of food beneath the roof of her jailer.

The keenness of her thirst made her accept water from the woman, but that was all. Neither cajoleries, threats, nor bribes could induce her to taste the food provided for her, though it was of the best, with fruits and wines, and even bon-bons to tempt her girlish appetite. Although she was starving she pushed them aside with disdain, and lay all day on the couch weeping forlornly, and calling by turns on the names of her father, mother, and sister.

Poor Precious! she had fully believed that her father would find her in less than twenty-four hours, but the long days wore away, and she gave herself up to despair. Prayers, promises, pleadings, were of no avail with the cruel old woman and her enamored son.

But at heart the old woman was uneasy and frightened as the long days waned and the beautiful captive grew paler and weaker day by day.

"She will die, Lindsey, for she has never tasted food since she came here, and that is a long week now. You had better let her go. She will never marry you; she will die first, as she said."

"Then she will be mine in death. I will bury her under the cellar of this house, and no one will ever know the secret of her fate."

"It is a wonder they did not suspect you," she exclaimed.

"I fancy the detectives did at first, but I was clever, and threw them off the scent. In the first place, I went as usual that day to give her her lesson in drawing. When the servants told me she was missing I pretended to be entirely in ignorance. Then I devoted myself to a girl in my own rank, and contrived to make every one think me engaged to her. That cleared me, you see."

"Better marry that girl, Lindsey. She might be happy with you. T'other one wouldn't, even if you got her. You're too poor; she couldn't bear it."

"But her father worships the ground she walks on; he would give her a dowry if she married me."

"Better say he would disinherit her for such a marriage."

"Not if she could be brought to love me. He's a stickler for love matches, I know. He married a governess himself. No, mother, only let me get the little beauty to marry me; and the senator would forgive us, and my fortune would be made."

"Go upstairs and look at that poor girl a-dying, as white as the wall, and not able to walk across the floor, and maybe you'll change your mind," replied she cynically.

"By heaven! she shall eat!" he cried frantically. "I will force her to swallow food at the point of a pistol."

"And drive her insane—yes, that's what you'll do!"

"Mother, you're a fool! Come along and help me, and we'll pour some wine down her throat. She shall not die. I love her too well. Life would be a desert without her."

She followed him up the dark, rickety stairway, carrying the lamp, for it was after dark, and presently unlocked the door of the girl's prison.

"What is that?" he cried in horror.

Precious lay face downward on the floor, seemingly lifeless.

"I told you so. She's dead! You've killed her!" the woman muttered.

With a groan he flung himself on his knees and lifted the silent form. The white face with its closed eyes fell inertly across his arm. He bent his ear to her heart.

"No, no, she is not dead. Her heart beats faintly. Quick! some wine in a spoon. Here, put it between her lips. Let it trickle down her throat," and with wild anxiety he held the still, white face up to the light.

Meantime there were suspense and horror unutterable in the senator's splendid mansion.

Since that bold and daring letter that had told them Precious was in the power of a lover whose passion amounted to insanity, no further clew had been found.

The most alert detectives of Washington and New York were completely baffled, though neither time nor money was spared in the quest.

Mrs. Winans had taken to her bed, a weak, nervous, weeping woman, and the physician declared that she would never rise from it again unless her daughter were soon restored. Her husband looked like a man whose mind might go wrong at any moment. Ethel, who had been sullenly indifferent at first, and secretly exultant at her sister's strait, began to get over her first anger, and missing the sunshine from the house prayed God to pardon her mad jealousy and restore her little sister to their yearning hearts.

"And let Lord Chester love her if he will, for if he can turn so easily from one to another he is not worth the winning," she thought with bitter pride.

She did not see him much in those days, but she knew that he was often with her father, and that he was eager to join in and forward every plan for finding Precious.

"I am forgotten already; but let him go, he is nothing to me," she said to herself with jealous pride, trying to cheat her own aching heart.

Suddenly her brother, Earle, who had been abroad, came home, and his grief and horror at the fate of Little Blue Eyes, as he had loved to call his younger sister, were most intense.

Ethel could not resist one bitter fling.

"Now that your idol is gone, perhaps you will be able to remember sometimes that you have another sister," she cried bitterly.

Earle, who was dark and handsome and impetuous, like his father, turned on her a glance of displeasure.

"Ethel, how can you speak so? Have I ever forgotten you? Did I not bring you from abroad more costly gifts than I brought Precious?"

"Earle, forgive me; I was only jesting," she cried quickly. But the pretense did not deceive the brother, who said to himself:

"Ethel is as foolishly jealous as ever. What a pity!"

But he put his arm around her and kissed the rosy cheek.

"You are more beautiful than ever, dear, and I have heard it whispered that you will some day be—Lady Chester," he whispered.

"Do not speak to me of Lord Chester. I hate him!" cried Ethel, and fled, sobbing wildly, to her own room.

She might weep all she would over her false lover now, and they would only think it was grief for her sister. Her maid thought so when she came into the room with tearful eyes and said eagerly:

"Oh, miss, if you'd take my advice you'd go to see a fortune-teller about Miss Precious. I know one in South Washington almost out in the country, and she tells very true."

"Nonsense, Hetty; they have no knowledge of the future—no more than we have."

"Oh, but, Miss Ethel, she told me wonderful things, and true as gospel, every word. I do believe as sure as my name's Hetty Wilkins that she could give you a clew to your sister's whereabouts. She's a clairvoyant, and charges a dollar for each person. Them clairvoyants always tells true, they say. Now, if you would like to slip out this afternoon for a walk, I'd go with you, for it's a lonesome neighborhood, and not safe for a lady like you alone."

"What is the address, did you say, Hetty?" inquired Ethel eagerly.

The woman fumbled in her pocketbook and brought out a crumpled bit of paper that she spread before Ethel's eyes.

"Perhaps I'll go with you to-morrow; I've another engagement for this afternoon to go walking with Miss Miller," Ethel said carelessly, and when Hetty saw her going out an hour later in a simple tailor-made suit and thick veil, she thought her young lady was going to keep her engagement, and sighed regretfully at Ethel's lack of faith in the wonderful clairvoyant seeress.

But Ethel knew how to keep her own secrets. She was on her way to the woman now.

She was not afraid, in spite of what Hetty had told her, for she had her sister's magnificent great mastiff along for protection—Kay, his young mistress insisted on calling him, because a beautiful young lady at the White House had one of that name.

It was a dreary March afternoon with a high wind and sunless sky, and Ethel had a long walk before her, but she preferred it to riding. She was an excellent pedestrian.

She reached the lonely old tumble-down brick house, and after knocking several times was admitted by a frowzy looking woman, who said that she was a fortune-teller.

"I have a lover, but I fear I have lost his love. I want to know if I shall ever marry him," faltered Ethel, putting some money in the outstretched palm.

"I can tell you about him, miss, but you must quiet that dog first. He is running and barking in the hall like a crazy thing, with his nose on the floor. What ails him?" uneasily.

Ethel opened the door and after some difficulty induced Kay to enter.

"He will be quiet now," she said, but Kay belied her words. The beautiful great fellow ran whining about the room, giving every symptom of excitement and interest. Suddenly he dipped his muzzle into a basket of trash in one corner and emitted a prolonged and dismal howl as he trotted back to Ethel.

Turning in surprise she saw in his mouth a long white kid glove, very tiny, and with golden buttons.

"Oh, heaven! my little sister's glove!" she cried.

CHAPTER VII.

"IT IS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF FATE THAT YOU WILL SIN AND YOU WILL SUFFER."

*"Man's love is like the restless waves,
Ever at rise and fall;
The only love a woman craves
It must be all in all.
Ask me no more if I regret—
You need not care to know,
A woman's heart does not forget—"*

The fortune-teller, who was no other than Mrs. Warwick, the laundress, became terribly agitated at the finding of the glove, and the excited shriek of Ethel.

"Oh, God! my sister's glove!" shrieked the girl, and the woman covered before her, and turned ashy pale.

The immense mastiff permitted Ethel to take the little white glove from his mouth, but he pressed close to her side with his great fore-paws in her lap, and fixing his big intelligent eyes on her face with an imploring expression, kept on yelping and whining in a dismal strain that was almost terrifying.

Kay had loved his fair young mistress with intense canine devotion, and as soon as he entered the old house his keenness of scent had made him acquainted with her presence there. He was following up the trail with blended joy and perplexity, when Ethel had called him into the room, where he had at once renewed his investigations, with the result that he had found the glove.

It was hers, Kay knew it, and with almost human excitement he carried it to Ethel, while his dismal yelps said as plain as words:

"My darling little mistress is somewhere near to us, but I cannot find her. Help me! oh, help me!"

Mrs. Warwick stared at both in horror, for the fatal truth dawned on her mind. This girl was the sister of the captive upstairs, and the faithful dog had penetrated the mystery.

While she was collecting her scattered self-possession Ethel turned to her, exclaiming agitatedly:

"My sister is in this house, a prisoner! Lead me to her at once."

The expression of fear on Mrs. Warwick's face changed to one of cunning, and she cried sullenly:

"Lady, I don't know what you mean! What would your sister be doing in this old house, where nobody lives but me? That glove was left here a week ago by a beautiful young lady that wanted her fortune told. I kept it, a-thinking she'd likely come back for it, but she never did."

"The girl was my sister. Did she come alone?" asked Ethel, fancying that perhaps her maid had told Precious about the fortune-teller, too. It made the woman's story sound plausible.

"That dog makes me nervous. But get him to stop his racket, and I'll tell you all about the girl."

Ethel pressed Kay's head down upon her knee, and soothed him until his sharp, impatient yelps subsided into low, dismal whining, and then the woman said:

"It was Inauguration night, about midnight, I guess, that I was aroused by a couple, a pretty, blue-eyed girl in white, with long yellow curls, and a handsome young man. They told me they had run away from the ball to get married, and the girl was afraid of her father, and wanted me to tell her

if he would ever forgive her for doing it. It seemed as how he was a swell, and rich, but her young man was poor, and worked for a living. I read the cards for them, and told them to go ahead, that the old man would come round and take them home to live in the grand mansion. The girl laughed for joy, and the young man paid me a double fee, then they went away in their carriage, and presently I found the girl's glove on the floor where she had dropped it."

Her story had a plausible sound, but Ethel looked at her suspiciously, and said:

"The girl's description answers to that of my sister, Precious Winans, who was abducted from the Inauguration Ball; but there is something strange about your story, for my sister was not willing to marry the man. I'm certain of that."

"Then it couldn't be the same young lady, for the one I saw here was desperate fond of her young man, I'm sure," returned the woman maliciously, hoping that this falsehood would help her son's cause with the senator.

"It is very strange," said Ethel, with a perplexed air, for she did not believe in her heart that Precious was in love with anybody. She rose abruptly, restraining Kay by a hand on his silver collar. "I will take the glove to papa and tell him what you have told me. Perhaps it may give him a clew."

"Oh, but, miss, I haven't told your fortune yet. Just stay a little longer, and keep that brute quiet, and I'll go into a trance, and tell you all you want to know."

Ethel paused irresolute. She did not really have much faith in the old woman's powers of divination, but she was curious, and—"the woman who hesitates is lost."

The fortune-teller threw herself into a chair, leaned her head back, closed her eyes, and feigned sleep.

Ethel, with her hand on Kay's collar, waited nervously.

Soon the woman began to mutter, like one asleep.

And as she was very angry at Ethel for coming there and getting her into what she foresaw would be a very bad scrape, she determined to give the young lady a very grewsome fortune. She accordingly began:

"You have a rich and handsome lover, and every girl in Washington has envied you, but now they laugh in derision."

Ethel started violently, her dark eyes flashing luridly.

"They laugh," continued the pretended clairvoyant, "because another girl has cut you out with your grand lover. He has almost forgotten you already, and worships the blue eyes and golden hair of his new love."

She heard a repressed gasp of agony that assured her that the chance shot had hit the mark, but her malice was not satiated yet, and she continued solemnly and dreamily:

"You will have a bad, black, bitter future. Your jealous hate of your successful rival will cause you to commit a crime. I cannot tell you for certain whether you will be sent to prison or hung for it, for I cannot clearly read the jurors' minds; besides, much will depend on the great influence of your powerful relations, so I don't know exactly how much punishment you will get, but it is written in the book of fate that you will sin and you will suffer."

It was the merest malicious jargon, guess-work, based on Ethel's first statement that she had lost her lover's heart, but it struck home to Ethel's proud, passionate heart with the awful certainty of prophecy. She trembled with terror, and the cold dew of fear started out on her brow, beneath the dark wavy tresses of her rich hair. With an effort she shook the woman's shoulder loathingly.

"Wake up! I don't want to hear any more of your dismal stuff! I'm going," she cried imperiously.

Mrs. Warwick shuddered, gasped, and seemed to come out of a deep sleep. Her guest was already going through the doorway into the hall.

Just then Kay broke from Ethel's grasp, and bounded up the rickety stairs to the narrow passageway above. They heard him, reared up on his hind feet, beating with his fore-paws on a door, and barking furiously.

"Call your dog down, or I will kill him!" shrieked the woman.

"You will not dare to do it. Papa brought him from Europe for my sister, and he cost several hundred dollars," answered Ethel quickly, but she stood at the foot of the stairway and called the mastiff repeatedly, first persuasively, then authoritatively.

But one tone had no more effect than the other.

Kay continued his vociferous barking, and the sound of his huge body as he hurled it against the resisting door echoed through the house.

"The brute is devilish! If I had a pistol I'd shoot him, even if he cost ten thousand dollars!" vowed the irate fortune-teller.

"I will go and bring him down," cried Ethel, but the woman pushed her away.

"No, no! you must not go up there! He is only after my big cat! I will go myself, and drive him down!"

"But you must not strike him. Precious never allowed any one to strike him," Ethel called anxiously.

The woman did not answer; she rushed on, and caught up a stick in the hall. Furious with anger she brought it down on Kay's back.

There was a savage howl of pain and fury.

The petted mastiff that had never felt the weight of a blow in his life, turned glaring red eyes on his assailant, and sprang at her ferociously.

In a minute she was down under the huge paws.

Ethel heard the blow, the savage howl of the startled dog, the fall of the woman's body on the floor, borne down by Kay's strong paws, then strangling shrieks:

"Help! Help! He will kill me!"

The girl bounded up the stairs and saw the infuriated Kay at the throat of the prostrate woman.

With a cry of horror Ethel caught his collar in both hands, trying to drag him off.

But Kay resisted all the efforts of her puny strength, and the contest must have ended in a tragedy but for a sudden happening.

From within the closed and locked door where Kay had been struggling to effect an entrance sounded a low, clear, eager voice:

"Kay! Kay! come to Precious!"

The woman on the floor was kicking, struggling, shrieking, and the dog, with his paws on her breast had his fangs at her throat, but at that sweet, clear voice everything changed on the instant.

The dog, with his jaws wide open, emitted a howl of savage joy, and leaped upward to the height of a man, then turned from the woman and back to the door. His victim scrambled to her feet, her garments hanging in tatters, her face ashy pale and absolutely fiendish, but before she could utter a word she saw Ethel come up to her with blazing eyes.

The girl cried sternly:

"My sister is in that room. Open the door this instant, I command you."

"I will not obey you!"

"You shall!"

"I will not!"

Ethel's face was corpse-like in its pallor, her black eyes glowed with light.

"Kay!" she called, in a low, menacing voice, and the woman shuddered. At the same time a voice in the locked room called plaintively:

"Ethel! Ethel! darling sister Ethel!"

"That is my sister's voice," cried Ethel wildly. "Woman, your defiance drives me mad! If you do not instantly open that door and release Precious I shall set the mastiff on you. He will tear you limb from limb!"

"I'll murder you first!" growled the woman, edging toward the club on the floor.

"Kay will protect me," the girl answered dauntlessly. "Once more, will you open the door? No? Kay!"

The mastiff, leaping and yelping at the door, turned his head, and the woman's defiance all fled.

"Take him away; let me get at the door, and I'll open it. The key's in my pocket," she growled.

Ethel drew Kay away and talked to him coaxingly while Mrs. Warwick pushed the key in the lock, turned it, and opened the door a little way.

"Go in now, you and the dog," she cried. "The girl's bed-ridden, and can't come out to you, and you can't leave that devil outside to devour me."

Ethel was so excited that she did not dream of danger or treachery to herself. She and Kay pushed past the woman, and entered the room. That instant the door was banged and locked on the outside.

CHAPTER VIII.

"IF I EVER HAVE A LOVER HE MUST BE GRAND AND HANDSOME."

*"He to whom I give affection
Must have princely mien and guise;
If devotion lay below me
I would stoop not for the prize.
Bend down to me very gently,
But bend always from above;
I would scorn where I could pity,
I must honor where I love."—Phebe Cary.*

Ethel heard the key click in the lock, but in the excitement of finding her sister she attached no significance to the fact.

She turned eagerly to the bed where lay a slender form clothed in a cheap blue wrapper of eider-down, over which swept a torrent of curling hair like sunshine.

But, oh, that face! Could it be Precious, the laughing, dimple-faced darling, with her cheeks like rose-leaves, her ripe red lips, her glorious eyes like blue pansies in the sunshine?

That wan little face on the coarse pillow was all thin and pale, with great shadows under the hollow eyes that were dim and faded from constant weeping. The little white hands were wasted so that the bewitching dimples were gone from the knuckles and the blue veins showed with painful clearness through the transparent skin.

At that piteous sight all the jealous hardness went out of Ethel's heart. She sprang with open arms to Precious, and clasped her to her breast, while Kay hovered over them in delight, licking the little feeble hands of his darling young mistress.

"Oh, Ethel, why didn't you come sooner? Where is papa? Why didn't he come with you? I shall die, and never see him any more," sobbed Precious plaintively.

"Die! Oh, no, my darling!" soothed Ethel, but she was startled by the words and the weakness and pallor of her sister.

"Precious, what has changed you so? Have you been ill?" she exclaimed anxiously.

"I am starving. I have never tasted food since the night I was kidnaped from the ball," answered Precious, in her faint, weak, hollow voice.

Ethel could scarcely credit the words, for a small stand near the bed was heaped high with edibles, fruits, and wines.

But Precious explained that she had determined to starve herself to death unless she was released from the power of the hated Lindsey Warwick.

"Yesterday I fainted from weakness when I tried to walk across the floor, and those two wretches came in and poured wine down my throat while I was too weak to resist, and again this morning she forced wine between my lips, and made me live a little longer, or else I think I should be dead already," and here Precious paused and gasped, too weak to continue.

"But you must eat and drink now, for I shall want you to go home with me," said Ethel tenderly, and she fed Precious like a little child, the poor girl taking food readily, for the pangs of hunger had been terrible to bear.

She ate and drank with grateful eagerness, and Ethel watched her with moist, dark eyes, and thought:

"Poor child, if I had stayed away a little longer she would have been dead; my little sister, that I have hated and envied in my evil moments, would never have crossed my path again, and I should not lose my lover as I shall surely do when once he sees Precious."

Was she glad or sorry that she had come?

She was glad!

It was one of the moments when good triumphed over evil in the complex nature of Ethel Winans.

"It was Heaven that sent me here to rescue Precious," she thought happily, and for awhile Lord Chester was forgotten while the sisters made mutual explanations.

"So it was Lindsey Warwick, after all. The detectives suspected him at first, but he hoodwinked them very cleverly," said Ethel.

"Oh, he is a fiend!" cried Precious shudderingly.

"Then you could never accept him as a lover?" Ethel asked curiously.

"Oh, never, never! He is very repulsive to me, with his keen little eyes, and his thick lips, and his perpetual smirk. If I ever have a lover I must have a grand, handsome one, as noble as papa, or perhaps like your lover, Ethel—I do not know his name, but I saw him at the ball with you, and I thought he was splendid. Well, when I have a real lover he must be like that, Ethel!" cried Precious innocently.

A shadow gleamed over Ethel's dusky beauty, and she thought:

"They are mutually attracted to each other. It is fate."

But she said carelessly:

"You are too young to dream of lovers yet, my dear, and when you get safe home again you must devote yourself to your studies, and not tease about going to balls. It was your willfulness about the Inauguration Ball that brought you into this trouble."

"And papa will put that villain into prison for this, I know," cried Precious, her voice a little stronger from the food and wine she had taken. Then she hugged Kay around his neck and kissed the top of his head.

"Darling old fellow, if it had not been for you Ethel would have come and gone without finding me. Oh, how shall I ever pay you for this? You shall have a golden collar with your name set in rubies—yes, you shall. Papa will buy it for you, I know, to pay you for saving his pet."

Kay showed as much boisterous delight as if he understood every word, and kept licking her little hands with joy unutterable.

"And now, dear, we must get out of this place, and go home if you think you are ready," smiled Ethel.

"Ready!" cried Precious gayly. "Well, I know I am very weak from my long fast, but joy makes me feel like a new girl. I have nothing to wear home but this blue wrapper over my ball dress, but no matter—let us start at once. If I am too weak to walk I can crawl there, or perhaps Kay will let me ride on his back," patting him tenderly.

Ethel turned the handle of the door, but it resisted her efforts, and she recoiled with a low cry.

"Oh, Heaven, I had forgotten! I heard that old hag lock the door on the outside as I entered. I am a prisoner too. What shall I do?"

The tears rushed into her sister's blue eyes.

"There is no use in screaming, for I cried that day and night until I was hoarse as a raven, but no one ever seemed to hear me. And the only window is nailed down, you see. But, oh, Ethel, they will miss you at home and come here to look for you presently, won't they dear?"

"I did not tell them I was coming here. I felt ashamed of going to see a fortune-teller to find out about you. They would have laughed at me. I let my maid think that I was going to see a friend. Oh, what shall I do? Why did I ever come here?" wept Ethel, wringing her hands in terror, and forgetting that she had told herself just now that God himself had sent her to the aid of Precious.

She shrieked aloud; she tore at the door with frantic hands.

"It will soon be night, and they will wonder what has become of me. This double sorrow will drive our poor mother mad. Oh, what shall I do?" she cried again in agony.

"If we could only get that window open," cried Precious eagerly. "But I have tried it every day, and my hands bled, but the nails would not come out. But if we could only open it, Ethel, we could plait a rope of the bedclothes, and get out."

Kay looked from one to the other, whining in unison with their grief.

Ethel turned a flashing glance on the window, then caught up a thick wash pitcher of heavy iron-stone ware. She poured the water out, and rushed at the window, dealing blow after blow on the panes. Joy! the thin glass and slight framework gave way before her furious onslaught. Then she attacked the shutters with the same signal success. They tumbled from their fastenings down to the ground two stories below. The sash was all gone, too, and the fresh outer air rushed into their faces—fresh, but full of the fog and damp of early twilight.

"Quick! now the bedclothes! We will sit at the window while we tear them in strips, and if we see any one passing we will scream to them for help," cried Ethel bravely, though her lovely hands were torn and bleeding from fragments of flying glass. They set to work, but Precious was so weak from her long fast that she could not help much. The little hands were strengthless and nerveless.

"She must have heard you breaking in the window, and she will come up here presently and kill us," she shuddered, with terrified eyes.

"Don't be a coward, Precious. I think the old wretch has very likely run off to tell her son what has happened, and we must get away before they come back, for, of course, he will be very angry, and, as you suggested, he may kill us," answered Ethel, working away in a perfect frenzy of fear and excitement.

But Precious was very weak and nervous; she could not bear the strain of this horrible dread, following on the hope of a few minutes ago. She dropped back quietly in her chair and fainted.

Ethel would not relax her frantic labor to resuscitate her, but Kay fell to licking the white face with such a rough, energetic tongue that presently Precious sighed and revived, pushing him down with feeble hands.

"Down, sir! down! You must not be so impudent," she sighed faintly.

"Come, Precious, our rope is done. Can you help me to fasten it to the leg of the bed? Then we will throw it from the window. I will slide down first, and you will follow. I will catch you at the bottom if you fall. And Kay can jump out after us. Oh, Heaven, what is that?"

She might well exclaim, for at that moment the wall at the opposite side of the room was suddenly divided by a burst of smoke and flame that lighted up the gloom with a lurid glare.

They had thought it was the wind, the strange, crackling noises they had faintly heard for some time, but now they understood the full horror of their situation.

The old house was in flames—fired doubtless by the fiendish old hag who had thus wreaked her vengeance and fled, leaving them to their fate.

It was a moment of the most sublime horror, the most deadly peril.

The two girls gazed at each other with horror-stricken faces, and the mastiff lifted up his voice in a prolonged and dismal howl like a banshee.

"We are trapped," cried Ethel wildly. "She has fired the house and gone. But we shall escape. Come, dear." She drew Precious to the window, and climbed upon the sill. "I will go first; you follow."

She grasped the rope, and swung outward, her heart beating wildly, her eyes watching the face of Precious as it leaned forward against the awful background of smoke and flame. The small pale face, like a snowdrop, the luminous blue eyes, the aureole of golden hair, made Precious look angelic.

Ethel felt herself rushing through the cold March air, and—suddenly she shot down wildly, and fell on the wet ground where the thick spongy turf broke the severity of the fall. Safe!

But an awful cry escaped her lips.

The plaited rope had proved treacherous, and broken off midway, dangling its useless length about a yard below the window sill, above which that beautiful white face looked down in a frenzy of despair.

Ethel staggered to her feet; she flung out her arms, she shrieked:

"Come, darling, climb out upon the rope, and drop. I will catch you—I will break the fall."

But Precious scarcely heard. Her senses had deserted her at sight of the broken rope. Ethel saw the dilated blue eyes close again, saw her sister fall backward into the blinding smoke, heard the frenzied yelp of Kay as he sprang upon the window sill, and felt that no earthly power could save her doomed sister now.

She held out her arms to Kay, and shrieked wildly:

"Come to me, Kay, come!"

But the poor beast gave a desolate howl, and sprang back into the room where Precious lay unconscious. Then a great black volume of smoke poured through the window, and from the front of the house Ethel saw the red glaring flame shoot quickly.

"The front of the house is all in flames. No one can save my sister now," she thought. Then something seemed to say in her heart:

"You are to blame. You should have sent her down the rope first. She was so light and small it would have carried her safely, and both would have been saved."

It made her angry, that still small voice of conscience, for she knew that it was a selfish anxiety over her own safety that made her descend first. Moving away she muttered:

"Why should I run the risk of my life for her? I tried to save her, and if she had not been so cowardly I would have succeeded. She will perish, but it is not my fault."

Why did she not run and spread the alarm? Some man might be found who would be brave enough to scale the window and bring out the unconscious girl.

But Ethel moved away, going backward, watching with fascinated eyes the burning building, her sister's funeral pyre.

Shrieks began to fill the air from the occupants of the shanties around, just discovering the fire. A crowd began to gather. Why did not the retreating girl pray the people to rescue her sister?

A tempting devil had recalled to her mind her sister's words of admiration for Lord Chester a little while ago—her longing for just such a splendid lover.

"Precious dead he would be yours; living she would win him from you," whispered the tempter, and she turned away muttering, "It is too late. No one could save her now."

CHAPTER IX. A FAITHFUL FRIEND

*"I am mad!
The torture of unnumbered hours is o'er,
The strong cord is broken, and my heart
Riots in free delirium! Oh, Heaven!
I struggled with it, but it mastered me!
I fought against it, but it beat me down!
I prayed, I wept, but Heaven was deaf to me,
And every tear rolled backward on my heart,
To blast and poison!"—George Henry Boker.*

A crowd soon collected and the fire engines quickly came upon the scene.

Streams of water began to play on the burning house, but to no avail. The fire had made too much headway to be checked now. The old ramshackle building was doomed. In the large crowd that had collected were two very elegant-looking young men—Earle Winans and Lord Chester.

The two young men, although acquainted but a few days, had become fast friends.

It was the nobleman's deep solicitude over the fate of Precious that had first drawn Earle toward him. Lord Chester's services were always ready in any new plan for finding Precious; he was as eager as Earle himself in the search.

The Winans family believed that all this zeal was for the sake of Ethel, whom the nobleman had seemed to admire so much that gossip said he would certainly make her Lady Chester at no distant date.

So Earle had taken the handsome young nobleman warmly into his heart and confidence.

They had been walking together that chilly afternoon, several blocks away from the place, when the light of the burning building drew them to follow the crowd to the spot.

They arrived but a few moments after Ethel had turned away from the dreadful scene, hardening her jealous heart against the voice of accusing conscience, and answering to its reproaches: "I tried to save her, and it was through her own cowardice she perished."

When her brother and Lord Chester came on the scene they heard some one saying:

"There is a dog shut up in that house. Hear his frightful baying!"

They could hear it distinctly, the prolonged mournful howls, and it seemed as if the sounds came from an open window.

"The window is open. Why don't the foolish animal come out?" cried Earle Winans, and just then the streams of water playing on the side of the wall cleared away the smoke a little, and the animal was seen a moment dimly, then with another howl he fell back into the room.

"He is bewildered and afraid to jump," cried a fireman, as poor Kay's dismal wails came distinctly to the ears of the crowd.

"Perhaps there is some person in the room, and he is too faithful to desert his post. Dogs are often more faithful than friends. Put up a ladder, and I will go and see," exclaimed Lord Chester suddenly.

"No, no! you must not risk your life for a dog, even a faithful one," cried Earle, trying to hold his friend back, for the situation was very perilous.

"No, no! I must save that poor dog!" Lord Chester cried, breaking loose and ascending the ladder, while the shouts of the tumultuous crowd rang to heaven.

Slowly, carefully, through the blinding smoke and heat and threatening flame he went, and presently his head rose above the sill of the open window and he peered into the room, which seemed full of black smoke and leaping flames.

He put out his hand and it touched a big tawny head.

"Come, good fellow, come," he cried, and tried to drag him out.

Then he made a startling discovery.

The faithful mastiff had dragged an unconscious human being to the window with his teeth, and was holding her up by a mass of golden hair in a vain effort to get her up to the sill, where she might be seen and rescued by the crowd.

CHAPTER X.

"HIS HEART WILL TURN BACK TO ME."

*"Eyes that loved me once, I pray
Be not crueler than death;
Hide each sharp-edged glance away
Underneath its cruel sheath!
Make me not, sweet eyes, with scorn,
Mourn that I was ever born!"—Alice Cary.*

Through the falling twilight of the bleak March day Ethel Winans sped away like a guilty creature, nor paused until she reached her home.

Entering by a private door she gained her own room unobserved and hastened to bathe her face and hands and rearrange her disordered tresses.

Then she summoned Hetty, and the maid stared in surprise at her corpse-like pallor and heavy eyes.

"Oh, Miss Ethel, you look awful! Are you sick?"

"I am tired to death," sighed Ethel. "I have had such a long, weary chase after Kay! Oh, Hetty, I have lost him, but you must never, never tell, for papa would never forgive me if he knew. He ran off with some other dogs in a park, and though I ran and ran I could not get him back."

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