

Lynch Lawrence L.

Madeline Payne, the Detective's Daughter



Lawrence Lynch

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CHAPTER I.

MAN PROPOSES

"H'm! And you scarcely remember your mother, I suppose?"

"No, Lucian; I was such a mere babe when she died, I have often wondered what it would be like to have a mother. Auntie Hagar was always very kind to me, however; so kind, in fact, that my step-father, fearing, he said, that I would grow up self-willed and disobedient, sent her away, and procured the services of the ugly old woman you saw in the garden. Poor Auntie Hagar," sighed the girl, "she was sorely grieved at our parting and, that she might be near me, bought the little cottage in the field yonder."

"Oh!" ejaculated the man, more as if he felt that he was expected to say something, than as if really interested in the subject under discussion. "Ah – er – was – a – was the old lady a property holder, then? Most discharged servants go up and down on the earth, seeking what they may devour – in another situation."

"That is the strangest part of the affair, Lucian; she had money. Where it came from, I never could guess, nor would she ever give me any information on the subject. It was a legacy – that was all I was to know, it seemed.

"I remember," she continued, musingly, "how very much astonished I was to receive, from my step-father, a lecture on this head. He took the ground that my childish curiosity was unpardonably rude, and angrily forbade me to ask further questions. And I am sure that since that one instance of wonderful regard for the feelings of Aunt Hagar, he has not deigned to consider the comfort and happiness of any, save and always himself."

As the girl's voice took on a tone of scornful sarcasm; as her cheeks flushed and her eyes flashed while memory recalled the many instances of unfeeling cruelty and neglect, that had brought tears to her childish eyes and pain to her lonely heart – the eyes of Lucian Davlin became bright with admiration, and something more; something that might have caused her honest eyes to wonder and question, if she had but intercepted the glance. But her thoughts had taken a backward turn. Without looking up, perceiving by his silence that he had no desire to interrupt her, she proceeded, half addressing herself:

"I used to ask him about my mother, and was always informed that he 'didn't care to converse of dead folks.' Finally, he assured me that he was 'tired of seeing my sickly, ugly face,' and that, as I would have to look after myself when he was dead and gone, I must be educated. Therefore, I was sent to the dreary Convent school at M – . And there I studied hard, looking forward to the time when, having learned all they could teach me, I might breathe again outside the four stone walls; for, by my step-papa's commands, I was not permitted to roam outside the sisters' domains until my studies should reach an end. Then they brought me back, and my polite step-papa called me an 'educated idiot;' and my good old Hagar cried over me; and I made friends with the birds, and the trees. Ever since, always avoiding my worthy ancestor-in-law, I have been wondering what it would be like to be happy among true friends, in a bright spot somewhere, far away from this place, where I never have been happy for a day at a time, even as a child."

"Never, little girl?" The eyes were very reproachful, and the man's hand was held out entreatingly. "Never, darling?"

She looked up in his face shyly, yet trustfully, and then putting her hand in his, said: "Never, until I knew you, Lucian; and always since, I think, except – "

She hesitated, and the color fled out of her face.

"Except when I think that the day draws near when you will leave me. And when the great world has swallowed you up, you will forget the 'little girl' you found in the woods, perhaps."

A smile flitted across the face of the listener, and he turned away for a moment to conceal the lurking devil gleaming out of his eyes. Then, flinging away his half finished cigar, he took both her hands in his, and looking down into her clear eyes, said:

"Then don't let me go away from you, beauty. Don't stay here to make dismal meditations among the gloomy trees. Don't pass all the weary Winter with Curmudgeon, who will marry you to an old bag of gold. Come with me; come to the city and be happy. You shall see all the glories and beauties of the gay, bright world. You shall put dull care far behind you. You shall be my little Queen of Hearts, to love and care for always. Sweetheart, will you come?"

He was folding her close now, and she nestled in his arms with perfect trustfulness, with untold happiness shining in her bright eyes. She was in no haste to answer his eager question, and he smiled again; and once more the lurking devil laughed out of his eyes. But he held her tenderly to him, in silence for a time, and then lifted the blushing face to meet his own.

"Look up, Aileen, my own! Is it to be as I wish? Will you leave this place with me to-morrow night?"

The girl drew back with a start of surprise. "You – you surely are not going to-morrow, Lucian," and the gentle voice trembled.

"I must, little one – have just received a letter calling me back to the city. Your sweet face has already kept me here too long. But I shall take it back with me, shall I not, love; and never lose it more?"

The girl was silent. She loved him only too well, and yet this peremptory wooing and sudden departure struck upon her naturally sensitive nerves as something harsh and unpleasant. She would not leave behind much love, would be missed by few friends, and yet – to leave her home once was to leave it forever, and it was home, after all. She looked at the man before her, and a something, her good angel perhaps, seemed, almost against herself, to move her to rebel.

"Why must I go like a runaway, Lucian? I can't bear to bid you go, and yet, if you must, why not leave me for a little time? My father will never consent, I well know, but let me tell him, and then go openly, after he has had time to become familiar with the idea."

"After he has had time to lock you up! Recollect, you are not of age, Aileen. After he has had time to force you into a marriage with your broken-backed old lover. After he has had time to poison your mind against me – "

"Lucian! as if he could do *that*; *he*, indeed!" The girl laughed scornfully.

It is not difficult to guess how this affair would have terminated. The man was handsome and persuasive; the girl trustful, loving, and, save for him, so she thought, almost friendless.

But an unexpected event interrupted the eloquence flowing from the lips of Lucian Davlin, and set the mind of the girl free to think one moment, unbiassed by the mesmeric power of his mind, eye, and touch.

They were standing in a little grove, near which ran the footpath leading into the village of Bellair. Suddenly, as if he had dropped from one of the wide spreading trees, a very fat boy, with a shining face and a general air of "knowingness," appeared before them.

"I beg pardin, sir," proclaimed he, "but as you told me if a tellergram come for you, to fetch it here, so I did."

And staring at Madeline the while, he produced a yellow envelope from some interior region, and presented it to Lucian Davlin, who tore open the cover, and took in the purport of the message at one glance. His face wore a variety of expressions: Annoyance, satisfaction, surprise, all found place

as he read. He stood in a thoughtful attitude for a brief time, and then, as if he had settled the matter in his own mind, said:

"All right, Mike. Go back now, and tell Bowers to prepare to leave to-night. I'll come down and send the required answer immediately. Here, take this."

Tossing him a piece of money, Lucian turned to Madeline, over whose face a look of sorrowful wonder was creeping.

"'Man proposes,' my dear! Well, I am 'disposed of' for a time. It is only one night sooner, and, after all, what matter? Will you decide for me at once, Maidie? Nay, I see you hesitate still, and time just now is precious. Think till to-night, then; think of the lonely days here without me; think of me, alone in the big world, wishing and longing for *you*. I could not even write you in safety. Think fast, little woman; and when evening comes, meet me here with your answer. If it must be separation for a time, dear, tell me when I shall come back for you."

The girl drew a breath of relief. He would come back – that would be better. But seeing his anxiety to be gone, she only said: "Very well, Lucian, I will be here."

"Then, good-by till evening."

A swift kiss, and a strong hand clasp, and he strode away.

Trampling down the wayside daisies and tender Spring grasses; insensible to the beauties of earth and sky; smiling still that same queer, meaning smile, he took the path leading back to the village. Reaching the site, where the woody path terminated in the highway, he turned. Yes, she was looking after him; she would be, he knew. He kissed his hand, lifted his hat with a courtly gesture, and passed out of her sight.

"Gad!" he ejaculated, half aloud, "she is a little beauty; and half inclined to rebel, too. She won't go with me to-night, I think; but a few weeks of this solitude without me, and my Lady Bird will capitulate. The old Turk, her step-father, won't raise much of a hue and cry at her flight, I fancy. Wonder what is the secret of his antipathy to Miss Payne."

He paced on, wrinkling his brow in thought a moment, and then whistling softly as his fancies shaped themselves to his liking. Suddenly he stopped, turned, and looked sharply about him.

"I'll do it!" he exclaimed. "Strange if I can't extract from a broken down old woman any items of family history that might serve my purpose. I'll call on the nurse – what's her name – to-night."

He glanced across the meadow to where stood the cottage of Nurse Hagar, and, as if satisfied with himself and his brilliant last idea, resumed his walk. Presently his pace slackened again, and he looked at the crumpled paper which he still retained in his hand, saying:

"It's queer what sent Cora to the city for this flying visit. I must keep my Madeline out of her way. If they should meet – whew!"

Evidently, direful things might ensue from a meeting between Madeline Payne and this unknown Cora, for after a prolonged whistle, a brief moment of silence, and then a short laugh, Davlin said:

"I should wear a wig, at least," and he laughed again. "I wonder, by Jove! I wonder if old Arthur's money bags are heavy enough to make a card for Cora. Well, I'll find that out, too."

CHAPTER II.

THE OLD TREE'S REVELATIONS

Meanwhile, strange feelings filled the heart, and troublesome thoughts the head, of Madeline Payne.

She looked about her sorrowfully. The leafy wood seemed one of her oldest, truest friends. Since her mother's death, she had lived, save for the faithful regard of old Hagar, an unloved life. In the only home she knew, she felt herself an object of dislike, and met only cold neglect, or rude repulsion. So she had made a friend of the shady wood, and welcomed back the birds, in early Springtime, with joyful anticipation of Summer rest under green branches, lulled and soothed by their songs.

Wandering here, the acquaintance between herself and Lucian Davlin had begun. Here six long, bright weeks of the Springtime had passed, each day finding them lingering longer among the leafy shadows, and drawing closer about them both the cords of a destiny sad for one, fatal for each.

Standing with hands clasped loosely before her, eyes down dropped, and foot tapping the mossy turf, Madeline presented a picture of youth and loveliness such as is rarely seen even in a beauty-abounding land. A form of medium height which would, in later years, develop much of stately grace; a complexion of lily-like fairness; and eyes as deep and brown, as tender and childlike, as if their owner were gazing, ever and always, as infants gaze who see only great, grand wonders, and never a woe or fear.

With a wee, small mouth, matching the eyes in expression, the face was one to strike a casual observer as lovely – as childishly sweet, perhaps. Yet there was something more than childishness in the broad brow, and firm chin. The little white hands were shapely and strong, and the dainty feet pressed down the daisies softly yet firmly, with quiet but steady movement.

Many a man has been mistaken in baby mouth, and sweetly-smiling eyes. And whoso should mistake Madeline Payne, in the time to come, for "just a child and nothing more," would reckon unwisely, and mayhap learn this truth too late.

Madeline sat down upon a fallen tree, where she had so often talked with her lover. She looked up into the wide spreading branches overhead. There was the crooked bough where she had, often and often, in past days, sought refuge when troubled by her father's harshness, or haunted by dreams of the mother she had hardly known. It looked cool and inviting, as if she could think to better purpose shrouded by the whispering leaves. She stepped upon the fallen trunk, and springing upward, caught a bending limb, and was soon seated cosily aloft, smiling at the thought of what Lucian would say could he see her there. Long she pondered, silent, motionless. Finally, stirring herself and shaking lightly an overhanging friendly branch she exclaimed:

"That will be best! I'll stay here for the present. I'll tell step-papa that I love Lucian, and will never marry his friend, Amos Adams, the old fright! I'll try and be very calm, and as dutiful as maybe. Then, if he turns me out, very well. If he shuts me up – " Her eyes flashed and she laughed; but there was little of mirth in the laughter – "Why, then, I *would* lead him a life, I think! Yes, I'll bid Lucian good-by, for a little while, and I'll try and not miss him too much, for – Oh!"

She had been very busy with her own half-spoken thoughts, else she must have sooner discovered their approach, for now they were almost underneath her, and they were no less personages than her step-father, John Arthur, and her would-be suitor, Amos Adams.

Madeline was about to make known her presence, but her ear caught the fragment of a sentence in which her name held prominent place. Acting upon impulse, she remained a silent, unsuspected listener.

And so began in her heart and life that drama of pain and passion, sin and mystery, that should close round, and harden and blight, the darkening future of Madeline Payne.

A more marked contrast than the two men presented could scarcely be imagined.

John Arthur might have been, evidently had been, a handsome man, years ago. But it did not seem possible that, even in his palmy days, Amos Adams could have been called anything save a fright. He was much below the medium height. His head was sunken between his shoulders, and thrust forward, and each feature of his ugly face seemed at war with every other; while the glance of his greenish gray eye was such as would cause a right-minded person involuntarily to cross himself and utter, with perfect propriety, the Pharisee's prayer.

"The mischief fly away with you, man," said Mr. Arthur, seating himself upon the fallen tree, and striking at the ground fiercely with his cane; "what is my dead wife to you? Madeline makes my life a burden by these same queries. It's none of your business why the departed Mrs. Arthur left her property to me during my life, and tied it up so as to make me only nominal master – mine to use but not sell, not one acre, not a tree or stone; all must go intact to Miss Madeline, curse her, at my death."

"Um-m, yes. Does the girl know anything of this?"

"If she did, your chances would be slim," said the other, scornfully. "No; I have taken good care that she should not. She has a vixenish temper, if she should get waked up to imagine herself 'wronged,' or any such school-girl nonsense. I shall not live many years – this heart disease is gaining on me fast; and if the girl is your wife, in case of my death the fortune is as good as yours, you know. I want to have peace while I do live; and for this reason, I say, I will give you my step-daughter in marriage, and you shall give me the note you hold against me for that old debt, the payment of which would compel me to live like a beggar for the remainder of my days, and the sum of ten thousand dollars."

"It's making a wife a rather expensive luxury," quoth old Amos, seating himself; "but the girl's a beauty – no disputing that point; and –"

"Of course she is," broke in Arthur, impatiently; "worth that, and more, to whoever wants her, which, fortunately for you, I don't; she is only a kill-joy to me. If you want the girl, take her, and be blessed – I'll give away the bride with all the pleasure in the world – and 'live happy ever after.'"

There was not much room for argument between these two. It was simply a question of exchange, and when old Amos had decided that he was not paying too dearly for so fair a piece of flesh and blood, they came to terms without more ado, and being agreed that "it's always best to strike while the iron is hot," Mr. Arthur suggested that his friend return with him, accept a seat at his hospitable board, and hear himself announced formally to Miss Madeline, as her future lord and master. John Arthur had ever exacted and received passive obedience from his step-daughter. He had little fear of rebellion now. How could she rebel? Was she not dependent upon his bounty for her daily bread, even?

Old Amos troubled his ugly head little if any on this point. He recognized no higher potentate than gold. He had bought him a wife; he had but to pay the price and take possession of the property.

Madeline Payne sat long on her leafy perch, thinking fast and hard, the expressions of her face changing rapidly as she revolved, in her mind, different phases of the situation. Surprise gave place to contempt, as she eyed the departing plotters from her green hiding-place. Contempt merged into amusement, as she thought of the wonderful contrast between the two wooers who had proffered their respective suits, in a manner so very different, beneath that self-same tree. A look of fixed resolve settled down upon her countenance at last, and uncurling herself, she dropped lightly upon the ground.

Madeline had made up her mind. That it would be useless to say aught of Lucian, she now knew too well. That she could never defy her father's commands, and still dwell beneath her father's roof, she also knew. She hesitated no longer. Fate, stronger than she, had decided for her, she reasoned. Her mind once made up, she gave in it no place to fears or misgivings. The strength of will and the spirit of rebellion, that were dormant in her nature, began to stir into life, roused by the injustice that would rob her of her own. She not only had a way of escape, but that way her own inclinations lured her. With never a fear, never a thought of the days to come, she turned from her mockery of a

home, from her parent, unnatural, unloving, and unloved, to an unknown, untried world, which was all embodied in one word – Lucian.

The past held for her many dark shadows; the future held all that she craved of joy and love – Lucian.

In her outraged heart there was no room for grief. She had heard her dead mother scorned, and by him who, more than all others, should have cherished her memory and honored her name. She had heard herself bartered away, as a parcel of goods, and her very life weighed in the balance as a most objectionable thing. Her happiness was scoffed at; her wishes ignored as if without existence, and contrary to all nature; even her liberty was menaced.

Slowly she turned away, and very thoughtful was her face as she went, but fixed in its purpose as fate itself: and fearless still as if life had no dark places, no storm clouds, no despair.

Oh! they were lovely, innocent eyes; and oh! it was a sweet, sweet mouth! But the eyes never wavered, and the mouth had no trace of weakness in its dainty curves. You have reckoned without your host, John Arthur. It is no commonplace school-girl with whom you have to deal. Madeline Payne possesses a nature all untried, yet strong for good or evil. Intense in love or hate, fearless to do and dare, she will meet the fate you bring upon her – but woe to those who have compassed her downfall! If your hand has shaped the destiny of her life, she will no less overrule your future and, from afar – perhaps unrecognized, unseen – mete out to you measure for measure!

The grand old tree is sighing out a farewell. The sunlight is casting fantastic shadows where her foot, but a moment since, rested. The leaves glisten and whisper strange things. The golden buttercups laugh up in the sun's face, as if there were no drama of loving and hating, sin and atonement, daily enacted on their green, motherly bosom. And Madeline Payne has put her childhood behind her, and turned her face to the darkness beyond.

CHAPTER III.

THE STORY OF A CRIME

Nurse Hagar was displeased. She plied her knitting-needles fiercely, and seemed to rejoice in their sharp clicking. She rocked furiously backwards and forwards, and sharply admonished the cat to "take himself away," or she "would certainly rock on his tail." She "wanted to do something to somebody, she did!" She looked across the fields in the direction of Oakley, and dropping her knitting and bringing her chair to a tranquil state, soliloquized:

"It's always the way with young folks; they don't never remember that old uns have feelings. They run away after a new face, and if it's a young one and a handsome one, they turn everybody out of their thoughts; everybody else. Not that I think that city fellow's a handsome chap; by no means," she grumbled; "but Maidie does; that's certain sure. And she won't let me say a word about him – oh, no; I'm a poor old woman, and my advice is not wanted!"

Hagar resumed her knitting and her rocking with fresh vigor. But her face relaxed a measure of its grimness as, looking up, her eye rested on a dainty nosegay, tossed in at the window only that morning, by this same neglectful young girl.

"She don't mean to forget me, to be sure," she resumed. "She is always kind and gentle to her old nurse. She is lonesome, of course, and should have young company, like other girls, but – " here the needles slacked again – "drat that city chap! I wish he had stayed away from Bellair."

"Goodness, auntie, what a face! I am almost afraid to come in."

Madeline laughed, despite her anxiety, as Aunt Hagar permitted her opinion of the "city feller" to manifest itself in every feature.

"Get that awfully defiant look out of your countenance, auntie," continued Madeline; "for I'm coming in to have a long talk with you, and I must not be frightened in the beginning."

The lovely face disappeared from the open window, and in a moment reappeared in the doorway.

To permit herself to be propitiated in a moment, however, was not in the nature of Dame Hagar.

"I s'pose you think it's very respectful to pop your saucy head in at an old woman's window, and set her all of a tremble and then tell her, because she is not grinning for her own amusement, that she looks awfully cross, and that you are afraid she will bite you. You are a nice one to talk of being afraid; you, who never showed an atom of fear of anything from your cradle up. If you were a bit afraid, when you were out in the woods, for instance, and meet a long-legged animal with a smooth tongue, and eyes that ought to make you nervous, 'twouldn't be to your discredit, I think. Of course, I don't mean to say that you don't meet him quite by accident; oh, no! And I don't *say* that he ain't a very nice, respectable sort of chap, whatever I may *think*. You are just like your poor mother, and if this fellow with a name that might as well be Devil, and done with it – "

"There, now, auntie – " Madeline's face flushed, and she put the cat down with sudden emphasis; "I won't let you say bad things of Mr. Davlin, for I think you would be sorry for it afterward."

She drew a low seat to the side of the old lady, and looking her full in the face, spoke in a voice low, intense, full of purpose.

"Auntie, it is time you told me more about my mother. You have evaded, my step-father has forbidden, my questioning, but if I am ever to know aught of my dead mother's history, I intend to hear it from your lips to-day."

Surprise for a time held the old woman speechless; a look of sorrow and affection drove the querulousness out of her face and voice.

"What ails you, child?" she said, wonderingly. "Do you want to make Mr. Arthur hate me more, and keep you from me entirely? Don't you know, dearie, how he swore that the day I told you these

things, he would forbid you to visit me; and if you disobeyed, take you away where I could not even hear of you?"

Tears were in Hagar's eyes, and she held out her wrinkled hands imploringly. "Don't tease your old nurse, dearie; don't. I can't tell you these things now, and they could not make you any happier, child. Wait a little; the time will come – "

"So will old age, auntie; and death, and all the knowledge we want, I suppose, when it is too late to make it profitable. Well, auntie, I will tell you something in exchange for my mother's story, and to make it easier for you to relate it. But first, will you answer a few questions? – wait, I know what you would say," as the old woman made a deprecating movement, and essayed to speak. "Hear me, now."

Hagar looked at the girl earnestly for a moment, and then said, quietly:

"Go on then, dearie."

"First," pursued Madeline; "my father dislikes me very much; is this the truth?" Hagar nodded assent.

"He dislikes you because you were always good to me." Here she paused, and Hagar again nodded.

"Because you were attached to my mother." Again she paused, and again the old woman bowed assent.

"And because" – the girl fixed the eyes of the old nurse with her own, – "because you were too familiar with my mother's past, and his, and knew too well the secret of his hatred of me!"

Hagar sat silent and motionless, but Madeline, who had read her answer in the troubled face, continued: "Very good; I knew all this before, and I'll tell you what else I know. I know why Mr. John Arthur hates me!"

Hagar opened her mouth, and shut it again quickly.

"He hates me," pursued Madeline, "because my mother left him her fortune so tied up that he can only use it; never dispose of it. And at his death it reverts to me."

Hagar still looked her amazement, and Madeline condensed the remainder of her force into one telling shot.

"If I would be kind enough to die, he would consider it a great favor. But as I evidently intend to live long, he desires, of course, to see me happy. Therefore he has bargained me in marriage to Amos Adams, for the splendid consideration of a few thousand dollars, and the promise of a few thousand more *if I die young!*"

Still the bewildered look rested upon the old woman's face, and still she gazed at the young girl before her. Suddenly, she leaned forward, and taking the fair head between two trembling hands, gazed long at her. As if satisfied at last with her scrutiny, she drew a deep, sighing breath and leaned back in her chair.

"It's true," groaned Hagar; "it's too true! She has found it out, and my little girl has gone away; – my Baby Madeline is become a woman! There was never a coward in all the race, and a Payne never forgave! It has come at last," she wailed, "and now, what will she do?"

Madeline lost not a look nor tone; and when the old woman ceased her rocking and moaning, she suggested, with a half smile:

"Hadn't I better marry old Adams, auntie, worry them both into untimely graves, and be a rich young widow?"

Hagar gazed at her in silence. And Madeline, taking her hand in her own, said: "Shall I tell you how I discovered all this, auntie, dear?"

"Yes, child; go on." And she bent upon the girl a look of attention.

Madeline drew close to her side, and briefly related what had transpired while she sat in her favorite tree; not stating, by the bye, how it occurred that she was in the grove at that very opportune time. Hagar's indignation was unbounded, but she continued to gaze at Madeline in a strange, half fearful, half wondering, wholly expectant way, that the girl could not interpret.

"And now, Aunt Hagar," pursued Madeline, seriously, "I want to understand this matter more fully, and I will not say a word of my plans until you have told me what I came to hear. I shall not come to you again for this information; it is surely my right, and time now is precious."

Madeline half rose, seeing that her nurse still rocked dismally and looked irresolute. "I can bide my time, and fight my battles alone, if need be," she continued, coldly. "I won't trouble you again, nurse," turning as if to go.

"Stop, child!" cried Hagar; "let an old woman think. I'll tell you all I can; all I know. Don't turn away from your old nurse, dearie; her only thought is for your good. Yes; you must not be left in the dark now, – sit down child; sit down."

Madeline resumed her seat, and old Hagar, after another season of moaning and rocking, proceeded to relate, with many wanderings from the point, and many interpolations and opinions of her own, the brief, sad story of Mrs. Arthur's married life and early death. Bereft of Hagar's ornamental extras, it was as follows:

Madeline Harcourt, an orphan, and the adopted daughter of a wealthy bachelor uncle, had incurred his displeasure by loving and marrying Lionel Payne, handsome, brave to a fault, with no other wealth than his keen intellect, his unsullied honor, and his loving, manly heart.

Lionel Payne had entered upon the study of law, but circumstances threw in his way certain mysteries that had long been puzzling the heads of the foremost detectives, and the young law student discovered in himself not only a marked taste for the study of mysteries, but a talent that was remarkable. So he gave up his law studies to become a detective. He rose rapidly in his new profession, giving all the strength of his splendid ability to the study of intricate and difficult cases, and became known among detectives, and dreaded among criminals, as "Payne, the Expert."

He had lived two happy years with his young wife, and been six months the proud father of baby Madeline, when he fell a victim to his dangerous pursuit, shot dead by a bullet from the hand of a fleeing assassin.

John Arthur had been a fellow law student with Lionel Payne, and he had followed the career of the young expert with curious interest, being, as much as was possible to his selfish nature, a friend and admirer of the rising young detective. And Lionel Payne, open and manly himself, and seeing no trace of the serpent in the seeming disinterestedness of Arthur, introduced him proudly into his happy home. Arthur was struck by the beauty of the young wife, and became a frequent and welcome visitor.

One day, there came to the office where John Arthur earned his bread reluctantly, as a salaried clerk, the uncle of Madeline Payne. He had come to make a will, in which he left all his possessions to his beloved niece, Madeline, and her heirs forever after. This was several months before the sudden death of Lionel Payne.

Ten months after she became a widow, Madeline's uncle died. Left alone with her little child, and with no resources but her own efforts, Madeline's mother struggled on, ever the object of the kind watchfulness and unobtrusive care of John Arthur, who professed to adore the child for the sake of the father, and through the baby Madeline, gradually won his way in the mother's esteem. Mrs. Payne was deeply grateful, and her mother's heart was touched by the devotion of Arthur to her little child. So it came about that, after a time, she gave him her hand, and all of her heart that was not buried with Lionel. A little later she learned that her uncle was dead, and she became mistress of a handsome fortune.

Soon came the knowledge that her husband's heart was not all gold, and the suspicion, as well, that her uncle's will and its purport had long been no secret to him. But, partly from force of habit, and partly because he was not yet quite hardened, John Arthur kept up his farce of affection for the child. And while his wife awoke to a knowledge of many of his short-comings, she always believed in his love for her little one.

The two elements that were strongest in the nature of John Arthur were selfishness and pride. From his youth up his idols had been gold and self. Born into the world minus that "golden spoon"

for which he sighed in youth, and schemed in later years, he had ever felt towards said world a half-fledged enmity. As he reached the age of manhood, his young sister was formally adopted by the only surviving relatives of the two; and becoming in due course of time and nature sole possessor of a very nice little fortune, afterwards held her head very high. Later, in consequence of some little indiscretions of her brother at the time when he was set free in the world – the result of the popular superstition held by him that "the world owed him a living," – she held herself aloof from and ignored him completely.

By degrees Mrs. Arthur's eyes became opened to the true character of the man she had married. Moments she had of doubting, and then of fearing that she wronged him too deeply, for her nature was a just one. It was in one of these latter moods that she made her will, before she had become aware that even his love for her little girl was only a well acted lie; believing her secure of love and care during his life, she made sure that, at his death, her darling should be supplied with all that money could give. She had long been in the fatal toils of that dread destroyer, heart disease, and suddenly, before she had found opportunity for securing her little daughter further, as she had since begun to realize it was needful to do, she was seized with a paroxysm that snapped the frail cord of life.

A short time before her death, she had given into the keeping of old Hagar, a package, to be delivered to little Madeline when she should become a woman, and with the express wish that, should John Arthur prove a kind guardian meanwhile, she would burn the journal it contained, unread.

Old Hagar now placed in Madeline's hands the package, which was found to contain her mother's most valuable jewels, and the tear-stained journal, which the girl seated herself to peruse, with sorrowful awe.

The last page being turned, and the sad life of her mother fully revealed, Madeline bowed her head and wept bitterly, heedless of the attempt of old Hagar to comfort her, until the name of her step-father upon the old woman's lips brought her suddenly to her feet, the tears still on her cheeks, but her eyes flashing, and on her countenance a look that might have been a revelation to John Arthur, had that gentleman been there to see. Taking the old woman's hand, and holding it tightly in her own, the girl said:

"Thanks, auntie, for recalling me. I have no time for tears now. Listen, and don't interrupt me. My poor mother died with a heart filled with fears for my future, left to that man's keeping. At the time of her death, he believed himself her unconditional heir. She feared for her life with him, and her sickness was aggravated in every possible manner by him, and I fully believe that, in intent if not in deed, John Arthur is my *mother's murderer!*"

The old woman's face expressed as plainly as words could do, that she shared in this belief. The girl went on, in the same rapid, firm tone:

"He killed the mother for gold, and now he would sell her child. He will fail; and this is but the beginning. As he drove my mother into her grave, I will hunt him into his! He shall suffer all that she suffered, and more! I know where you obtained your independence now, Aunt Hagar; and he hates you doubly because my mother's love provided for you a home, and for her child a haven in time of need. It was well. Keep the old cottage open for me, Aunt Hagar. Keep an eye on John Arthur, for my sake. Never fear for me, whatever happens. Expect to hear from me at any time, to see me at any moment. Don't answer any questions about me. A thousand thanks for all your love and kindness, auntie; good-by."

Before the old woman could recover from her astonishment, or utter a word, Madeline had kissed her, swiftly taken up the precious package, and was gone! Hagar hastened to the door, but the girl was speeding swiftly down the path, and was quickly lost to view.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" moaned Hagar, seating herself in the doorway; "her father's passion and her mother's pride! Sorrow and trouble before her, and she all alone; dark, dark, dark; the world against her! Sorrow and trouble – it's in the blood! And she'll never give it up! She'll fight her wrongs to the bitter end. Oh, my precious girl!" and she buried her head in her apron and wept.

The sun's last ray had faded from the highest hill-top. The little birds had folded their wings and hushed their warblings. Dark clouds came sweeping up from the west, and one, heavy and black, passed above the roof of Oakley, bent down, and rested there. Hagar, still sorrowing in the doorway, saw and interpreted. Dark days to come to the master of that overshadowed house. Dreary days and bitter nights – ah, how many, before that cloud should be lifted from over it, or light hearts beat beneath its roof.

"I beg pardon, madame, you appear in trouble; perhaps I intrude?"

It was Lucian Davlin's soft, lazy voice, and that disagreeable half smile lurked about the corners of his eyes and mouth.

"I've had more welcome visitors," said the old woman, with more truth than politeness, and rubbing her eyes with the corner of her apron, "what do you want?"

"Only a small matter of information, which I believe you can give me."

"Well," said Hagar, testily.

"I want to make a few inquiries about Mr. Arthur of Oakley."

"About Miss Madeline, I suppose you mean. I won't tell you a word –"

"My dear, good woman, I don't ask nor wish any information regarding that young lady – my inquiries solely concern the father. He is said to be wealthy!"

"What is John Arthur or his money to you?" she questioned, eying him with much disfavor.

"Nothing whatever," he indifferently replied. "I merely inquire on behalf of a friend."

"I'll throw him off the scent if he does mean Madeline," thought the old woman.

"Well, Mr. whatever your name is, if it will satisfy your friend to know that Mr. John Arthur is master of Oakley, and everybody knows there's no finer property in the State, and that he has a yearly income of ten thousand or more, why, tell him or her so. And you may as well say, at the same time, that he is too stingy and mean to keep the one in repair, or spend decently the other. And when he dies" – here she suddenly checked herself – "well, when he dies, his heirs, whoever they may be, will inherit all the more because of his meanness."

"And who, pray, may be his heirs?"

"How should I know who a stingy old reprobate will choose to inherit after him? I think he has a sister somewhere, but I don't know."

"H'm, thank you – for my friend. Good-night."

Smiling that same Mephistophelian smile, Lucian Davlin sauntered away, apparently satisfied with himself and what was passing in his mind.

"He'll do," he muttered; "and she'll do him. It will be a good thing for her, just now, and very convenient for me into the bargain. Cora's a marvellously fine woman, but little Madeline is fresh as a rose, and a few months of the city will make her sharp enough. Only let me keep them apart; that's all." Satisfaction beamed in his eye and smiled on his lip. "Pretty Madeline will be the envy of half the boulevard."

Now he has neared the trysting tree. "I think I'll just smoke here, and wait for my pretty bird; this is the place and almost the time."

He smoked and he waited; the time came, and passed; his cigar expired; the shadows deepened – but still he waited.

And he waited in vain. No light form advanced through, the gathering night; no sweet voice greeted him.

The time was far past now, and, muttering an oath, the disappointed lover strode away, and was lost in the night.

Madeline was standing in her own room, the threshold of which John Arthur had never crossed since the day when a silent form was borne from it, and laid in that peaceful home, the churchyard. She had just received the summons, for which, only, she lingered – the command of Mr. Arthur to attend at the altar of hospitality, and pour, for Mr. Amos Adams, the tea.

She was attired in a neat dark garment which was vastly becoming. She had made her toilet with more than usual care, as if, perhaps, to do honor to her ancient suitor – at least so thought Mr. Arthur, when she presented herself before him.

She had put her chiefest treasures in a little, a very little, travelling bag. And now she threw across her arm a large cloak, took her hat, veil, and bag, and descended softly to the hall below. It was faintly lighted from the lower end, and Madeline deposited her belongings in a darkened niche near a door, peeped out into the night that had come on cloudy and starless, and entered the room where waited the two conspirators, and supper.

John Arthur was more bland and smiling than Madeline had ever before known him, while as for old Amos, he nearly lost himself in a maze of grins and chuckles, but displayed a very unloverlike appetite, nevertheless, and divided his attention pretty evenly between the beautiful face of Madeline, and the viands on the table.

Madeline betrayed no sign of surprise at her step-papa's unwonted cordiality, and no annoyance at the ogling and chuckling of her antiquated suitor. In truth, she favored him with more than one expressive smile, the meaning of which he little guessed, as she contrasted him once more with handsome Lucian Davlin, and smiled again at the picture of his coming defeat.

The meal was partaken of in comparative silence, all apparently quite satisfied with their own thoughts – ah, how different! It was not until old Jane, the servant, had been dismissed that Mr. Arthur drew his chair a trifle nearer that of his friend, and leaning his arms upon the table, looked across at Madeline, and said:

"My dear, I believe you are aware of the honor this gentleman desires to confer upon you? I think I have hinted at the truth upon one or two occasions?"

Madeline veiled her too expressive eyes behind their long lashes, but made no reply.

"It is my desire," he continued, surveying with satisfaction the appearance of humility with which his words were received, "and the desire of Mr. Adams as well, that we should come to a satisfactory understanding to-night. We will, therefore, settle the preliminaries at once: – this is your desire, I think, Mr. Adams?"

"Oh, certainly! Oh, yes, yes," ejaculated old Amos, in a transport of grins.

"And this will, I trust," – he was growing more stately and polite every moment – "this, of course, is satisfactory to you, Miss Madeline?"

"Perfectly." She looked him full in the face now, and somehow her glance slightly impaired his feeling of dignity and security.

"Very good; and now having formally accepted the proffered hand of Mr. Adams – "

"Pardon me, sir, you are too fast. Mr. Adams has not offered himself."

"Nonsense," – Mr. Arthur suddenly forgot his politeness – "haven't I just stated his offer?"

Madeline leaned back in her chair, and looked from one to the other with a tranquil smile.

"Perhaps; but unfortunately there is a law in existence which prohibits a man from marrying his grandmother, and likewise objects, I believe, to a young woman's espousing her step-papa, however much adored. And as you can't marry me, my dear parent and guardian, why I object to listening to a proposal from your lips."

John Arthur gazed in angry consternation upon the girl's still smiling face, but before the impatient words that he would have uttered could find voice, old Amos, who had interpreted her smiles as being favorable to himself, came gallantly to the rescue.

"Right! quite right," he chuckled. "Of course, you know, Arthur – Miss Madeline, ahem – that's what I meant, you know. It's the proper way," he gasped; and the general expression of his countenance did not tend to make his observations the more lucid – "I meant, you know – ah, well – will you honor me Miss Madeline – by – by your hand, you know?"

This effort of oratory was received with smiling attention by the girl, who now addressed herself entirely to him, without heeding the effect of her words upon her step-father, or his interpolations, as she proceeded.

"Mr. Adams;" – she spoke in a low, even tone, and gradually permitted the real feelings that were seeking for expression to show themselves in her every feature – "Mr. Adams, I think I appreciate *as it deserves* the honor you desire to bestow upon me; believe me, too, when I say that I am as grateful as it is proper I should be. But, Mr. Adams, I am only a mere girl, and you might pay too dearly for me."

"What the deuce does the fool mean?" growled Mr. Arthur.

"I don't dispute the fact that I am a perfectly marketable commodity, and it is very right and proper that my dear step-papa – who dotes on me, whose idol I have been for long years – should set a high valuation upon my unworthy head. Yet this little Arcadian transaction is really not just the thing for the present century and country. And so, Mr. Adams, I must beg leave to thank you for the honor you proffer, and, thanking you, to decline it!"

For a moment no one spoke; there was neither sound nor movement in the room. John Arthur was literally speechless with rage, and old Amos was just as speechless from astonishment; while Madeline gazed from one to the other unmoved. As soon as he could articulate, John Arthur confronted her, and taking her roughly by the shoulder, demanded:

"What do you mean, you ungrateful jade? What are you talking about?"

"About your contract in flesh and blood, Mr. Arthur. About your very worthy scheme for putting money in your pockets by making me this man's wife. If I am to be sold, sir, I will make my own bargain; be very sure of that; and *this* is not my bargain!"

"Don't talk to me of bargains, you little idiot! Do you think to defy me? Do you dare to defy me?"

His rage passed all bounds. She put the width of the table between them and surveyed him across it, mockingly.

"Listen, girl, I am your lawful guardian; you shall obey me!"

"Really, now, don't, step-papa; you are actually purple in the face! You might die, you know; think of your heart, do, and take a glass of water."

Old Adams collapsed in the remote corner whither he had fled. The miser was not at home in a tempest, and this was already beyond his depth. He gasped in speechless amaze and affright. Was this the girl he had thought to mold as his wife, this fearless, defiant creature? Already he began to congratulate himself upon his lucky escape. "She would murder me some day," he thought, shuddering.

For the time being, John Arthur was a madman. Defied, mocked, by this girl who had been a burden to his very life! He raged, he raved, he cursed; and so raging and raving, he cursed her, and then in vile, bitter words hurled his anathema at her dead mother's memory.

Then the mocking smile was gone, the taunting voice changed its tone; and as it changed, old Amos, cowering in his corner, shuddered afresh. Her whole face underwent a transformation. Her form dilated, she sprang before her step-father and the ring of her voice checked the imprecations on his lips.

"Stop," she cried; "don't add the last drop to your already overfull measure! Don't double the force of the thunderbolt that will strike you some day! Is it not enough that you have hated me all my life through; that you have loaded down my childhood with unkind words, curses, and wishes for my death? Not enough that you follow me with your hatred because my mother's own will be mine at your death? Not enough that you would barter my life – yes, my *life* – for gold, sell my heart's blood for your own ease and comfort? And now must you pollute the name of my mother, as you polluted her life? Never breathe her name again; never *dare* to name her! I, her daughter, tell you that for her every tear, every heart pang, every sigh, *you* shall pay dearly; *dearly*! I will avenge my mother's wrongs, some day; for *you are her murderer*!"

John Arthur gazed in speechless amaze into the space before him – but she was gone! The stern, vengeful, set face was no longer there. The proud, ringing voice was no longer sounding in his ear. The uplifted, warning, threatening hand menaced him only in memory. And before the might of her purpose, and the force of her maledictions, he stood as in a trance.

When he had so far recovered himself as to think of her sudden disappearance, he went out quickly. The entrance door stood wide open; the dim light flickered on an empty hall and stairway; the sky was black with clouds, and never a star; the wind moaned about the house; and across the meadow came the doleful howl of old Hagar's watch-dog.

But Madeline was not to be found.

Always, in the days to come, he remembered her face as it had looked on him that night. Often in dreams he would start and cry out, haunted by the sound of her scornful voice, the spectre of her threatening hand.

CHAPTER IV. THE DIE IS CAST

Lucian Davlin paced the platform of the Bellair depot, in a very unpleasant frame of mind.

His companion, – half servant, half confederate, wholly and entirely a rascal, – discerning his mood and, as ever, adapting himself to it, had withdrawn to a respectful distance. Only the shine of his cigar, glowing through the darkness, betokened his proximity, or the fact that the dark platform was not in the sole possession of the sullen man who paced its brief length, and questioned the Fate in which he trusted, and which, for once, had played him a sorry trick.

He had been deceived by a mere school-girl. She had not even deigned him a farewell word. He had lost a fair prize.

"Gad!" he muttered, biting viciously at his cigar, "to be baffled like this; to lose that little beauty; to be foiled like a moon-struck idiot and never know how or why! I can't write her, with that cursed old step-father to interfere. I can't return again very soon. And she *is* such a little beauty!"

He paused at the end of the darkened platform, and looked down the track; in the direction of the grove where they had met, and of Madeline's home. It was almost time for the train. At the upper end of the platform, the station master flashed his lantern, tumbled the luggage closer to the track and examined the checks critically; while the Man of Tact came out from his retirement and overlooked the proceeding.

Something was coming down the track, swiftly, silently. He could just discern a shape moving toward him. It came nearer, and he moved up a few paces, and turned again where the lantern's rays fell upon him. It came nearer yet and paused in the shadow. It was a woman's form, and it beckoned. He approached carelessly.

"Lucian!" She came close to him, and placed her hand upon his arm, drawing her breath hard and quick.

He drew her farther into the shadow and clasped his arms about her. "Little one! You have walked fast, – how your heart beats! I had given you up. Is it 'good by,' dear?"

She silently held up the little chatelaine, which he felt rather than saw, and took from her hand. In the darkness, he smiled again the old exultant smile not good to see, and pressing her closer in his arms, said:

"Don't try to talk, sweet one; see, yonder comes our fiery horse and soon we will be far on our way. Take my arm, little one, and trust him who loves you. Look your last at the scene of your past loneliness, – to-morrow comes the gay world."

Rattling and shrieking, the train approached. Lucian hurried his companion upon the rear platform; and neither his comrade, who entered the smoking car without looking about him, nor the station master, busy with his trunks and valises, observed that a third passenger quitted Bellair station on the night express.

About them, the passengers nodded, yawned or slept. Outside, swiftly passing darkness. And every moment was hurrying her farther and farther away from all familiar scenes and objects, out to a life all untried, a world all new and strange. But she never thought of this. She was not elated, neither was she cast down. She felt no fear; – and, afterwards, she remembered that she indulged in no bright visions of the future during her swift flight.

She had prepared herself to relate her story, to describe the scene she had just passed through, to tell him all. But he had other things to occupy his mind, and bidding her to rest and save all she might have to relate until the morrow, he relapsed into silence and thought, only now and then gently speaking a word, and looking after her comfort with a happy grace possessed by few, and so powerful in the winning of a woman.

On, on, through the black night – youth and age, joy and sorrow, hope and despair, good and evil; on together through the night; on, on. Near to the great city; near to the welcome, dark or bright, awaiting the journey's end. Blacker grew the night, wilder shrieked the wind in angry protest against the defiant, fiery, resistless monster upon whom its rage fell impotent. Now pausing; now rushing on with a shriek and a roar; nearer, nearer to the scene of the new life, dawning grimly upon the fair girl, all unconscious, unheeding.

They halted at a wayside station – just one of those little hamlets only a few miles removed from, and really a part of the great city. One passenger came on board, sauntering down the coach's length listlessly, wearily. He threw himself into a reversed seat in a half reclining attitude, and so his careless, wandering gaze fell first upon Madeline, seated opposite and very near.

She sees him just as she sees the rest, vaguely. She remembers, later, that he had a good face and that she had thought it then. But confused and wearied in mind and body, she feels no inclination to observe or think. So they were hurried on, and no whisper of her heart, no quickening of the pulses, or sensation of joy or fear, warned her that she was sitting under the gaze and in the presence of the good and the evil forces that were to compass and shape her life.

Open your eyes, oh, Madeline, before it is too late. See the snare that is spreading beneath your feet; read aright the bright glance that shines on you from those handsome, fateful eyes. Interpret truly the smile turned on you now. Alas! what woman ever saw guile in the eyes of the man she loved? Never one, until those eyes have ceased to smile upon her, and her fate is sealed. What one ever yet recognized the false ring of the voice that had never, as yet, addressed her save in honeyed tones, that seemed earth's sweetest music to her ears? None, until the voice had changed and forgotten its love words; none, until it was too late.

What Madeline saw, was a man who was to her the embodiment of all manly grace, her all of joy and love, of truth and trust. And, sitting opposite, just a young man with fair curling hair, and frank blue eyes; with a fine manly face, and an air of refinement. A very nice young man; but not like her hero.

Not like her hero? No, thank heaven for that, Madeline, else your way would have been far more drear, else your life might have known never a ray of sunlight, in the long days to come.

On, on; nearer and yet nearer the long journey's end. Both thinking of her, but how differently!

One pityingly, sadly, fearing for her fate, longing to save her from the precipice which she could not see and still wear that look of sweet trustfulness.

One triumphantly, as of a fair prize gained; a new tribute to his power and strength; another smile from Chance; one more proof that he was a favored one of Fortune, and that life ever gave him good things from out the very best.

They are very near their journey's end now, and Lucian Davlin whispers briefly to Madeline, and lounges out to give some necessary directions to the neglected companion of his wanderings.

Hastily the young man opposite rises, and crossing to Madeline bends over her, speaking hurriedly.

"Pardon me, madame, but are you a stranger to the city?"

"Yes." After giving her answer she wonders why she did it, remembering that it is from a stranger the question comes, and that it is therefore an impertinence.

"I thought as much!" – the blue eyes look troubled, and the manly voice hurries on. "The time may come, I hope it will not, when you will need a friend. If so, this card bears my address, – take it, keep it, and believe me, I speak from honest motives and a desire to serve you."

He drops a card in her lap, and as she makes a gesture of repulsion, he says, entreatingly: "Take it; *in the name of your mother* I ask it."

She snatches up the card impulsively, and looks for one moment straight in his eyes. Then drawing a long sighing breath says, simply, "I will," and turns away as she puts it in her pocket, never so much as glancing at it.

"Thank you." He lifts his hat, and resumes his seat and his former attitude just as Lucian reappears.

Now all was bustle and confusion, the journey's end was reached; and through the hurrying, jostling crowd, past flickering lamps, and sleepy guards, they went under the dusky arches of the mammoth city station, out among the bawling 'bus drivers and brawling hackmen, past them, until a carriage, that seemed to be in waiting for them just beyond the noisy crowd, was reached. Stepping into this, they were about to drive away when, in the shadow, and very near them, Madeline discerned the form of the Unknown of the railway train. Then Lucian gave the order from the carriage window, and they rolled away.

The man in the shadow heard, and stepping into the nearest carriage, repeated the order given by Lucian the moment before, adding: "Quick; don't lose a moment!"

And thus it was that a carriage passed swiftly by that which contained Davlin and his companion, and the flash of their vehicle's lamp showed Madeline the face looking from its window.

Again that face seen in the shadow – how strange, thought she; but her lover was speaking and she forgot all else.

"Darling, I must leave you soon. I came up to-night on a matter of business, and to meet a friend who will leave to-morrow early. I must therefore keep my appointment to-night, late as it is; or rather this morning, for it is midnight and past. You will not be afraid, dear, left alone for a little while in a great hotel?"

"I am not afraid, Lucian, but – "

"But lonely; is that it? Well, sweetheart, it's only for a little while, and to-morrow I will come for you, and all shall be arranged. We'll have no more separations then. Rest well and at noon to-morrow be ready; I will be with you then. Meantime, your every want will be supplied, and let the morrow find my little treasure bright-eyed and blooming."

"Oh, Lucian, Lucian! how strange this seems. I can't realize it at all."

He laughed lightly. "Not afraid, little one?"

"Not afraid, Lucian, no; but I can't explain or describe my feelings. I suppose I need rest; that is all."

"That is all, depend upon it; and here we are. One kiss, Madeline, the last till to-morrow."

He folded her tenderly in his arms, and then sprang lightly from the carriage.

Up and down, far as the eye could see, the street lamps glittered, and as Madeline stepped from the carriage she observed another roll away. High above her loomed the great hotel, and after midnight though it was, all here was life and bustle. The scene was novel to the half bewildered girl. Clinging to her lover's arm, she entered the reception-room and, sitting opposite the door, saw a form pass in the direction Lucian had taken, as he went to register her name and order for her "all that the house could afford."

"I did not give your real name, because of your step-father, you know," said Lucian, upon his return. "I registered you as Miss Weir, that name being the first to occur to me."

She looked a trifle disturbed, but said nothing. A few words more and a servant appeared.

"To conduct you to your room," said Lucian.

Together they moved towards the door; there he lifted his hat, with profound courtesy, and said in a very audible tone: "Good-night, Miss Weir; I will call to-morrow noon; pleasant dreams."

"To-morrow noon," she echoed.

As she watched his retreating figure, another passed her; a man who, meeting her eye, lifted *his* hat and passed out.

"He again!" whispered the girl to herself; "how very strange."

Alone in her room, the face of this man looked at her again, and sitting down, she said, wearily: "Who is he? what does he mean? His name – I'll look at the card."

Taking it from her pocket, she read aloud: Clarence Vaughan, M. D., No. 430 B – street.

"Clarence Vaughan, M. D.," she repeated. "What did he mean? I must tell Lucian to-morrow; to-night I am too weary to think. Search for me, John Arthur; find me if you can! To-morrow – what will it bring, I wonder?"

Weary one, rest, for never again will you sleep so innocently, so free from care as now. Sleep well, nor dream!

She slept. Of the three who had been brought into contact thus strangely, Madeline slept most soundly and dreamed the brighter dreams.

It was the last ray of her sunlight; when the day dawned, her night began.

CHAPTER V. A SHREWD SCHEME

An elegant apartment, one of a suite in a magnificent block such as are the pride of our great cities.

Softest carpets, of most exquisite pattern; curtains of richest lace; lambrequins of costly texture; richly-embroidered and velvet-covered sleepy-hollows and lounging chairs; nothing stiff, nothing that did not betoken abandonment to ease and pleasure; downy cushions; rarest pictures; loveliest statuettes; finest bronzes; delicate vases; magnificent, full length mirrors, a bookcase, itself a rare work of art, containing the best works of the best authors, all in the richest of bindings – nothing here that the most refined and cultivated taste could disapprove, and yet everything bespoke the sybarite, the voluptuary. A place wherein to forget that the world held aught save beauty; a place for luxurious revelry, and repose filled with lotus dreams.

Such was the bachelor abode of Lucian Davlin, as the glowing gas lights revealed it on the dark night of the arrival of this gentleman in the city.

Moving restlessly about, as one who was perfectly familiar with all this glowing richness, only because movement was a necessity to her; trailing her rich dress to and fro in an impatient promenade, and twisting recklessly meantime a delicate bit of lace and embroidery with plump, white fingers – a woman waited and watched for the coming of Lucian Davlin.

A woman, fair of face, hazel-eyed, sunny-haired, with a form too plump to be quite classical, yet graceful and prepossessing in the extreme. A very fair face, and a very wise one; the face of a woman of the world, who knows it in all its phases; who is able, in her own peculiar manner, to guide her life bark successfully if not correctly, and who has little to acquire, in the way of experience, save the art of growing old gracefully and of dying with an acquitted conscience.

No unsophisticated girl was Cora Weston, but a woman of eight-and-twenty; an adventuress by nature and by calling, and with beauty enough, and brains enough, to make her chosen profession prosperous, if not proper.

She paused before a mirror, carefully adjusting her fleecy hair, for even in pressing emergencies such women never forget their personal appearance. This done, she pondered a moment and then pulled the bell. A most immaculate colored gentleman answered her summons and, bowing low, stood waiting her will.

"Henry, is it not time that your master were here? The train is certainly due; are you sure he will come? What did he telegraph you?"

"That he would arrive on the one o'clock express, madame; and he never fails."

"Very well. If he does not appear soon, Henry, you must go and inquire if the train has been delayed, and if so, telegraph. My business is imperative."

The well trained servant bowed again, and, at a signal from her, withdrew. Left alone, she continued her silent march, listening ever, until at length a quick footstep came down the passage. Flinging herself into the depths of a great easy chair, she assumed an air of listless indifference, and so greeted the new comer.

"Gracious heavens, Cora! what brings you here like this? I thought you had sailed, and was regretting it by this time."

He hurried to her side and she half rose to return his caress. Then sinking back, she surveyed him with a lazy half smile. "I wonder if you are glad to see me, Lucian, my angel; you are such a hypocrite."

He laughed lightly, and threw himself into a seat near her. "Candid Cora, you are not a hypocrite, – with me," and he looked admiringly yet impatiently at her. "Come," he said, at length,

as she continued to tap her slender foot lazily, and to regard him silently through half closed lashes: "what does it all mean? Fairest of women, tell me."

"It means, *Mon Brave*, that I did not sail in the *Golden Rose*; I only sent my hat and veil."

"Wonderful woman! Well, thereby hangs a tale, and I listen."

"I came back to see – "

"Not old Verage?" he interrupted, maliciously.

"No, hush: he saw me safely on board the *Golden Rose*– very gallant of him, wasn't it?"

"Rather – yes, considering. And if I did not know Miss Cora Weston so very well, I should be surprised at all this mystery; as it is, I simply wait to be enlightened."

"And enlightened you shall be, monsieur."

She threw off her air of listlessness and arose, crossing over and standing before him, leaning upon a high-backed chair, and speaking rapidly.

Lucian, meantime, produced a cigar case, lit a weed, and assuming the attitude and manner she had just abandoned, bade her proceed.

"You see," she said, "I did not like the idea of quitting the country because of a little difference of opinion between myself and an old idiot like Verage."

"A difference of some thousands out of pocket for him; well, go on."

"Just so, comrade mine. Well, fortune favored me; she generally does. I learned, at almost the last moment, that a lady of my acquaintance had taken passage in the same vessel. I interviewed her, and found her in the condition of the good people in novels who have seen better days; her exchequer was at low ebb, and, like myself, she had reasons which induced her to emigrate. I did not inquire into these, having no reason to doubt the statement, but I accompanied her on board the *Golden Rose*, bade her a fond farewell, and bequeathed to her my street apparel and a trifling sum of old Verage's money. In exchange, I donned her bonnet and veil, and adopted her rather awkward gait, and so had the satisfaction of seeing, on my return to terra firma, old Verage gazing enraptured after my Paris bonnet and floating veil as it disappeared with my friend, outward bound."

"Well, what next? All the world, your world, supposes you now upon the briny deep. Old Verage will be rejoiced to find you here in the city; what then?"

"I think he will," said Cora, dryly, "when he does find me. I did not come here in the dark to advertise my arrival."

"Bravo, Cora," he patted her hands softly; "wise Cora. You are a credit to your friends, indeed you are, my blonde beauty."

She laughed softly; – a kittenish, purring laugh.

"Well, Lucian, time flies and I throw myself on your mercy. Recommend me to some nice quiet retreat, not too far from the city, but at a safe distance; put me in a carriage, at daylight, which will carry me out to some by-station, where I can take passage behind the iron horse, unmolested, for fresh fields and pastures new."

Davlin pondered a moment as if he had not already decided upon his course of action. He knew the woman he had to deal with, and shaped his words accordingly. "A retired spot, – let me see. I wonder, by Jove," – brightening suddenly, "I think I have the right thing for you."

"Well, when Lucian Davlin 'thinks' he has a point, that point is gained; proceed, man of might."

"You see," began Lucian, in a business-like tone, "I took one of my 'skips' for change of scene and recreation."

"And safe quarters until the wind shifted," interrupted she. "Well, go on."

He laughed softly, "Even so. We children of chance do need to take flying trips sometimes, but I did not set out for Europe, Cora mine, and I wore my own clothes home."

"Bravo! But old Verage don't want you, and the wind *has* changed; proceed."

"Well, as usual, I found myself in luck, and if I had been a nice young widow, might have taken Summer quarters in the snug little village of Bellair."

"Not being a widow, relate your experience as a rustivating gentleman at large. You excite my curiosity."

Lucian removed his cigar from between his lips, and lazily contemplated his fair *vis a vis*.

"How long a time must elapse before the most magnificent of blondes will think it fitting, safe, and," with a slight smile, "expedient to return and resume her sovereignty here, on this hearth, and," striking his breast theatrically, "in this heart?"

The "most magnificent of blondes" looked first, approvingly, at her image displayed in the full length mirror opposite, then coolly at her interrogator.

"Hum! that depends. The lady you so flatter can't abide dullness and inaction, and too much stupidity might overcome her natural timidity, in which case even my ardent old pursuer could not scare me into submission and banishment. If I could only find an occupation, now, for my –"

"Peculiar talents," he suggested; "that's just the point. And now, I wonder if you wouldn't make a remarkably charming young widow?"

"So you have an idea, then, Lucian? Just toss me a bunch of those cigarettes, please, – thank you. Now a light; and now, if it's not asking too much, will you proceed to explain yourself, and tell me what fortunate being you desire me, in the character of a fair widow, to besiege? What he is like; and why?"

"Admirable Cora! what other woman could smoke a cigarette with such a perfect air of doing the proper thing; so much of Spanish grace."

"And so much genuine enjoyment," she added, comfortably. "Smoke is my poetry, Lucian. When far from my gaze, and I desire to call up your most superb image, I can do so much more comfortably and satisfactorily inspired by my odorous little Perique."

"Blessed Perique! Cora shall have them always. But back to my widow; an absence of six months, perhaps, would be a judicious thing just now, you think?"

"More would be safer," she smiled, "if the Peri can keep aloof from Paradise so long."

"How would the Peri fancy taking up her permanent abode outside the walls of Paradise?"

She removed the fragrant gilded cigar in miniature from between two rosy, pursed-up lips, and surveyed him in mute astonishment.

"Provided," he proceeded, coolly, "provided she found a country home, bank account, and equipage to her liking, with everything her own way, and ample opportunities for trips to Paradise, making visits to her brother and her city friends – and a fine prospect of soon becoming sole possessor of said country mansion, bank stock, etc.?"

She placed the tiny weed once more between her lips, and sending up perfumed, curling little volumes of smoke, settled herself more comfortably and said, nonchalantly, "That depends; further particulars, please."

It was wonderful how these two understood each other. She knew that he had for her a plan fully matured, and wasting no time in needless questionings, waited to hear the gist of the whole matter, assured from past experience that he would suggest nothing that would be an undertaking unworthy of her talent, and he knew that she would weigh his suggestions while they were being made, and be ready with her decision at the close.

Long had they plotted and prospered together, these two Bohemians of most malevolent type; and successfully and oft played into each other's hands. Never yet had the good fortune of the one been devoid of profit to the other; knowing this, each felt safe in accepting, unquestioned, the suggestions of the other; and because of this, she felt assured now that, in this present scheme, there was something to be gained for him as well as herself.

When the looker-on wonders idly at the strength of ties such as those which bound together these two, and the length of their duration, he has never considered their nature – the similarity of tastes, similarity of pursuits, and the crowning fact of the mutual benefit derived from such association.

Find a man who lives by successful manipulations of the hand-book of chance, and who bows to the deity of three aces; who finds victims in fortified places, and whose most hazardous scheme is surest of success; who walks abroad the admired of his contemporaries, who envy him his position as fortune's favorite in proportion as they ply their own similar trade near the foot of the ladder of chance; who shows to men the dress and manner of a gentleman, and to the angels the heart of a fiend – and you will find that man aided and abetted, upheld and applauded, by a woman, his fitting companion by nature or education. She is unscrupulous as he, daring as he, finding him victims that his arm could not reach; plying the finer branch of a dangerous but profitable trade; sharing his prosperity, rescuing from adversity; valued because necessary, and knowing her value therefore fearing no rival.

Cora was beautiful in Davlin's eyes, and secure in his affections, because she was valuable, even necessary, to him. He cared for her because in so doing he was caring for himself, and placing any "card" in her hands was only the surest means of enlarging his own pack. While she, for whether a woman is good or bad she is ever the slave of her own heart, recognizing the fact of the mutual benefit resulting from their comradeship, and improving, in her character of a woman of the world, every opportunity to profit by him, yet she saw in him the one man who possessed her love. Though the life she had led had worn out all the romantic tendencies of her nature, and had turned the "languishing of her eye" into sharp glances in the direction of the main chance, still she lavished upon him the best of her heart, and held his interest ever the equal of her own. After the manner of such, they were loyal to each other.

"Then," pursued Lucian, "listen, and a tale I will unfold."

In his own way, he proceeded to describe the intended victim; his home, his wealth, his state of solitude, together with the facts he had gathered up here and there relative to his leading characteristics and weaknesses, whereby he might be successfully manipulated by skilled hands. The boldness of his plan made even Cora start, and instead of her usually ready decision and answer, she favored him with a wondering, thoughtful stare.

"You see," concluded Lucian, "he can't live forever at the worst, and the estate is a handsome one. You could easily make yourself queen absolute of the situation, and go and come at your own sweet will. I think as a good brother I should be a magnificent success, and an ornament to your country mansion in the lazy Summer."

"And if I don't approve of the speculation after a trial, I can commit suicide or vanish," Cora said, meditatively.

"Just so," laughed he; "and take the spoons."

"You are sure there are no incumbrances; perfectly sure of that?" she questioned.

"Perfectly sure. There was a step-daughter, but she ran away with some foreigner;" here he smiled, and veiled his eyes, lest she should read aright their expression. "He would not give her a penny, or a crust of bread, were she to return. He hated her from her earliest day; but she is not likely to reappear in any case."

"If she should, you might marry her, you know," she suggested, maliciously.

"So I might," he said, shutting his eyes again; "and we would all settle down into respectable members of society – charming picture. But, jesting aside, how do you like the prospect?"

She tossed away her cigarette and, rising, paced the room in silence for a few moments.

Lucian whistled, softly, a few bars from a favorite opera; then lighted a fresh cigar, and puffed away, leaning lazily back and watching her face furtively out of half closed eyes.

"I think," she said, resuming her seat, "that I will take a nearer view of this 'prospect' of yours."

He nodded his head and waited for her to proceed.

"I think the *rôle* of widow might interest me for a little time, so I'll take myself and my 'delicate constitution' down to your promising haven of rest. I'll 'view the landscape o'er,' and the prospect of an opportunity for a little sharp practice will make my banishment more endurable; of course, my resignation will increase as the situation becomes more interesting."

"Which it is sure to do," he said, rising quickly and crossing to the window. "The thing is as good as done; you always accomplish what you undertake; and you'll find the game worth the powder. The fact is, Cora," he continued, seriously, "you and I have engineered so many delicate little affairs successfully, here in the city, that, as a combination, we are pretty well known just now; too well, in fact, for our own ease and comfort. Your supposed trip to Europe was a lucky thing, and will throw all officiously-interested ones off your track completely. I shall limit my operations here for a time; shall make this merely headquarters, in fact, and 'prospect,' like yourself, in fresh fields. And now, it being nearly morning, and quite necessary that you should be on your victorious march, let us consider final ways and means."

In a concise, business-like way, they arranged and discussed, the result of the whole being briefly this:

Cora would drive at early dawn to a suburban station, and from thence go by rail to a village midway between the city and her final destination; and there await her luggage, and the arrival of Lucian. He would join her shortly, and proceed with her to Bellair, in his character of brother; see her comfortably settled, and leave her to her new undertaking.

And thus it was that in the gray of morning a veiled lady, sweet-voiced and elegant in manner, stepped from a close carriage at a little wayside station, and sped away at the heels of the iron horse.

And thus it was that Lucian Davlin, reappearing in Bellair and listening in well simulated surprise to the story of the sudden disappearance of John Arthur's step-daughter, effectually put to flight any idea – forming in the brains of the few who knew, or conjectured, that these two had met – that he had aught to do with her mysterious flitting. In truth, none save old Hagar knew of the frequency of their clandestine meetings, and she never breathed to others the thoughts and suspicions that haunted her brain.

And thus it was, too, that Cora Weston, in her new *rôle* of languishing widow, secluded carefully from the vulgar gaze, heard never a word of Madeline's flight. And when, later, the fact was revealed to her, none save old Hagar could have named the precise date of the event. So even wise Cora never connected the fate of the unfortunate girl with the doings of Lucian Davlin.

CHAPTER VI. A WARNING

Early morning in the great city, but the buzz and clamor were fairly under way, and the streets as full of busy, pushing, elbowing life as if night and silence had never rested above the tall roofs and chimney pots.

With the rattle of the first cart wheel on the pavement, Madeline had started broad awake. As the din increased, and sleep refused to return to the startled senses, all unused to these city sounds, she arose, and completing her toilet with some haste, seated herself at her window to look out upon the scene so new to her.

What a world of strange emotions passing and repassing beneath her eye! What hopes and fears; what carelessness and heartache! How they hurried to and fro, each apparently intent upon his own thoughts and purposes.

She gazed down until her vision wearied of the motley, ever-changing, yet ever the same crowd; and then she reclined in the downy depths of a great easy chair, closed her eyes, and thought of Lucian. After all, what meaning had this restless moving throng for her? Only one; Lucian. What was this surging sea of humanity to her save that, because of its roar and clamor, they two were made more isolated, therefore nearer to each other?

The morning wore away, and she began to realize how very soon she should be with her hero, and then no more of separation. Her heart bounded at this thought.

Some one tapped softly at her door. She opened it quickly, thinking only of Lucian. It was not Lucian, however, but a veiled woman who stepped within the room, closing the door as she came.

Madeline fell back a pace, and gazed at the intruder with a look of startled inquiry which was, however, free from fear. She had not thought of it before, it flashed across her mind now that this fact was odd; but in all her morning's ruminations, she had not once thought of the mysterious stranger of the railway episode. Yet now the first words that took shape in her mind, at the entrance of this unexpected visitor, were "Clarence Vaughan, M. D." She almost spoke them.

With a quick, graceful movement, the stranger removed the shrouding veil; and Madeline gazed wonderingly on the loveliest face she had ever seen or dreamed of. It was a pure, pale face, lighted by lustrous dark eyes, crowned by waving masses of dark silky hair; exquisitely molded features, upon which there rested an expression of mingled weariness and resignation, the look of

"A soul whose experience
Has paralyzed bliss."

One could imagine such a woman lifting to her lips the full goblet of life's sparkling elixir, and putting it away with her own hand, lest its intoxicating richness should shut from her senses the fragrance of Spring violets, and dim her vision of the world beyond.

They formed a decided contrast, these two, standing face to face.

One, with the calm that comes only when storm clouds have swept athwart life's sky, leaving behind marks of their desolating progress, but leaving, too, calm after tempest; after restlessness, repose.

The other, stretching out her hand like a pleased child to woo the purple lightning from the distance, buoyant with bright hopes, with nothing on brow or lip to indicate how that proud head would bear itself after it had been bowed before the passing storm.

"Pardon me," said the lady, in a sweet contralto. "I think I am not mistaken; this is the young lady who arrived last evening, and is registered," – she looked full in the girl's eyes – "as Miss Weir?"

Madeline's eyes drooped before that searching gaze, but she answered, simply: "Yes."

"You are naturally much astonished to see me here, and my errand is a delicate one. Since I have seen you, however, I have lost every doubt I may have entertained as to the propriety of my visit. Will you trust me so far as to answer a few simple questions?"

The words of the stranger had put to flight the first idea formed in her mind, namely, that this visit was a mistake. It was intended for her, and now, who had instigated it? She looked up into the face of her visitor and said, with her characteristic frankness of speech:

"Who sent you to me?"

The abruptness of the question caused the stranger to smile.

"One who is the soul of honor and the friend of all womankind," she said, with a soft light in her eyes.

Madeline's eyes still searched her face. "And his name is that," she said, putting the card of Clarence Vaughan upon the table between them.

"Yes; and this reminds me, I have not yet introduced myself. Here is my card."

She placed in the hand of Madeline a delicate bit of cardboard bearing the name, "Olive Girard."

Silence fell between them for a moment, and then Olive Girard spoke.

"Won't you ask me to be seated, and hear what I wish to say, Miss Weir?"

She hesitated over the name, and Madeline, perceiving it, said:

"You think Weir is not my name?"

"Frankly, I do," smiled Mrs. Girard; "but just now the name matters little. Pardon me, but I am more interested in your face than your name. I came here because it seemed my duty, and to oblige a friend; now I wish to serve you for your own sake, to be your friend, if you will let me."

Still Madeline's brain kept thinking, thinking; and she put her questions rather as commentaries on her own thoughts than as her share in a conversation.

"Why did Mr. Vaughan send you to me?"

They had seated themselves, at a sign from Madeline, and Mrs. Girard drew her chair nearer to the girl as she answered:

"Because he feared for you."

"Because he *feared for me!*" Madeline's face flushed hotly; "feared what?"

"He feared," said Olive Girard, turning her face full upon her questioner, "what I feel assured is the truth, having seen you – simply that you do not know aright the man in whose company you came to this place."

Madeline turned her eyes upon her guest and the blood went slowly out of her face, but she made no reply, and Mrs. Girard continued:

"I will ask you once more, before I proceed further, do you object to answering a few questions? Of course I am willing to be likewise interrogated," she added, smiling.

Over the girl's face a look was creeping that Aunt Hagar, seeing, could readily have interpreted. She nodded her head, and said briefly: "Go on."

"First, then," said her interrogator, "are you entirely without friends in this city? Except, of course," she added, quickly, "your escort of last night."

"Yes." Madeline's countenance never altered, and she kept her eyes fully fixed on her companion's face.

"Are – are you without parents or guardian?"

"Yes."

"As I thought; and now, pardon the seeming impertinence of this question, did you come here as the companion of the man who was your escort, or did mere accident put you under his charge?"

"The 'accident' that put me in the charge of Mr. Davlin was – myself," said the girl, in a full, clear voice. "And he is my only guardian, and will be."

Olive Girard pushed back her chair, and rising, came and stood before her, with outstretched hand and pleading, compassionate eyes.

"Just as I feared," she sighed; "the very worst. My poor child, do you know the character and occupation of this man?"

Madeline sprang to her feet, and putting one nervous little hand upon the back of the chair she had occupied, moved back a pace, and said, in a low, set tone:

"If you have come to say aught against Lucian Davlin, you will find no listener here. I am satisfied with him, and trust him fully. When I desire to know more of his 'character and occupation,' I can learn it from his own lips. What warrant had that man," pointing to Clarence Vaughan's card, "for dogging me here, and then sending you to attempt to poison my mind against my best friend? I tell you, I will not listen!"

A bright spot burned on either cheek, and the little hand resting on the chair back clinched itself tighter.

Olive Girard drew a step nearer the now angry girl, and searched her face with grave eyes.

"If I said you were standing on the verge of a horrible precipice, that your life and soul were in danger, would you listen then?" she asked, sternly.

"No," said Madeline, doggedly, drawing farther away as she spoke; "not unless I saw the danger with my own eyes. And in that case I should not need your warning," she added, dryly.

"And when your own eyes see the danger, it will be too late to avert it," said Olive, bitterly. "I know your feeling at this moment, and I know the heartache sure to follow your rashness. *What are you, and what do you hope or expect to be, to the man you call Lucian Davlin?*" She spoke his name as if it left the taste of poison in her mouth.

The girl's head dropped until it rested on the hands clasped upon the chair before her; cold fingers seemed clutched upon her heart. Across her memory came trooping all his love words of the past, and among them, – she remembered it now for the first time, – among them all, the word *wife* had never once been uttered. In that moment, a thought new and terrible possessed her soul; a new and baleful light seemed shining upon the pictures of the past, imparting to each a shameful, terrible meaning. She uttered a low moan like that of some wounded animal, and suddenly uplifting her head, turned upon Olive Girard a face in which passion and a vague terror were strangely mingled.

"What are you saying? What are you *daring* to say to me!" she ejaculated, in tones half angry, half terror-stricken, wholly pitiful. "What horrible thing are you trying to torture me with?"

She would have spoken in indignation, but the new thought in her heart frightened the wrath from her voice. She dared not say "I am to be his wife," with these forebodings whispering darkly within her.

She turned away from the one who had conjured up these spectres, and throwing herself upon a couch, buried her face in the cushions, and remained in this attitude while Olive answered her and for long moments after; moments that seemed hours to both.

Olive's eyes were full of pity, and her tone was very gentle. Her woman's quick instinct assured her that words of comfort were of no avail in this first moment of bitter awakening. She knew that it were better to say all that she deemed it her duty to say, now, while her hearer was passive; and stepping nearer the couch, she said:

"Dr. Vaughan, who saw you in the company of a man so well known to him that to see a young girl in his society he knew could mean no good, came to me this morning with a brief account of your meeting of last night. He is too good a physiognomist not to have discovered, readily, that you were not such a woman as could receive no contamination from such as Lucian Davlin. He feared for you, believing you to be another victim of his treachery. Your coming to this hotel assured him that you were safe for the time, at least; and this being a subject so delicate that he, a stranger, feared to approach you with it, he desired me to come to you, and, in case his fears were well founded, to save you if I could. My poor, poor child! you have cast yourself upon the protection of a professional

gambler; a man whose name has been associated for years with that of a notorious and handsome adventuress. If he has any fear or regard for anything, it is for her; and your very life would be worth little could she know you as her rival. Judge if such a man can have intentions that are honorable, where a young, lovely and unsophisticated girl like yourself is concerned."

She paused here, but Madeline never stirred.

"Come with me," continued Olive, drawing a step nearer the motionless girl; "accept me as your protector, for the present, at least. Believe me, I know what you are suffering now, and near at hand you will find that which will aid you to forget this man."

Madeline slowly raised herself to a sitting posture and turned towards the speaker a face colorless as if dead, but with never a trace of a tear. Her eyes were unnaturally bright, and her lips were compressed, as if she had made, and was strong to keep, some dark resolve.

"What is it that I am to find?" she said, in a low, intense tone.

"A girl, young as you, and once as beautiful," replied Olive, sadly, "who is dying of a broken heart, and her destroyer is Lucian Davlin."

Madeline gazed at her absently for a moment. "I suppose I had ought to hate you," she said, wearily; "you have made my life very black. Lucian Davlin will soon be here, – will you please go?"

"Surely you are going with me?" said Olive, in amaze.

"No."

"You doubt me? Oh, I have not made you feel your danger! You think I am an impostor!"

"No," said the girl, in the same quiet tone; "something here," putting her hand upon her bosom, "tells me that you are sincere. My own heart has abandoned me; it will not let me doubt you, much as I wish to. I cannot thank you for making my heart ache, – please go."

Still with that air of unnatural calm, she arose and walked to the window.

Of the two, Olive Girard was by far the more agitated. "Tell me," she said, in eager entreaty; "oh, tell me, you are not going with *him*?"

Madeline turned sharply around. "I shall not add myself to the list of his victims," she said, briefly.

And then the two gazed at each other in silence for a moment.

"This is madness," said Olive, at length. "What rash thing do you meditate? I will not leave you to face this man alone; I dare not do it."

Madeline came from the window and stood directly before her. "I am not the weak child you think me. You can do nothing but harm by remaining here. I will meet Lucian Davlin, and part with him in my own way," she said, between her teeth.

Olive saw, in the set face, and stern eye, that she was indeed dealing with a character stubborn as death, and devoid of all fear. She dreaded to leave her thus, but felt assured that she could do nothing else.

"Will you come to me afterward?" she asked. "You have no friends here, you tell me, and you need a friend now. Promise me this and I will go."

"Thank you," said the girl, wearily; "at least I promise to go to no one else; good-by."

Turning away, she resumed her position at the window, and never looked once at Olive after that.

"I will write my address on this card," said Olive. She did so; then turning on the girl a look full of pitying tenderness, said: "I need not tell you to be brave; I should rather bid you be cautious. Remember, your life is worth more than the love and loss of such a man. Put this behind you, and come to me soon, believing that you are not friendless."

She lowered her veil and, casting one more wistful glance at the silent figure by the window, went out and closed the door softly.

CHAPTER VII.

A STRUGGLE FOR MORE THAN LIFE

It is a fortunate provision of Providence that calamity comes upon us, in most cases, with a force so sudden and overwhelming that it is rather seen than felt. As we realize the full torture of an ugly wound, not when the blow is struck, but after the whole system has been made to languish under its effects, so a blow struck at the heart can not make itself fully felt while the mind is still unable to picture what the future will be like now that the grief has come. We only taste our bitterest grief when the mind has shaken itself aloof from the present woe, to travel forward and question what the future can hold for us, now that our life is bereft of this treasure.

Madeline's condition, after the departure of Olive Girard, was an exponent of this truth. Fast and hard worked her thoughts, but they only encountered the ills of the present, and never glanced beyond.

She had set her lover aloft as her ideal, the embodiment of truth, honor, and manhood. He had fallen. Truth, honor, manhood, had passed out of existence for her. And she had loved him so well! She loved him even yet.

The thought brought with it a pang of terror, and as if conjured up by it, the scenes of the day previous marshalled themselves again for review. Could it be possible? Was it only yesterday that she listened to his tender love words, beneath the old tree in Oakley woods? Only yesterday that her stepfather was revealed in all his vileness, – his plots, his hopes, his fears. Her mother's sad life laid bare before her; Aunt Hagar's story; her defiance of the two men at Oakley; her flight; Clarence Vaughan; the strange, great city; Olive Girard; and now – now, just a dead blank, with no outlook, no hope.

And was this all since yesterday?

What was it, she wondered, that made people mad? Not things like these; she was calm, very calm. She *was* calm; too calm. If something would occur to break up this icy stillness of heart, to convulse the numbed powers of feeling, and shock them back into life before it was too late.

She waited patiently for the coming of her base lover, lying upon the soft divan, with her hands folded, and wondering if she would feel *much* different if she were dead.

When the summons came, at last, she went quietly down to greet the man who little dreamed that his reign in her heart was at an end, and that his hold upon her life was loosening fast.

When Madeline entered the presence of Lucian Davlin, she took the initiatory step in the part she was henceforth to play. And she took it unhesitatingly, as if dissimulation was to her no new thing. Truly, necessity, emergency, is the mother of much besides "invention." Entering, she gave him her hand with free grace, and smiled up at him as he bade her good-morning.

He remarked on her pale cheeks, but praised the brightness of her eyes, and accepted her explanation that the bustle and the strangeness was unusual to her, as a natural and sufficient reason for the pallor.

"You will soon grow accustomed to that," he said, as they descended to the carriage, "and be the rosiest, fairest little woman on the boulevard, for I mean to drive half the men jealous by taking you there often."

Madeline made no reply, and they entered the carriage.

Davlin was not surprised at her silence; he was prepared for a little coyness; in fact, for some resistance, and expected to have occasion for the specious eloquence always at his command. Of course, the result would be the same, – he had no doubt of that, and so in silence they reached their destination.

Up a broad flight of stairs, and then a door. Lucian rings, and an immaculate colored servant appears, who seems as well bred as an English baronet, and who expresses no surprise at the presence of a lady there.

Up another flight of softly carpeted stairs, across a wide hall, and lo! the abode of the sybarite, the apartments of the disciple of Chance.

"Welcome to your kingdom, fair queen," says Lucian, as they enter. "This is your abiding place, for a time, at least, and I am your slave for always," and he kneels playfully before her.

Madeline turns away, and, finding it easiest to do, in her then state of mind, begins a careless tour of the rooms, making a pretense of criticism, and finding in even this slow promenade some relief from absolute quiet and silence.

She guarded her face lest it should display too much of that locked, sullen calm underneath, and replied by an occasional word and nod to his running comments upon the different articles undergoing examination. Fingering carelessly the rare ornaments upon a fine set of brackets, her eye rested upon an elegant little gold mounted pistol. She turned away quickly, and they passed to other things.

Her replies became more ready, and she began questioning gravely about this or that, listening with childlike wonder to his answers, and winning him into a pleasant bantering humor.

Finally he threw himself upon a chair, and selecting a cigar proceeded to light it.

Madeline continued to flit from picture to statuette, questioning with much apparent interest. At last, she paused again before the bracket which held the tiny toy that had for her a fascination.

"What a pretty little pistol," she said. "Is it loaded?"

"I don't know," replied he, lazily. "Bring it to me; I will see."

He was inwardly wondering at her cool acceptance of the situation; and felt inclined to congratulate himself. Seeing her look at the little weapon doubtfully, he laughed and strode to her side, taking it in his hand.

"It is not loaded," he said. "Did you ever fire a pistol?"

"No; show me how to hold it."

He placed it in her hand, and showed her how to manipulate the trigger, and to take aim.

"I should like to see it loaded," she said, at last.

"And so you shall."

He smiled, and crossing the room took from a little inlaid box a handful of cartridges. Madeline watched him attentively, as he explained to her the operation of loading. At length expressing herself satisfied, and declining his invitation to try and load it herself, she turned away.

Davlin extracted the cartridge from the pistol, and returned it to its place, saying: "You might wish to practice at aiming, and won't want it loaded."

"I shall not want such practice," she replied.

A rap at the door, and the servant announced that dinner was come.

"I ordered our dinner here, to-day," explained Lucian, "thinking it would be more cosy. You may serve it, Henry," to the servant.

Dinner was accordingly served, and Lucian found occasion to criticise, very severely, the manner of his serving man. More than once, his voice took on an intolerant tone.

Sitting opposite, Madeline saw the man, as he stood behind his master's chair, dart upon him a look of hatred. Her lips framed a smile quite new to them; and, after dessert was placed upon the table and the man dismissed, she said:

"You don't like your servant, I judge?"

"Oh, he's as good as any," replied Lucian, carelessly. "They are pretty much alike, and all need a setting back occasionally; – on general principles, you know."

"I suppose so," assented Madeline, indifferently, as if the subject had lost all interest for her.

Slowly the afternoon wore on, moments seeming hours to the despairing girl. At length Lucian, finding her little inclined to assist him in keeping up a conversation, said:

"I am selfish not to remember that you are very tired. I will leave you to solitude and repose for a little time, shall I?"

"If you wish," she replied, wearily. "I suppose I need the rest."

"Then I will look in upon some of my friends. I have almost lost the run of city doings during my absence. Meantime, ring for anything you may need, won't you?"

"I will ring;" and she looked, not at him, but at the bracket beyond.

"Then good-by, little sweetheart. It is now four; I will be with you at six."

He embraced her tenderly, and went out with that *debonnair* grace which she had so loved. She looked after him with a hungry, hopeless longing in her eyes.

"Oh, why does God make His foulest things the fairest?" she moaned. "Why did He put love in our hearts if it must turn our lives to ashes? Why must one be so young and yet so miserable? Oh, mother, mother, are all women wronged like us?"

Madeline arose and commenced pacing the floor restlessly, nervously. She had come here with no fixed purpose, nothing beyond the indefinite determination to defy and thwart the man who had entrapped her. She had never for a moment feared for her safety, or doubted her ability to accomplish her object.

A plan was now taking shape in her mind, and as she pondered, she extended her march, quite unthinkingly, on into the adjoining room, the door of which stood invitingly open. The first object to attract her attention was the light traveling coat which Lucian had worn on the previous day; worn when he was pleading his suit under the trees of Oakley; and in a burst of anger, as if it were a part of him she was thinking of so bitterly, she seized and hurled it from her. As it flew across the room, something fell from a pocket, almost at her feet.

She looked down at it; it was a telegram, the one, doubtless, that had called him back to the city the day before. A business matter, he had said. Into her mind flashed the words of Olive Girard, "a professional gambler." She would see what this "business" was. Stooping, she picked up the crumpled envelope, and quickly devoured its contents.

Must see you immediately. Come by first train; am waiting at your quarters.

Cora.

Madeline went back to the lighter, larger room, and seating herself, looked about her. Again the words of Olive rung in her ears.

"Cora!" she ejaculated. "He obeyed her summons, and brought *me* with him. And she was here only last night – and where has she gone? This must be the 'notorious,' the 'handsome.' Ah, Lucian Davlin, this is well; this nerves me for the worst! I shall not falter now. This is the first link in the chain that shall yet make your life a burden."

She crossed the room and touched the bell.

"Now for the first real step," said Madeline, grimly.

The door opened and the dark face of Henry appeared, bowing on the threshold.

"Come in, Henry, and close the door," said Madeline, pleasantly. "I want you to do me a favor, if you will."

Henry came in, and stood waiting her order.

"Will you carry a note for me, Henry, and bring me back an answer? I want *you* to take it, because I feel as if I could trust you. You look like one who would be faithful to those who were kind to you."

"Thank you, lady; indeed I would," said the man, in grateful tones.

Madeline was quick to see the advantage to be gained by possessing the regard and confidence of this man, who must, necessarily, know so much that it was desirable to learn of the life and habits of him, between whom and herself must be waged a war to the very death.

She reasoned rapidly, and as rapidly arrived at her conclusions. The first of those was, that Lucian Davlin, by his intolerance and unkindness, had fitted a tool to her hand, and she, therefore, as a preliminary step, must propitiate and win the confidence of this same tool left by his master within her reach.

"And will you carry my letter, Henry, and return with an answer as soon as you can? You will find the person at this hour without any trouble."

"Master ordered me to attend to your wants," replied the man, in a somewhat surly tone.

She understood this somber inflection, and said: "He 'ordered' you? Yes, I see; is your master always as hard to please as to-day, Henry? He certainly was a little unkind."

"He's always the same, madame," said the man, gloomily. Her words brought vividly before his mind's eye the many instances of his master's unkindness.

"I'm sorry he is not kind to you," said the girl, hypocritically. "And I don't want you to carry this letter because *he* ordered you. I want you to do it to oblige *me*, Henry, and it will make me always your friend."

Ah, Henry, one resentful gleam from your eyes, as you stood behind the chair of your tyrant, has given to this slight girl the clue by which to sway you to her will. She was smiling upon him, and the man replied, in gratitude:

"I'll do anything for you, madame."

"Thank you, Henry. I was sure I could trust you. Will you get me some writing material, please?"

Henry crossed to the handsome davenport, and found it locked. But when taking this precaution, Davlin overlooked the fact that Cora's last gift – a little affair intended for the convenience of travelers, being a combined dressing case and writing desk, the dividing compartment of which contained an excellent cabinet photograph of the lady herself, so enshrined as to be the first thing to greet the eyes of whosoever should open the little receptacle – was still accessible.

Failing to open the davenport, Henry turned to this; and pressing upon the spring lock, exposed to the view of Madeline, standing near, the pictured face of Cora. Spite of his grievances, the sense of his duty was strong upon him, and he put himself between the girl and the object of her interest. Not so quickly but that she saw, and understood the movement. Stepping to his side, she put out her hand, saying:

"What an exquisite picture – Madame Cora, is it not, Henry?"

She was looking him full in the eyes, and he answered, staring in astonishment the while: "Yes, miss."

"She is very handsome," mused the girl, as if to herself: "left just before my arrival, I think?" she added, at a venture.

Again her eyes searched his face, and again he gave a surprised assent.

"Do you like her, Henry?" questioned she, intent on her purpose.

"She is just like *him*," he said, jerking his head grimly, while his voice took again a resentful tone. "She thinks a man who is *black* has no feelings."

He placed pen, ink and paper on the table as he answered, and then looked to her inquiringly.

"You may wait here while I write, if you will," she said, and took up the pen.

She had brought away from the G – House, the two cards of her would-be friends, and she now consulted them before she asked.

"No. 52 – street; is that far, Henry?"

"It's a five minutes' walk," he answered. "I can go and come in twenty minutes, allowing time for an answer."

"Very good," she said, abruptly, and wrote rapidly:

Clarence Vaughan.

No. 52 – street.

Sir – Having no other friend at hand, I take you at your word. I need your aid, to rescue me from the power of a bad man. Will you meet me, with a carriage, at the south corner of this block, in one hour, and take me to Mrs. Girard, who has offered me a shelter? You *know* the danger I wish to escape. Aid me "*in the name of your mother.*"
Madeline "*Weir.*"

This is what she penned, and looking up she asked: "What is the number of this place, Henry?" "91 Empire block," he replied; "C – street."

She added this, and then folding and enclosing, addressed it to Clarence Vaughan, M. D., etc.

"There, Henry, take it as quickly as you can; and some day I will try and reward you."

She smiled upon him as she gave him the letter. He took it, bowed low, and hurried away.

She listened until the sound of his footstep could be heard no longer. Then rising quickly, she opened the receptacle that held the portrait of the woman who, though unseen, was still an enemy. Long she gazed upon the pictured face, and when at last she closed the case, springing the lock with a sharp click, she muttered between set teeth:

"I shall *know* you when I see you, madame."

Crossing to the pistol bracket, she took the little weapon in her hand, and picking up one of the cartridges left by its careless owner, loaded it carefully. Having done this she placed the weapon in her pocket.

She paced to and fro, to and fro; nothing would have been harder for her than to remain quiet then. Her eyes wandered often to the tiny bronze clock on the marble above the grate.

Ten minutes; her letter was delivered, was being answered perhaps; – fifteen; how slowly the moments were going! – twenty; what if *he* should return, too soon? Instinctively she placed her hand upon the pocket holding the little pistol. Twenty-five minutes; what if her messenger should fail her? And that card had clearly stated "office hours three to five." Twenty-six; oh, how slow, how slow! – twenty-seven; had the clock stopped? no; – twenty-eight – nine – half an hour.

Where was Henry?

She felt a giddiness creeping over her; how close the air was. Her nerves were at their utmost tension; another strain upon the sharply strung chords would overcome her. She felt this vaguely. If she should be baffled now! She could take fresh heart, could nerve herself anew, if aid came to her, but if *he* should come she feared, in her now half frenzied condition, to be alone, she was so strangely nervous, so weak!

How plainly she saw it, the face of Clarence Vaughan. Oh, it was a good face! When she saw it again she could rest. She had not felt it before, but she did need rest sorely.

Thirty-five minutes, – oh, they had been hours to her; weary, weary time!

How many a sad watcher has reckoned the flying moments as creeping hours, while sitting lonely, with heavy eyes, trembling frame, and heart almost bursting with its weight of suspense – waiting.

Forty minutes – and a footstep in the passage! Her heart almost stopped beating. It was Henry.

"I had to wait, as he was busy with a patient," said he, apologetically, handing her the letter she desired.

Madeline tore open the missive with eager fingers, and read:

Miss Madeline W.:

Thank you for your faith in me. I will meet you at the place and time appointed.

Do not fail me. Respectfully,

C. Vaughan.

She drew a long breath of relief.

"Thank you, Henry. Now I shall leave this place; promise me that you will not tell your master where I went or how. Will you promise?"

"I will, miss," said the man, earnestly. "Is this all I can do?"

"If you would be my true friend – if I might trust you, Henry – I would ask more of you. But I should ask you to work against your master. He has wronged me cruelly, and I need a friend who can serve me as you can quite easily. I should not command you as a servant, but ask you to aid me as a true friend, for I think your heart is whiter than his."

And Henry was won. Starting forward, he exclaimed:

"He treats me as if I were a dog; and you, as if I were white and a gentleman! Let me be your servant, and I will be very faithful; tell me what I can do."

"Thank you, Henry; I will trust you. To-morrow, at noon, call at Dr. Vaughan's office and he will tell you where you can find me. Then come to me. You can serve me best by remaining with your master, at present; and I will try, after I have left this place, to reward you as you deserve."

"I will obey you, mistress," said the delighted servant. "I shall be glad to serve where I can hear a kind word. And I shall be glad to help you settle accounts with *him*. I will be there to-morrow, no fear for me."

She turned, and put on her wrappings with a feeling of exultation. He would come soon, smiling and triumphant, and she would not be there! He should fret and wonder, question and search, but when they met again the power should be on her side.

She turned to the waiting servant, saying: "I am ready, Henry."

He opened the door as if for a princess. Before Madeline had lifted her foot from the carpet, her eyes became riveted upon the open doorway.

There, smiling and *insouciant*, stood *Lucian Davlin*!

Madeline stood like one in a nightmare, motionless and speechless. Again, and more powerfully, came over her senses that insidious, creeping faintness; that sickening of body and soul together.

It was not the situation alone, hazardous as it certainly was, which filled her with this shuddering terror; it was the feeling that vitality had almost exhausted itself. She suddenly realized the meaning of the awful lethargy that seemed benumbing her faculties. The "last straw" was now weighing her down, and, standing mute and motionless she was putting forth all her will power to comprehend the situation, grasp and master it.

Like a dark stone image Henry stood, his hand upon the open door, his eyes fastened upon the man blocking the way.

Davlin, whose first thought had been that the open door was to welcome his approach, realized in an instant as he gazed upon Madeline, that he was about to be defied. There was no mistaking the expression of the face, so white and set. He elevated his eyebrows in an elaborate display of astonishment.

"Just in time, I should say," removing his hat with mock courtesy, and stepping across the threshold. "Not going out without an escort, my dear? Surely not. Really, I owe a debt of gratitude to my friends down town, for boring me so insufferably, else I should have missed you, I fear."

No answer; no change in the face or attitude of the girl before him.

"Close that door, sir, and take yourself off," he said, turning to Henry.

Remembering her words, "You can serve me best here," Henry bowed with unusual humility, and went out.

"I don't think she is afraid of him," he muttered, as he went down the hall; "anyhow, I won't be far away, in case she needs me."

Lucian Davlin folded his arms with insolent grace, and leaning lazily against the closed door, gazed, with his wicked half smile, upon the pale girl before him.

Thus for a few moments they faced each other, without a word. At length, she broke the silence. Advancing a step, she looked him full in the face and said, in a calm, even tone:

"Open that door, sir, and let me pass."

"Phew – w – w!" he half whistled, half ejaculated, opening wide his insolent eyes. "How she commands us; like a little empress, by Jove! Might the humblest of your adorers be permitted to ask where you were going, most regal lady?"

"Not back to the home I left for the sake of a gambler and *roue*," she said, bitterly.

"Oh," thought he, "she has just got her ideas awakened on this subject: believed me the soul of honor, and all that. Only a small matter this, after all."

"Don't call hard names, little woman," he said aloud. "I'm not such a very bad man, after all. By the way, I shouldn't have thought it exactly in your line, to order up my servant for examination in my absence."

"I am not indebted to your servant for my knowledge concerning you, sir. I wish to leave this place; stand aside and let me pass."

The red flush had returned to her cheeks, the dangerous sparkle to her eyes; her courage and spirits rose in response to his sneering pleasantries. Her nerves were tempered like steel. He little dreamed of the courage, strength and power she could pit against him.

He dropped one hand carelessly, and inserted it jauntily in his pocket.

"Zounds; but you look like a little tigress," he exclaimed, admiringly. "Really, rage becomes you vastly, but it's wearisome, after all, my dear. So drop high tragedy, like a sensible girl, and tell me what is the meaning of this new freak."

"I will tell you this, sir: I shall leave this place now, and I wish never to see your face again. Where I go is no concern of yours. Why I go, I leave to your own imagination."

"Bravo; what a little actress you would make! But now for a display of my histrionic talents. Leave this place, against my will, you can not; and I wish to see your face often, for many days to come. Where you go I must go, too; and why you go, is because of a prudish scruple that has no place in the world you and I will live in."

"The world *you* live in is not large enough for me too, Lucian Davlin. And you and I part, now and forever."

"Not so fast, little one," he answered, in his softest, most persuasive tone. "See, I am the same lover you pledged yourself to only yesterday. I adore you the same as then; I desire to make you happy just the same. You have put a deep gulf between yourself and your home; you can not go back; you would go out from here to meet a worse fate, to fall into worse hands. Come, dear, put off that frown."

He made a gesture as if to draw her to him. She sprang away, and placing herself at a distance, looked at him over a broad, low-backed chair, saying:

"Not a step nearer me, sir, and not another word of your sophistry. I will not remain here. Do you understand me? *I will not!*"

Lucian dragged a chair near the door, and throwing himself lazily into it, surveyed the enraged girl with a look of mingled astonishment, amusement, and annoyance.

"Really, this is rather hard on a fellow's patience, my lady. Not a step nearer the door, my dear; and no more defiance, if you please. You perceive I temper my tragedy with a little politeness," he added, parenthetically. "I will not permit you to leave me; do you hear me? *I will not!*"

His tone of aggressive mockery was maddening to the desperate girl. It lent her a fresh, last impulse of wild, defiant energy. There was not the shadow of a fear in her mind or heart now. The rush of outraged feeling took full possession of her, and, for a second, deprived her of all power of speech or action. In another instant she stood before him, her eyes blazing with wrath, and in her hand, steadfast and surely aimed, a tiny pistol – his pistol, that he had taught her to load and aim not two short hours before!

He was not a coward, this man; and rage at being thus baffled and placed at a disadvantage by his own weapon, drove all the mockery from his face.

He gave a sudden bound.

There was a flash, a sharp report, and Lucian Davlin reeled for a moment, his right arm hanging helpless and bleeding. Only for a moment, for as the girl sprang past him, he wheeled about, seized her with his strong left arm, and holding her close to him in a vice-like clutch, hissed, while the ghastly paleness caused by the flowing blood overspread his face:

"Little demon! I will kill you before I will lose you now! You – shall – not – esca – "

A deathly faintness overcame him, and he fell heavily; still clasping the girl, now senseless like himself.

Hearing the pistol shot, and almost simultaneously a heavy fall, Henry hurried through the long passage and threw open the door. One glance sufficed, and then he rushed down the stairs in frantic haste.

Meantime, Clarence Vaughan, punctual to the time appointed, had driven rapidly to the spot designated by Madeline. He was about to alight from the carriage, when he drew back suddenly, and sat in the shadow as a man passed up the street.

It was Lucian Davlin, and he entered the building bearing the number Madeline had given in her note.

Instantly Vaughan comprehended the situation. She had sent for aid in this man's absence, and his return might frustrate her plans. Pondering upon the best course to pursue, he descended from the carriage, and paced the length of the block. Turning in his promenade, his ear was greeted by a pistol shot. Could it come from that building? It sounded from there certainly. It was now five minutes past the time appointed; could it be there was foul play? He paused at the foot of the stairs, irresolute.

Suddenly there was a rush of feet, and Henry came flying down, the whites of his eyes looking as if they would never resume their natural proportions. Clarence intercepted the man as he essayed to pass, evidently without having seen him.

"Oh, sir! – Oh, doctor, come right up stairs, quick, sir," he exclaimed.

"Was that shot from here, my man?" inquired Doctor Vaughan, as he followed up the stairs.

"Yes, sir," hurrying on.

"Any people in the building besides your master and the lady?"

"No, sir; not at this time. This way, sir."

He threw open the door and stepped back. Entering the room, this is what Clarence Vaughan saw:

Lying upon the floor in a pool of blood, the splendid form of Lucian Davlin, one arm dripping the red life fluid, the other clasping close the form of a beautiful girl. His eyes were closed and his face pallid as the dead. The eyes of the girl were staring wide and set, her face expressing unutterable fear and horror, every muscle rigid as if in a struggle still. One hand was clenched, and thrown out as if to ward off that death-like grasp, while the other clutched a pistol, still warm and smelling of powder.

It was the work of a moment to stop the flow of blood, and restore the wounded man to consciousness. But first he had removed the insensible girl from Davlin's grasp, laid her upon a bed in the inner room and, removing the fatal weapon from her hand, instructed Henry how to apply the remedies a skilful surgeon has always about him, especially in the city.

At the first sure symptoms of slowly returning life, Doctor Vaughan summoned Henry to look after his master, whom he left, with rather unprofessional alacrity, to attend to the fair patient in whose welfare he felt so much interest. As he bent over the still unconscious girl, his face was shadowed with troubled thought. She was in no common faint, and feeling fully assured what the result would be, he almost feared to see the first fluttering return of life.

At last a shudder agitated her form, and looking up with just a gleam of recognition, she passed into another swoon, thence to another. Through long weary hours she only opened her eyes to close them, blinded with the vision of unutterable woe; and so the long night wore away.

Dr. Vaughan had given brief, stern orders, in accordance with which Lucian Davlin had entrusted his wound to another surgeon for dressing, and then, still in obedience to orders, had swallowed a soothing potion and betaken himself to other apartments.

Henry had summoned a trusty nurse well known to Clarence Vaughan, to assist him at the bedside of Madeline.

In the gray of morning, pallid and interesting, with his arm in a sling, Lucian reappeared in the sick room. Evidently he had not employed all of the intervening time in slumber, for his course of action seemed to have been fully matured.

"She won't be able to leave here for many days, I should fancy?" he half inquired in a low tone, sinking languidly into a sleepy-hollow, commanding a view of the face of the patient, and the back of the physician.

"Not alive," was the brief but significant answer.

"Not alive! Great heavens, doctor, don't tell me that my miserable accident will cost the little girl her life!"

"Ah! your accident: how was that?" bending over Madeline.

"Why, you see," explained Davlin, "She picked up the pistol, and not being acquainted with the use of fire-arms, desired to investigate under my instructions. Having loaded it, explaining the process by illustration, she, being timid, begged me to put it up. Laughing at her fear, I was about to obey, when moving around carelessly, my hand came in contact with that chair, setting the thing off. The sight of my bleeding arm frightened her so that I saw she was about to faint. As I caught her I myself lost consciousness, and we fell together. But how will she come out, doctor? tell me that; poor little girl!"

"She will come out from this trance soon, to die almost immediately, or to pass through a fever stage that may result fatally later. Her bodily condition is one of unusual prostration from fatigue; and evidently, she has been sustaining some undue excitement for a considerable time."

"Been traveling, and pretty well tired with the journey. That, I suppose, taken with this pistol affair – but tell me, doctor, what she will need, so that I may attend to it immediately."

"If she is living at noon," said Dr. Vaughan, reflectively, "it will be out of the question to remove her from here, without risking her life for weeks to come. If she comes out of this, and you will leave her in my hands, I will, with the aid of this good woman," nodding toward the nurse, "undertake to pull her through. It will be necessary that she have perfect quiet, and sees no face that might in any manner excite her, during her illness and convalescence."

Davlin mused for a few moments before making answer. He did not care to excite remark by calling in unnecessary attendants. Dr. Vaughan he knew by reputation as a skilful physician. As well trust him as another, he thought, and it was no part of his plan to let this girl die if skill could save her.

In answer to his natural inquiry as to how the doctor was so speedily on the spot when needed, Henry had truthfully replied that he knew the medical man by sight, and that, fortunately, he was passing when he ran down to the street for assistance. Davlin was further convinced that he, Henry, knew nothing save that the young lady rang for him to show her out, and he, according to orders, had obeyed.

"Well, sir," Davlin said, at last, "I shall leave the lady and the premises entirely in your hands, as soon as the crisis has passed. Then, as my presence might not prove beneficial, while I carry this arm in a sling, at least, I will run down into the country for a few days. My man, here, is entirely at your disposal. Don't spare any pains to pull her through safely, doctor. I will look in again at noon."

He rose and went softly out of the room, the doctor having answered him only by a nod of assent.

"Zounds, how weak I feel," he ejaculated. "I hope the girl won't die. Anyhow, I have no notion of figuring at a death-bed scene. So I'll just keep myself out of the way until the thing is decided."

Then, I'll run down and let Cora coddle me up a bit. I can explain my wounded arm as the result of a little affair at the card-table."

Noon came, and slowly, slowly, stern Death relaxed his grasp upon the miserable girl, for Death, like man, finds no satisfaction in claiming willing victims. Slowly the life fluttered back to her heart; and because Death had yielded her up, and to retain it would be to lose her life, reason forsook her.

Under the watchful care of the skilled nurse, and the ministrations of the young physician, she now lay tossing in the delirium of fever.

Nothing worse to fear, for days at least, reported the doctor. So the afternoon train bore Lucian Davlin away from the city and his victim, to seek repose and diversion in the society of his comrade, Cora.

"She will come out of this now, I think," he muttered. "Then – Oh! I'll tame your proud spirit yet, my lady! I would not give you up now for half a million."

And he meant it.

CHAPTER VIII. THREADS OF THE FABRIC

What had become of Madeline Payne?

The question went the round of the village, as such questions do. The servants of Oakley fed upon it. They held secret conferences in the kitchen, and grew loud and argumentative when they knew John Arthur was safely out of hearing. They bore themselves with an air of subdued, unobservant melancholy in his presence, and waxed important, mysterious and unsatisfactory, when in converse with the towns folk – as was quite right and proper, for were they not, in the eyes of mystery hunters, objects of curiosity secondary only to their master himself?

The somber-faced old housekeeper gave utterance to a doleful croak or two, and a more doleful prophecy. But after a summons from John Arthur, and a brief interview with him in the closely shut sacredness of his especial den, not even the social intercourse of the kitchen and the inspiration that the prolonged absence of the master always lent to things below stairs, could beguile from her anything beyond the terse statement that "she didn't meddle with her master's affairs," and she "s'posed Miss Madeline knew where she was."

The housemaid, who read novels and was rather fond of Miss Payne, grieved for a very little while, but found in this "visitation of providence," as John Arthur piously termed it, food for romance weaving on her own responsibility. She entertained Peter, the groom, coachman and general factotum, with divers suggestions and suppositions, each more soul harrowing than the last, making of poor Madeline a lay figure upon which she fitted all the catastrophes that had ever befallen her yellow-covered "heroinesses."

The villagers talked. It was all they could do, and their tongues were very busy for a time until, in fact, a fresher sensation arrived. Nurse Hagar was viewed and interviewed; but beyond sincere expression of grief at her disappearance, and the unvarying statement that she had not even the slightest conjecture as to the fate of the lost girl, nothing could be gained from her.

Hagar was somewhat given to rather bluntly spoken opinions of folk who happened to run counter to her notions in regard to prying, or, in fact, her notions on any subject. In the present emergency she became a veritable social hedgehog, and was soon left to solitude and her own devices.

Whatever were Hagar's opinions on the subject, she kept them discreetly locked within her own breast. She had received, at their last interview, a revelation of the depth and force of character which lay dormant in the nature of Madeline; and she believed, even when she grieved most, that the girl would return, and that when she came she would make her advent felt.

John Arthur went to the city "to put the matter in the hands of the detectives," he said. But as he most fervently hoped and wished that he had seen the last of his "stumbling – block," and believed that of her own will she would not return, it is hardly to be supposed that the Secret Service was severely taxed.

Be this as it may, the Summer days passed and he heard nothing of Madeline.

Meantime, the neat little hotel that rejoiced in the name of the Bellair House, displayed on a fresh page of its register the signature of Lucian Davlin once more, and underneath it that of Mrs. C. Torrance.

Mrs. C. Torrance was a blonde young widow, dressed in weeds of most elegant quality and latest style, with just the faintest hint of an approaching season of half mourning.

Mrs. Torrance had now been an inmate of Bellair House some days, and she certainly had no reason to complain that her present outlook was not all that could be desired. Already she had met the object of her little masquerade, and it was charming to see the alacrity with which John Arthur

placed himself in the snare set for him by these plotters, and how gracefully he submitted as the cords tightened around him.

Over and over again Davlin thanked his lucky star for having so ordered his goings that, on his previous visit, he had never been brought into immediate contact with John Arthur. Over and again he congratulated himself that his meetings with Madeline had been kept their own secret, for he knew nothing of the watchful, jealous eyes of old Hagar.

On a fine summer morning, or rather "forenoon," for Mrs. Torrance was a luxurious widow, and her "brother," Mr. Davlin, not at all enamored of early rising, – on a fine forenoon, then, the pair sat in the little hotel parlor, partaking of breakfast. They relished it, too, if one might judge from the occasional pretty little ejaculations, expressive of enjoyment and appreciation, that fell from the lips of the widow.

"More cream, monsieur? Oh, but this fruit is delicious! And I believe there is a grand difference in the qualities of city and country cream."

"The difference in the favor of the country living, eh? I say, Co., don't you think your appetite is rather better than is exactly expected, or in order, for a widow in the second stage of her grief?"

Things were moving just now as Mr. Davlin approved, and he felt inclined to be jocular.

Cora laughed merrily. Then holding up a pretty, berry-stained hand, she said, with mock solemnity, "That is the last, my greatly shocked brother. But didn't you inform Mr. Arthur that we should accept of his kind offer to survey the woods and grounds of Oakley in his company, and isn't this the day, and almost the hour?"

"So it is; I had forgotten."

It was not long before the pair were equipped, and sauntering slowly in the direction of the Oakley estate.

Their morning's enterprise was more than rewarded, and the cause of the widow was in a fair way to victory, when, after having politely refused to lunch with Mr. Arthur on that day, and gracefully promised to dine at Oakley on the next day but one, they bade adieu to that flattered and fascinated gentleman, and left him at the entrance of his grounds.

Then they sauntered slowly back, keeping to the wooded path. Arriving at the fallen tree, the scene of so many interviews between Madeline and Lucian, Cora seated herself on the mossy trunk and announced her determination to rest.

Accordingly her escort threw himself upon the soft grass, and betook himself to his inevitable cigar, while he closed his eyes and allowed the vision of Madeline to occupy the place now usurped by Cora. Very absorbing the vision must have been, for he gave an almost nervous start as Cora's voice broke the stillness:

"Lucian, did you ever see this runaway daughter of Mr. Arthur's?"

Lucian started unmistakably now. Then he employed himself in pulling up tufts of the soft grass, pretending not to have heard.

"Lucian!" impatiently.

"Eh, Co., what is it?" affecting a yawn.

"I ask, did you ever see this Madeline Payne, who ran away recently?"

"I? Oh, no. Old fellow always kept her shut up too close, I fancy. They say she was pretty, and you are the first pretty woman I have seen in these parts, Co."

"Well, then, I'm sorry you didn't," quoth Cora, "for from motives of delicacy I really don't care to inquire of others, and I have just curiosity enough to wish to know how she looked."

"Sorry I can't enlighten you, Co. Get it all out of the old fellow after the joyful event."

"Umph! Well, *that* business prospers, *mon brave*. We shall win, I think, as usual."

"Yes; and never easier, Co."

"Well, I don't anticipate much trouble in landing our fish. But come along, Lucian, this romantic dell might make you forget luncheon; it can't have that effect on me."

Cora gathered her draperies about her, and prepared to quit the little grove, her companion following half reluctantly.

CHAPTER IX. GONE!

Hours that seemed days; days that seemed years; weeks that seemed centuries; yet they all passed, and Madeline Payne scarce knew, when they were actually gone, that they were not all a dream.

Life, after that first yielding of heart and brain, had been a delirium; then a conscious torture of mind and body; next a burden almost too great to bear; and then a dreamy lethargy. Heaven be praised for such moods; they are saviors of life and reason in crises such as this through which the stricken girl was passing.

Madness had wrought upon her, and her ravings had revealed some otherwise dark places and blanks in her story to her guardian and nurses. Pain had tortured her. Death wrestled with her, and then, because he could inspire her with no fear of him, because she mocked at his terrors and wooed him, fled away.

In his place came Life, to whom she gave no welcoming smile. But Life stayed, for Life is as regardless of our wishes as is Death.

Forms had hovered about her; kindly voices, sweet voices, had murmured at her bedside. At times, an angel had held the cooling draught to her thirsty lips. At last these dream-creatures resolved themselves into realities:

Doctor Vaughan, who had ministered to her with the solicitude of a brother, the gentleness of a woman, and the goodness of an angel.

Olive Girard who, leaving all other cares, was ever at her bedside, and who came to that place at a sacrifice of feeling, after a wrestling with pride, bringing a bitterness of memory, and a patient courage of heart, that the girl could not then realize.

Henry, too, black of skin, warm of heart; who waited in the outer court, and seemed to allow himself full and free respiration only when the girl was pronounced out of danger.

Out of danger! What a misapplication of words!

From the scene of conflict, at the last flutter of Death's gloomy mantle, comes the man of medicine; watch in hand, boots a tiptoe, face grave but triumphant. His voice bids a subdued farewell to the somberness proper to a probable death-bed, coming up just a note higher in the scale of solemnities, as it announces to the eager, trembling, waiting ones,

"The danger is past!"

Death, the calm, the restful, the never weary; Death, the friend of long suffering, and world weariness and despair; Death, the rescuer, the sometime comforter – has gone away with empty arms and reluctant tread, and – Life, flushed, triumphant, seizes his rescued subject and flings her out into the sea of human lives, perchance to alight upon some tiny green islet or, likelier yet, to buffet about among black waters, or encounter winds and storms, upheld only by a half-wrecked raft or floated by a scarce-supporting spar.

And she is out of danger!

Hedged around about by sorrow, assailed by temptation, overshadowed by sin. And, "the danger is over!"

Buffeted by the waves of adversity; longing for things out of reach; running after *ignis fatui* with eager outstretched hands, and careless, hurrying feet, among pitfalls and snares. And, out of danger!

Open your eyes, Madeline Payne; lift up your voice in thanksgiving; you have come back to the world. Back where the sun shines and the dew falls; where the flowers are shedding their perfume and song birds are making glad music; where men make merry and women smile; where gold shapes itself into palaces and fame wreathes crowns for fair and noble brows; where beauty crowns valor and

valor kisses the lips of beauty. And where the rivers sparkle in the sunlight, and, sometimes, yield up from their embrace cold, dripping, dead things, that yet bear the semblance of your kind – all that is left of beings that were once like you!

Out of danger!

Where want, and poverty, and – God help us! – vice, hide their heads in dim alleys and under smoky garret roofs. Where beaten mothers and starving children dare hardly aspire to the pure air and sunlight, the whole world for them being enshrined in a crust of bread. Where thieves mount upwards on ladders beaten from pilfered gold, and command cities and sway nations. Where wantonness laughs and thrives in gilded cages, and starves and dies in mouldy cellars.

Out of danger!

Madeline, the place that was almost yours, in the land of the unknowable, is given to another. The waters of death have cast you back upon the shores of the living. You are "out of danger!"

What was to become of Madeline, now that they had brought her back to life? This was a question which occurred to the two who so kindly interested themselves in the fate of the unknown and headstrong girl.

While they planned a little, as was only natural, yet they knew from what they had seen of their charge that, decide for her how they would, only so far as that decision corresponded with her own inclinations would she abide by it. So they left Madeline's future for Madeline to decide, and found occupation for their kindness in ministering to her needs of the present.

Once during her illness, and just as the light of reason had returned to the lovely hazel eyes, Lucian Davlin came. But he found the door of the sick chamber closely shut and closely guarded. The slightest shock to her nerves would be fatal now, – they told him. And he, having done the proper thing, as he termed it, and not being in any way fond of the sight of pain and pallor, yielded with a graceful simulation of reluctance. Having been assured that with careful nursing, there was nothing to fear, he deposited a check on his bankers in the hands of her attendants, and went away contentedly, smiling under his mustache at the novelty of being turned away from his own door.

He went back to Bellair, to Cora, and to the web they were weaving, little dreaming whose hands would take up the thread and continue and complete what they had thus begun.

And now the day has come for Madeline to leave the shelter that she hates. Pale and weak, she sits in the great easy chair that had served as a barrier between herself and her enemy, and converses with Olive Girard while they await the arrival of Clarence Vaughan, who is to take them from the place so distasteful to all three.

It has been settled that, for the present, Madeline will be the guest of Olive. What will come after health and strength are fully restored, they have not discussed much. Olive Girard and Doctor Vaughan had agreed that all thoughts of the future must bring a grief and care with them, and the mind of the invalid was in no condition for painful thought and study. So Olive has been careful to avoid all topics that might bring her troubles too vividly to mind.

But partly to divert Madeline's mind from her own woes, partly to enable the unfortunate girl to feel less a stranger among them, she has talked to her of Doctor Vaughan, of her sister, and at last of herself.

And Madeline has listened to her description of merry, lovely Claire Keith, and wondered what she could have in common with this buoyant, care-free girl, who was evidently her sister's idol. Yet she found herself thinking often of Olive's beautiful sister. Once, in the brief absence of Olive, she had said to Doctor Vaughan:

"Mrs. Girard has told me of her sister; is she very lovely? And do you know her well?"

"She is very fair, and sweet, and good. You will love her when you know her, and I think you will be friends."

She had not needed this; the tell-tale eye was sufficient to reveal the fact that it was not, as she had at first supposed, Olive Girard, but the younger sister, whom Clarence Vaughan loved.

"I might have known," she murmured to herself. "Olive Girard has the face of one whose love dream has passed away and lost itself in sorrow; and he looks, full of strength and hope, straight into the future."

As they sat together waiting, there was still that same contrast, which you felt rather than saw, between these two. They might have posed as the models of Resignation and Unrest.

The look of patient waiting was five years old upon the face of Olive Girard. Five years ago she had been so happy – a bride, beautiful and beloved. Beautiful she was still – with the beauty of shadow; beloved too, but how sadly! Philip Girard had been convicted of a great crime, and for five long years had worn a felon's garb, and borne the anguish of one set apart from all the world.

The hand that had darkened the life of Olive Girard, and the hand that had turned the young days of the girl Madeline into a burden, was one and the same.

Afterwards Madeline listened to the pathetic history of Olive's sorrow.

Sitting in that great lounging chair, Madeline looked very fair, very childlike. Sadly sweet were her large, deep eyes, and her hair, shorn while the fever raged, clustered in soft tiny rings about her slender, snowy neck and blue-veined temples. She had not been permitted to talk much during her convalescence, and Olive had as yet gleaned only a general outline of her story.

"Mrs. Girard," said the girl, resting her pale cheek in the palm of a thin, tiny hand, "you once said something to me about – about some one who had been wronged by – " Something sadder than tears choked her utterance.

As Olive turned her grave clear eyes away from the window, and fixed them in expectation upon her; Madeline's own eyes fell. She sat before her benefactress with downcast lids, and the hateful name unuttered.

"I know," said Olive, after a brief silence; "I referred to a girl now lying in the hospital. She is very young, and has been cruelly wronged by him. She is poor, as you may judge, and earned her living in the ballet at the theater. She was thrown from a carriage which had been furnished her by *him*, to carry her home from some rendezvous – of course the driver took care of himself and his horses. The poor girl was picked up and carried to the hospital. She was without friends and almost penniless. She sent to him – for him; he returned no answer. She begged for help, for enough to enable her to obtain what was needed in her illness. Message after message was sent, and finally a reply came, brought by a messenger who had been bidden to insist upon receiving an answer. The servant said that his master had directed him to say to any messenger who called, that he was out of town."

"The wretch! He deserves death!"

Madeline's eyes blazed, and she lifted her head with some of her olden energy.

"Softly, my dear: 'Thou shalt do no murder.'"

"It is not murder to kill a human tiger!"

Olive made no answer.

"Is she still very ill, this girl?" questioned Madeline.

"She can not recover."

"Shall I see her?"

"If you wish to; do you?"

"Yes."

Another long pause; then Madeline glanced up at her friend, and said listlessly: "What do you intend to do with me?"

"Do with you?" smiling at her. "Make you well again, and then try and coax you to be my other sister. Don't you think I need one?"

No answer.

"Life has much in store for you yet, Madeline."

"Yes;" bitterly again.

"You are so young."

"And so old."

"Madeline, you are too young for somber thoughts and repining."

"I shall not repine."

"Good! You will try to forget?"

"Impossible!"

"No; not impossible."

"I do not wish to, then."

"And why?"

"Wait and see."

"Madeline, you will do nothing rash? You will trust me, and confide in me?"

The girl raised her eyes slowly, in surprise. "I have not so many friends that I can afford to lose one."

"Thank you, dear; then we will let the subject drop until we are stronger. And here is the carriage, and Doctor Vaughan."

Out into the sunny Summer morning went Madeline, and soon she was established in a lovely little room which, Olive said, was hers so long as she could be persuaded to occupy it. Here the girl rested and, ministered unto by gentle hands, she felt life coming back.

And Lucian?

Late in the afternoon of the day that saw Madeline depart from his elegant rooms, Mr. Davlin arrived, and found no one to deny him admittance. All the doors stood ajar, and Henry was flitting about with an air of putting things to rights. The bird had flown.

He gained from Henry the following: "I don't know, sir, where she went. A gentleman came with a carriage, and the young lady and the nurse went away with him."

Lucian was not aware what manner of nurse Madeline had had in her illness. And Henry, having purposely misled him, enjoyed his discomfiture.

"She told me to give you this, sir," said he, handing his master a little package.

Tearing off the wrapper, Lucian held in his hand the little pistol that had inflicted upon him the wounded arm. From its mouth he drew a scrap of paper, and this is what it said:

When next we meet, I shall have other weapons!

CHAPTER X.

BONNIE, BEWITCHING CLAIRE

Four months. We find Madeline standing in the late Autumn sunset, "clothed and in her right mind," strong with the strength of youth, and beautiful with even more than her olden beauty.

Fair is the prospect as seen from the grounds of Mrs. Girard's suburban villa, and so, perhaps, Claire Keith is thinking.

She is looking down the level road, and at the trees on either hand, decked in all their October magnificence of scarlet and brown and gold, half concealing coquettish villas and more stately residences.

The eyes of Madeline were turned away from the vista of villas and trees, and were gazing toward the business thoroughfare leading into the bustle of the town; gazing after the receding figure of Doctor Clarence Vaughan as he cantered away from the villa; gazing until a turn of the road hid him from her view. Then – and what did she mean by it? – she turned her face toward Claire with a questioning look in her eyes – the question came almost to her lips. But the words were repressed.

Bonnie Clair was thinking of anything but Clarence Vaughan just then. Presently she turned a bright glance upon her companion, who was gathering clusters of the fallen maple leaves, with face half averted.

"A kiss for your thoughts, beautiful blonde Madeline. I certainly think it is ten minutes since Doctor Vaughan departed and silence fell upon us."

She bent down, and taking her companion's head between two dimpled hands, pulled it back, until she could look into the solemn brown eyes.

"Come, now," coaxingly, "what were you thinking?"

Madeline extricated herself from Claire's playful grasp, and replied with a half laugh: "It must be mutual confession then, you small highwayman; how do you like my terms?"

"Only so so," flushing and laughing. "I was meditating the propriety of telling you something some day, and was thinking of that something just now, but –"

"But," mimicked Madeline, with half-hearted playfulness; "what will you give me to relieve your embarrassment, and guess?"

"You can't," emphatically.

"Can't I? We will see. My dear, I fear you have left a little corner of your heart behind you in far-away Baltimore. You didn't come to pay your annual visit to your sister, quite heart free."

Anyone wishing to gain an insight into the character of Claire Keith might have taken a long step in that direction could he have witnessed her reception of this unexpected shot. She opened her dark eyes in comic amazement, and dropping into a garden chair, exclaimed, with a look of frank inquiry:

"Now, how ever could you guess that?"

"Because," said Madeline, in a constrained voice, and with all the laughter fading from her eyes; "Because, I know the symptoms."

"I see," dropping her voice suddenly. "Oh, Madeline, how I wish you could forget *that*."

"Why should I forget my love dream," scornfully, "any more than you yours?"

"Oh, Madeline; but you said you had ceased to care for him; that you should never mourn his loss."

"*Mourn his loss!*" turning upon Claire, fiercely. "Do you think it is for him I mourn my *dead*; my lost happiness, my shattered dreams, my life made a bitter, burdensome thing. Mourn him? I have for Lucian Davlin but one feeling – hate!"

Madeline, as she uttered these last words, had turned upon Claire a face whose fierce intensity of expression was startling. For a moment the two gazed into each other's eyes – the one with curling

lip and somber, menacing glance, the other with a startled face as if she read something new and to be feared, in the eye of her friend.

Claire had been an inmate of her sister's house for four weeks. When first she arrived, she had heard Madeline's story, at Madeline's request, from the lips of her sister Olive, and now the girls were fast friends. Generous Claire had found much to wonder at, to pity and to love, in the story and the character of the unfortunate girl. Possessing a frank, sunshiny nature, and never having known an actual grief, she could lavish sweet sympathy to one afflicted. But she could not conceive what it would be like to live on when faith had perished and hope was a mockery. She had never known, therefore never missed, a father's love and care. Indeed, he who filled the place of father and guardian, her mother's second husband, was all that a real parent could be. Claire seldom remembered that Mr. James Keith was not her father, and very few, except the family of Keith, knew that "Miss Claire Keith, daughter of the rich James Keith, of Baltimore," was in truth only a step-daughter.

Mrs. Keith, whose first husband was Richard Keith, cashier in his wealthy cousin's banking house, had buried that husband when Olive was five years old, and baby Claire scarce able to lisp his name. In a little less than two years she had married James Keith, the banker-cousin, and shortly after the marriage, James Keith had transferred his business interests to Baltimore, and there remained.

So Claire's baby brothers had never been told that she was not their "very own" sister, for of Olive they knew little, her marriage having separated them at first, and subsequently her obdurate acceptance of the consequences of that marriage.

When the law pronounced her husband a criminal, Mr. Keith had commanded Olive to abandon both husband and home, and return to his protection. This, true-hearted Olive refused to do. Her step-father, enraged at her obstinacy in clinging to a man who had been forsaken by all the world beside, bade her choose between them. Either she must let the law finish its work of breaking Philip Girard's heart by setting her free, or she must accept the consequences of remaining the wife of a criminal.

Olive chose the latter, and thenceforth remained in her own lonely home, never even once visiting the place of her childhood.

"He called my husband a criminal," she said, "and I will never cross his threshold until he has had cause to withdraw those words."

Claire, however, announced her intention of visiting her sister whenever she chose, and she succeeded, in part, in carrying out her will, for every year she passed two months or more with Olive.

What a picture the two girls now made, standing face to face.

Madeline, with her lithe grace of form, her pure pale complexion lit up by those fathomless brown eyes, and rendering more noticeable and beautiful the tiny rosy mouth, with its satellite dimples; with such wee white, blue-veined hands, and such a clear ringing, yet marvelously sweet voice. Madeline was very beautiful, and Claire, as she looked at her, wondered how any man could bear to lose such loveliness, or have the heart to betray it; as if ever pure woman could fathom the depth of a bad man's wickedness.

Bonnie, bewitching Claire! Never was contrast more perfect. A scarf, like scarlet flame, flung about her shoulders, set off the richness of her clear brunette skin, through which the crimson blood flamed in cheek and lip. Eyes, now black, now gray, changing, flashing, witching eyes: gray in quiet moments, darkening with mirth or sadness, anger or pain; hair black and silky, rippling to the rounded, supple waist in glossy waves. Not so tall as Madeline, and rounded and dimpled as a Hebe.

Bringing her will into service, Madeline banished the gloom from her face and said, with an attempt at gayety:

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