

Rice Alfred Ernest

**An Oregon Girl: A Tale of
American Life in the New West**



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INTRODUCTORY

In the year 19 – a legend adorned with gold and bearing the significant words, “The Securities Investment Association, Mr. Philip Rutley, President, Mr. Jack Shore, Secretary-Treasurer,” appeared on the glass panel of a certain office door on Third street, in the city of Portland, Oregon.

These two men were middle-aged bachelors, and moved in select society. Through their social standing they had persuaded two wealthy men of the city to lend their names as stockholders and directors in the company; but the Investment Company’s business failed to meet the expenses which the social living of the two promoters felt were demanded of them, and the inevitable happened, viz., a resort to dishonest manipulations of sundry bond transactions by which the two wealthy directors had to “make good.”

It resulted, on discovery, in the immediate closing of the office and prosecution of the offenders was ordered; but because of their social standing and promise to leave the city at once, criminal proceedings were suspended.

Three years elapsed. In the medium-sized room of a plainly furnished flat, in a genteel suburb of the “Bay City,” a man sat brooding over the ill luck which had pursued him for the past few years. This man, as he sat with elbows on his knees and chin resting on his hands, was looking through the open window and out over the bay, out over that far off rugged ridge of purple and gray and white that projected up in the clear ethereal blue, northward, gazing with eyes fixed into nothingness, for he was deeply absorbed in a review of his past career and of the sunny time he had enjoyed while living in Portland.

His straw colored hair, verging to a sandy hue, framed a smooth shaven face of marked strength and intelligence. His eyes of a bluish gray, were bright when shielded by spectacles, worn more from fashion than necessity, glittered with keenness and energy.

Jack Shore rarely allowed his naturally aggressive and buoyant spirits to remain for long depressed by a gloomy retrospect; but the purpose of his prolonged stare at vacancy on this occasion was attributable to the necessity of another visit to Mr. Loan-on-personal-property.

His reverie was ended by the abrupt entry of his companion, Philip Rutley, who drawled out in quiet tones: “Jack – Aw – I beg pardon. I see you are engaged.”

Jack looked at his visitor, noted his dignified bearing and unwonted coolness as he removed his gloves; noted the smile of cunning pleasure that played about his mouth and, from experience, concluded that some deep scheme had been thought out and a line of action forming.

“Well, Phil,” he replied, “what game is on now?”

“A well dressed lady and gentleman, strangers,” began Phil, “halted me on Market Street and addressed me as ‘My Lord Beauchamp.’ They warmly shook my hand and gushingly insisted that I promise them the pleasure of presenting our very dear friends, – Mr. and Mrs. Orthodox – to Lord Beauchamp at the Palace tonight.”

“Of course, you consented!” quietly laughed Jack.

“Ahem! Unfortunately I had instructed my secretary to ‘clear’ the yacht for the north this evening, and as all arrangements were complete, must beg, with profound regrets” (and he bent low with courtly grace) “to decline the pleasure. Should you be visiting England next summer, my cordial invitation to rest a month or so at – a – Beauchamp, Isle of Wight.”

“And you – ”

“Beckoned a passing cab; bade them ‘adieu’ and drove on a few blocks.”

“I congratulate you on your iron-clad nerve,” laughingly remarked Jack. “And you withdrew with your new title, – a – me Lord Beauchamp, sitting jauntily, like a chip on your shoulder, – undisturbed.”

“How could I do otherwise? You know I am opposed to shocks, but seriously, Jack, the incident has suggested a way out of our embarrassment.”

“How?”

“By carrying the thing on and be a lord in fact, with you as my secretary.”

Jack laughed, low and yet with a heartiness that was rollicking in its abandon, and then added by way of parenthesis:

“I shall announce ‘Your Grace’s’ intention to visit Portland.”

“Precisely! You are well aware of the great esteem in which Me Lord Beauchamp is likely to be held there, particularly by our friends, The Thorpes, Harrises, et al.”

“A proper entry will create quite a stir among the fashionable set,” remarked Jack reflectively.

“And give us opportunities to ‘work’ them some.”

“Are you agreed?”

“Yes,” responded Jack. “It will be a damn good joke, anyway,” and again he laughed, for as the horn of plenty flitted before his vision his spirits soared once more, above the measly depths of want and anxiety. “As an American,” he continued, “you have as much right to play the role of Lord, General or Judge as any other name by which your friends may be pleased to ‘dub’ you.”

CHAPTER I

Within the perimeter of a great semi-circle window in a large luxuriously furnished room of a fashionable residence not far from 6666 Hill, in the city of Portland, two women sat reading.

It was an autumn afternoon, just after a light shower, a little warm but rarely matched for the unusual splendor of its soft, dreamy atmosphere – calm and clear as infinite space.

The incessant roar of the city's commerce floated up and through the screened windows in muffled echoes, but the readers being accustomed to the sound, were undisturbed.

At length one of the readers, a girl who had not seen more than twenty summers, closed the book she had just finished reading and broke the silence with the remark: "Most interesting! A great story!"

"Yes," exclaimed her companion, looking up, "particularly in its treatment of the bogus Count. Indeed, it is realistic enough to be true."

"So it appears!" replied the maid, "but just imagine such a thing to happen – as for instance a tramp to impersonate successfully Lord Beauchamp!"

"My Lord is a gentleman 'to the manor born,' and impossible of counterfeit."

"I understand the reception by Mrs. Harris is to be given in his honor?"

"Yes," replied Mrs. Thorpe, and smiling she went on: "He has promised to take tea with us today."

"And do you know," said Hazel in an awed tone, "he's a Knight of the Order of the Garter? It is reported that he is to be married to a beautiful San Francisco girl."

"I have heard it mentioned, but I hardly think his Lordship seeks a wife in America, because he is very wealthy."

"But, Constance, – love is sometimes eccentric!"

"Quite true, when its underlying motive is mercenary. You remember Philip Rutley."

"Constance!" exclaimed the girl, with a stamp of her foot. "You know the wise proverb, 'Let sleeping dogs lie.'"

It was then that Philip Rutley, impersonating Lord Beauchamp, was ushered in, accompanied by Mr. Joseph Corway.

"Ah! My Lord," greeted Constance arising from her seat. "This delightful corner has lured us to forget to welcome you at the portal of our home. Allow me the pleasure of introducing Miss Hazel Brooke, and you, Mr. Corway, – well you know we are always 'at home' to you."

As Rutley deliberately placed a monocle to his eye, he said, "A corner with such an entrancing vista," carelessly waving his hand toward the open, "is a pardonable lure to dreamy forgetfulness."

Then he stared at the girl and, as he supposed, conveyed the desired impression, muttered: "Charming!" and that word, uttered with quiet and apparently involuntary emphasis, at once made Hazel Brooke his friend, and, to add to the favorable impression which Rutley perceived he had created, he bowed low and said suavely: "Miss Brooke will permit me to say, I rejoice in her acquaintance."

"Your Lordship may find me a deceiver."

"I shall not believe so winsome a flower can be unreal." And he again fixed the monocle to his eye and stared at her in pleased assurance.

"Art simulates many charming things of nature," remarked Mrs. Thorpe, and she slyly glanced at Hazel.

The girl almost laughed; but her gentle breeding came to the rescue, and she bore Rutley's stare with admirable nonchalance, until Mr. Corway, feeling a little amused at Lord Beauchamp's monopoly of the girl's attention answered Mrs. Thorpe: "Yet nature cannot be excelled in anything that is beautiful in art."

For which he received from the girl a smile that thrilled him with a conviction that no lord, no croesus, nor commoner, could dethrone him from her heart.

The ordeal in which Hazel found herself under Rutley's disconcerting stare, was terminated by Mrs. Thorpe.

"Your Lordship must be familiar with many beautiful things of nature. By the way, I want you to visit our conservatory. We have some choice exotics there from the Orinoco."

Rutley removed his monocle, and turned to Mrs. Thorpe. "My secretary obtained some rare specimens in Bogota, nevertheless I shall consider it a pleasure to visit your collection, for indeed it must be superb, judging from such natural beauty already in evidence."

"You are coming, too," said Mrs. Thorpe, turning to Hazel and Mr. Corway.

"Thanks! – that is, – we shall join you presently," stammered Mr. Corway, looking at Hazel with a half smile.

Mrs. Thorpe looked amused as she said: "Oh, very well," and then, halting on the threshold, turned again and added: "Hazel, dear, don't forget the conservatory."

Rutley and Mrs. Thorpe had scarcely gone when Hazel exclaimed: "Well! I'm waiting for you."

"Of course," Corway replied haltingly; then, after a pause, "Hazel!"

"Miss Brooke – please," she corrected, with a tantalizing smile.

"Oh – confound it. Hazel" – he began again.

"Are you coming?" she interrupted, moving away, but with an aggravating smile playing fitfully about her face.

Whereupon he bowed low, with mock formality, approached her offering his arm. "I crave the honor."

The girl placed her hand in his arm with a promptness that flushed his face, but immediately blanched it with the teasing remark: "It's to be only as far as the conservatory, you know."

"And from there around the grounds," he replied tenderly.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "You insist on going the rounds with me? Oh, very well!" and they laughed together.

Shortly after they had gone, the portieres of an entrance to the left were cautiously parted and a young girl peeped in, then entered the room. She was the embodiment of youth, happiness and expectancy.

She was dressed in the whitest of white muslin. A narrow band of magenta-colored silk encircled her slender waist, the long, loose ends of the bow flowing almost to her feet, while her mass of raven black hair drawn back from her fair white forehead, and coiled at the back of her shapely head lent a queenly grace to a divinely moulded form.

The suppleness of her carriage, intensified by the simplicity of her soft, faultless dress, was a poem of delight which needed no skill of adornment to beautify; no touch of art to dignify.

Across the room she stole, as lightly as though her feet were winged, and listened at the door.

"I am sure I heard his voice!" Then with a smile of joy, she tripped to the open window overlooking the piazza, and looked out, murmuring – "how I long to see him. My Joe! Handsome, manly Joe, I adore you. And these, his flowers – his favorite flower, our beautiful rose," drawing from her hair two red roses, which she kissed again and again.

"I hurried home because I could not remain away from you, and now – oh, the joy of a glad surprise – I hear footsteps!" and she listened expectantly, then turned to behold Mrs. Harris, an elderly lady of portly bearing and elegantly dressed, who was at that moment entering from the piazza.

"Why, Virginia, I am delighted. You look the happiest girl in the land," taking her hand and kissing her. "Oregon peach-bloom on your cheeks, too; I'll wager you are just in from the farm, you hayseed."

“Yes, and I’ve had the most delightful time,” replied the girl softly. “Romped over the fields of sweet-smelling clover, and through the orchards, and helped in the hay-field, too,” she laughed joyously.

“Hands up! I mean the palms,” said Mrs. Harris, in mock severity. “It must have been a silver rake you handled in the hay-field,” she resumed, after scrutinizing the palms of Virginia’s outstretched hands, “for there isn’t even a callous.”

“It is harvest time,” replied the girl, laughing, “and the harvest moon is death to callouses, you know.”

“We’ve missed you, dear, at Seaside,” said Mrs. Harris. “But still you look just as charming as though you had been there the entire season.”

“You rude flatterer. The seaside is nice, but I love our dear old farm home in the valley, best. Yet” – Virginia continued, demurely, with downcast eyes, “it seemed a little dull this year, and, you see, I have a reason for coming in before the harvest is over.”

As the girl stood with downcast eyes, her countenance appeared exquisitely regular, dignified and very beautiful.

“Ah, dear!” exclaimed Mrs. Harris, with admiration. “An affair of the heart – a man in it, eh, dear? – I know him. He will be here in a few moments – lucky fellow!”

“Will he? – are you sure?”

“Dear me! How joyful you are!” said Mrs. Harris, staring kindly at her.

“Oh, if you had been away from your sweetheart for so long a time as I have been from mine” —

“Ha! ha! ha! ha!” laughed Mrs. Harris. “Why, Virginia dear, only two weeks! Really you carry me back to my own girlish days, just after I met James – I remember well – my heart nearly fluttered out of its place.”

“My heart fluttered out of its place weeks and weeks ago, and will not flutter back, unless” —

“Unless what, dear?”

“Unless he despises it,” she said, with a sigh.

“Well, the dear boy is pining to see you. That I know, so there is a pair of you.”

“Is he getting thin?” questioned Virginia, eagerly.

“Not exactly, but – listen!” And Mrs. Harris held up a warning finger as she looked out over the piazza.

“He is coming!”

“Oh, dear!” exclaimed Virginia, in an ecstasy of joy. “I shall hide and surprise him. Oh! his favorites have wilted. I will pluck fresh ones in the conservatory, and hasten back – don’t tell!” and with that she flew out of the room through the portieres.

As Mrs. Harris stood alone in a contemplative mood, she said aloud to herself: “Oh, dear! These hearts of ours! How foolish they make us at times – I have often thought our Sam was a ‘lady killer,’ now I am sure of it.”

Just then Sam Harris stepped across the piazza and entered the room.

Sam was a young man just having passed his twenty-fourth birthday. His strong chin was indicative of fidelity to his friends, and his mass of reddish, curly hair lent expression to a jovial expression of countenance.

Sam was particularly joyous in anticipation of meeting Virginia Thorpe. “Have you seen her, Auntie?” and he straightway opened a door leading to the library and looked in; then he closed it.

Mrs. Harris quietly watched him and became disturbed with misgivings, lest his zeal in his present frame of mind would impair the dignity she considered so essential to his enterprise as well as to the position the Harrises held in society.

It was therefore necessary to impress on him the importance of “proper” form, which she immediately undertook, and addressed him with calm stateliness.

“Now, Sam, I warn you to be careful how you greet Virginia. Remember, though but twenty-two, she is an accomplished young lady.”

“Don’t I know it!” he replied, with a satisfied smile.

“Don’t touch the portieres, Sam! Sam!” she exclaimed in alarm, but her command was unheeded, and Sam spread them wide apart, much to his aunt’s consternation.

No one being behind the portiere, she appeared amazed, but quickly recovering her composure, continued:

“Dear me! How very strange! Oh, yes, I forgot. She has gone to the conservatory.” Then she muttered in low tones:

“Now I have said it, and she told me not to tell.”

“Well, I’m off to the conservatory, too – eh, Auntie! Don’t follow me,” and he strode toward the piazza.

“Sam! Sam! Remain here. I have something to say to you.”

“Well, be quick, Auntie. You know I am crazy to see her. Eh! I guess so.”

“Crazy! Well, remember the least display of rudeness or unseemly eagerness will be promptly met with a frown of displeasure.”

“Auntie, she’s finer than the petals of a rose.”

“But, like a rose, too, she is just as sensitive,” cautioned Mrs. Harris, as she majestically moved over to the mantel – and then she abruptly turned, at a fresh thought. “Sam, for the sake of our social prestige – for my own hope that your affection shall be reciprocated” —

“Love, Auntie!” interrupted Sam. “That’s the word. It’s short and to the point. Eh?”

Quite undisturbed by the interruption, she continued: “And for the supreme pleasure it would afford me to see the house of Harris united to the house of Thorpe, I desire that you give me an example of the manner you intend to approach Virginia.”

The idea appeared so grotesque to Sam that he gave a slight inclination of his head, a habit he had somehow acquired in the “Desert,” and exclaimed in startled emphasis: “Ea-Ah! How?”

“By addressing me as you would her.”

With a smile broadening his face and a roguish twinkle of the eye, he exclaimed: “Can’t be done, Auntie! You ain’t the real thing. Can’t work up any excitement over a counterfeit.”

“Sam! It grieves me to say that I fear for your success. Her rejection of your suit would mean humiliation for us. Therefore I insist that you remember what I have told you and address Virginia as I shall instruct you.”

Sam was too shrewd to oppose his aunt’s determination – a previous experience having taught him the desirability of quietly agreeing with her notions, so with a smile of acquiescence he answered:

“All right, Auntie! Fire away.”

Drawing herself up in a stately pose, she passed to the end of the room, turned, and again faced him. “Now, Sam, I request you to impress upon your memory every word I utter, so that you may salute your lady-love in a similar manner. Do you comprehend?”

“I think so, Auntie,” and thereupon thrust his hands in his trouser pockets.

“Sam, remove your hands from your pockets. It is neither good form nor in accordance with polite usage, for a gentleman to bury his hands in his trouser pockets, when in the presence of a lady.”

“All right, Auntie!” and he grinned broadly as he removed the offending hands.

With a most affable smile, yet maintaining a dignified carriage, she advanced down the room, halted midway, and gracefully bowed, then continuing, extended her hand, which Sam took. She again bowed and carried his hand to her lips; then taking both his hands in hers and looking straight into his eyes, smiled and said:

“I am delighted to have the honor of congratulating Miss Thorpe on her safe return.” She then released his hands and proceeded across the room.

“Is that all?” came from Sam, in a burst of dismay.

Mrs. Harris turned sharply and emphatically exclaimed: "Yes, Sam. In your conversation with Virginia beware of gushing familiarity. Nothing to my mind is more likely to jeopardize your suit than absurd vulgarity." So saying, she again turned and proceeded toward the door.

"Auntie, I can do better than that. Why, you left out the best part." And his eyes twinkled mischievously, while a laugh on his face was suppressed with difficulty.

She turned quickly, and in much surprise exclaimed: "Dear me! I didn't know it. What is it?"

"I will show you." With that Sam passed to the end of the room and turned. "Now, Auntie, I'll try to think that you are my sweetheart, Virginia."

Smiling, he proceeded down the room, halted midway, bowed and then continued toward his aunt, took her right hand, clasped it between his two, and looked into her eyes. He then raised her hand to his left shoulder and while he held it there, pressed her waist with his right arm – "I am delighted to welcome you home again." Pressing her closer to him – "Believe me – I – I can never forget – that I – I," – then he became absent-minded and, to save himself, suddenly blurted out – "I love you – there!" And he kissed her lips and embraced her vigorously. Then, with a whirl, he released her, laughing as he did so, and exclaimed: "Ah ha! I guess so, eh, Auntie?"

Mrs. Harris recovered herself, in the middle of the room, and gasped out: "Oh, dear! What a shock. I am sure I am twisted all out of shape."

Sam stood with a satisfied grin on his face, and thrust his hands in his trouser pockets, and watched her. "That was love! The real thing – eh, Auntie!"

"Dear me," she exclaimed, between her labored breathing. "I was never treated to anything so rude in my life. Your arm, Sam. Assist me to the piazza. I must have more air."

"Auntie, you wait till I try it on Virginia. Oh, my! Eh!"

Meanwhile a little scene was being enacted in the conservatory, destined to produce the gravest consequences to others than those directly concerned. After examining the rare plants, Mrs. Thorpe and My Lord had passed out to an attractive bed of massed chrysanthemums, fringed with geraniums, then in full flower – leaving Hazel and Corway alone.

Propitious fate again granted him the opportunity he so ardently desired.

They were looking at some violet buds, concealed by giant Canna leaves and a profusion of palms, when there passed through the girl's frame one of those mysterious thrills – which man designates magnetic, but which Providence has really made inscrutable to the human understanding.

"I wonder," she faintly exclaimed, and slowly turning her head – their lips met.

Though stolen, it was delicately done – one of those exquisite little gems of cause and effect, which naturally happen to true sweethearts.

They stood looking at each other in surprised silence.

"I did not grant you that privilege," at length broke from Hazel, in a faltering manner – her cheeks flushing and her soft blue eyes dancing.

"I could not resist the temptation," and taking her two hands in his, added: "Hazel, I love you! Will you be mine?"

"Why, Mr. Corway!" replied the maid, disengaging herself.

She spoke and acted quietly, while a bewitching smile shone in her eyes.

At that moment, unnoticed by them, a shadow suddenly darkened the doorway. It did not tarry long, and swiftly disappeared.

Unseen herself, Virginia had entered the conservatory, her footfalls as light as her joyous young heart, the happiest of the happy.

Hearing that voice, she had paused, then gently parted some leaves and – the smile died on her lips.

She stood for a moment like one transfixed, listening in an amazed wonder, then, undiscovered, she silently withdrew into deeper foliage.

"Why draw away from me, Hazel?" went on Corway.

“Because! You may not be sincere!” replied the girl, shyly.

“Not sincere? Hazel, from the first moment that I beheld you I felt that I stood in the presence of my fate.”

“But, Mr. Corway,” – she returned, with that provoking smile still lurking about the corners of her pretty mouth – “don’t you love any other?”

“No,” he softly replied.

“Are you sure?”

“Sure!”

“Not even Virginia?”

“I respect her, but do not love her – Oh, Hazel, do not keep me in suspense. Tell me you requite my love – promise to be mine, to cherish and protect forever” – and again he took her unresisting hand in his and drew her near him.

“Well, this is so serious that – don’t you think that I should have a little time to consider it?”

Her face had taken on a half-serious look, but the little cloud was quickly chased away by a happy smile.

Nor did it escape the eager eye of her sweet-heart. He saw that her hesitation was not to be taken seriously, and as a test he said in soft, tremulous accents: “Then the girl I would die for does not love me, does not care for me – ”

Turning half around to him, in a pleading and half-reproachful way, she tenderly emphasized: “Oh, I do love you, Joe, with all my heart.” And throwing wide her arms, fell on his breast, with the joy of a maiden’s first love flushing her face.

And then their lips met – deep in the sweet intoxication of love’s first confiding trust.

“Thou perfect flower! To express the fullness of my heart would be impossible,” he joyfully exclaimed.

And thus, while pressing her hand on his shoulder and feeling a ring on her finger, he gently removed it.

“Oh! that’s Virginia’s ring; that is, I got it from her,” she protested feebly, her head pillowed on his breast.

“It shall be a ‘Mizpah’ of trust, dearest, and shall come back to you with an engagement ring,” he softly replied, as he slipped it into his vest pocket.

In one of Virginia’s happy girlish moments, she had picked up the ring from Constance’s dressing table, and admiring its beauty, smilingly slipped it upon her own finger, with the owner’s permission to wear it awhile, but with the injunction to “be careful not to lose it, dear, for I value it very highly. It was John’s gift to me before we were married” – and then later, on that same day, with Hazel’s arm clasping her waist and her own arm clasping Hazel’s, the two happy girls strolling through the grounds – to have Hazel remove it in the same admiring fashion and slip it on her own finger, Virginia yielding to her young cousin, just as Constance, in perfect trust, yielded to her. And then in the morning, all forgetful of the ring, she left for the Valley farm.

And now, on her sudden return, she beheld that same ring taken by Corway as a size for Hazel’s engagement ring, and heard him declare “it shall be a Mizpah of trust, dearest.”

A sigh unconsciously escaped her; a sigh freighted with the blood of fibers as love tore itself away from her heart.

Hazel heard it, and in alarm said to Corway: “What is that? Did you hear it? So like a moan?”

He looked around. “You were mistaken, dearest; there is none here but you and me.”

“Oh, yes, I heard it” – and with a timidity in which a slight sense of fear was discernible, said: “Let us go out in the open.”

But he held her firm, loath to release the beautiful being clasped close to his heart.

“This is for truest love” – and he kissed her again, as she looked up through eyes of unswerving fidelity. “This for never-faltering constancy” – and again their lips met – “And this, a sacred pledge of life’s devotion, God helping me, forever more” – and their lips met yet once again.

Then they passed out to join Mrs. Thorpe and Rutley.

Virginia had witnessed the pledge that meant the blighting of her life’s fond hopes, and she had heard his passionate declaration.

With straining eyes and a very white face, she watched them depart, till there welled up and gathered thick-falling tears that mercifully shut him out from her sight. She sat down on a bench.

She thought of the honeyed words and eager attention with which he wooed her, and made captive her young heart’s deepest, most ardent passion, and now his perfidy was laid bare.

With an effort she became more composed, and exclaimed aloud: “So, the almighty dollar is the object of Joseph Corway’s devotion.” And as her indignation increased, she sprang from her seat, and with quivering voice, said: “Oh, God! and I did confide in him so fondly, trusted him so guilelessly, and now our engagement is ended and all is over between us – forever.” And notwithstanding her effort to suppress them, sob after sob burst forth.

Strong-minded and of powerful emotions, Virginia Thorpe was a queenly woman, a woman whose friendship was prized by her acquaintances, and whose wealth of intellect was a charm to a strikingly graceful figure; and the love that was in her nature once awakened, grew and intensified day by day till at last a steadfast blaze of trust and confidence glorified her personality.

Such she bore for Corway – until she discovered he loved Hazel. Oh, what a change then came over her, as her heart yielded up its dearest desire in tears of scalding bitterness.

“Oh, Joe! tenderly I loved you, passionately I adored you, and you led me to believe that you loved none but me, yet all the time your heart had gone out to another, and this is no doubt the real reason you wanted our engagement to be kept a secret, and my love, which no woman had greater, was but a plaything!” she thought to herself.

She looked at the roses she had unconsciously held in her hand, with infinite tenderness, then crushed them, and broke them.

“Farewell, sweet emblems of truth and love.” And throwing the flowers, which she had so fondly kissed but a few moments before, among dead leaves on the ground, said in a voice that trembled with the pathos of the death of love’s young dream:

“Thus perish all my young life’s happy hopes. Gone! Gone among the things that are dead.” Sobs of bitterest disappointment again burst from her lips.

Suddenly she brushed her hand across her eyes – it was then that Virginia’s transformation took place.

From the guileless, joyful, winsome maid, emerged a woman – beautiful, but alas, subtle, alert and avenging. With a stamp of her foot she said, with sudden determination:

“Away with these tears. What have I to do with human feelings now? I will conquer this weakness, though in the process my heart be changed to stone.

“Now, Corway, beware of me, for you shall know that the love you have toyed with has changed to hate, an unappeasable, undying hate, and you shall learn, too, that a woman’s revenge will pause at nothing that will help to gratify it.” Then she slipped out of the conservatory, with the intention to get to her room, if possible, unobserved, but was halted by hearing Constance say: “Virginia, dear! I wish to make you acquainted with Lord Beauchamp.”

There was no chance for evasion or escape. Virginia had not noticed them as she passed, for they were hidden by the angle of the conservatory, and she was quite close to them when addressed by Constance.

Quick of wit, the girl realized that some excuse was necessary to account for the appearance of her tear-stained face. Halting in her flight, she drew her handkerchief and commenced to rub her eyes, and speaking with faltering lips, for the wound in her heart was yet raw and tender, she said:

“Your Lordship finds me at an awkward moment – something has gotten into my eye, and causes me acute pain, but please believe, I esteem it an honor to number Your Grace among my acquaintances.”

“Dear heart!” exclaimed Constance, at once proceeding to examine the girl’s eye. “Let me try to relieve you!”

As Virginia felt the touch of loving fingers on her eyelids, she felt powerless to restrain her emotion, and great tears welled up. Her weary head fell forward upon her friend’s shoulder, and she sobbed: “Oh, Constance, dear, the world to me is one black charnel house.”

The gentle nature of Constance leaped out in sympathy which, for the moment, smothered her surprise. She threw her arms around Virginia and kissed her on the temple.

That Virginia suffered was enough, she felt instinctively that such an outburst of grief was from a far deeper source than that produced by the mote in her eye.

Virginia always had confided in Constance. That desire to communicate, so natural in youth, was strong in the girl. In Hazel, she had been met with a sort of pity, till she ceased to touch upon girlish secrets with her altogether, but in Constance she found one who would not chide even folly, and so these two were, by the nature of things, very close friends.

“There, dear heart,” soothingly said Constance, “rest awhile, for I know the pain must be severe.”

Rutley was an involuntary witness to this bit of feminine sympathy, and, no doubt, recalled it to memory in the events that were to come. His immediate concern, however, expressed itself in a cold, matter-of-fact manner. “Oftentimes,” he said, “the protection supplied by nature to the human eye seems insufficient, and consequent suffering must be endured. I trust Miss Thorpe will soon find relief.”

“Oh! I am sure the pain is only temporary,” half rebelliously replied Virginia, drawing away from Constance, and rapidly recovering her self-possession, as she brushed the tears from her eyes. “There,” she said, “it is passing away now, and I can see quite distinctly already. Why, how like your lordship resembles a past acquaintance,” she remarked, as she eyed him critically.

“Indeed, if the acquaintance you mention was not consigned to the gallows, it might be no sin to resemble him,” responded Rutley, stroking his Vandyke beard.

“Oh! his offense was quite serious, poor fellow! Some shady bond transaction with an investment association, in which he, and one Jack Shore, were the officers. I have heard that the directors agreed not to prosecute them on condition that they left the city and never returned.”

“In England, were it not for the color of my hair, I should have been taken often for the Marquis of Revelstoke,” and to the girl’s dismay, he stiffened up and directed on her a most austere and frigid look, then deliberately fixed the monocle to his eye, and remarked, as his frame faintly quivered, as with a slight chill – “It’s deuced draughty, don’t-che-know!”

He then removed the monocle, and suddenly resumed his habitually suave manner. Picking up a binocle, which lay on the table, he turned to look toward Mt. Hood – “Sublime!” he exclaimed.

“It is very beautiful and white today,” remarked Constance.

“Indeed,” assured Rutley, “it seems close enough to touch with my outstretched hand.”

“My lord’s arm would need to be thirty miles long,” smiled Mrs. Thorpe, who was then ascending the steps.

“A long reach,” responded Rutley, lowering the glass.

“The illusion is due to our clear atmosphere,” replied Mrs. Thorpe.

“I presume so,” agreed Rutley.

“At times the air is phenomenally clear. One day this past Summer I fancied I could make out the ‘Mazamas,’ who were then ascending the mountain,” quietly remarked Virginia.

“Aw, indeed, very likely; quite so,” continued Rutley, handing the glass to Constance, and then turning to Virginia with an alluring smile, added: “And then, the ladies – are so bewitchingly entertaining.”

“Presumably your idea of American girls has suggested the art of flattery.”

“No, no!” he replied. “It’s no flattery, I assure you.”

Just then Hazel and Mr. Corway approached the group standing on the piazza.

Virginia saw them, and with an affected sigh, she turned to John Thorpe, who was standing at the head of the piazza steps, and who also was looking at the approaching couple, and taking him aside, said in a low voice: “John, has it occurred to you that Corway is a handsome man?”

“He certainly is good looking and well proportioned, too,” replied Thorpe, with a quizzical stare at his sister, and his stare developed a smile, as he added, pleasantly: “But why? – are you, too, becoming enamored of this handsome man?”

With downcast eyes, and sudden flushed cheeks, that betrayed the shame she felt at the part she had elected to assume, her answer was given in a low, serious voice: “I have reason to warn you as my cousin’s guardian, that his intentions are not of the best.”

Thorpe felt a strange gripping sensation creep into his heart, and then he, too, looked serious, but his seriousness quickly passed, as he thoughtfully muttered: “No, no, ’tis impossible!” and then, in a more unperturbed manner, said slowly: “His reputation for honor and rectitude is above reproach.”

Though his muttering was scarcely audible, Virginia heard him. “Are you sure?” she replied, in a voice equally subdued, and with a flash of anger in her meaning glance. “You may find that he will bear watching. And you also may find that his attention to Hazel is an insult to our family honor.”

The possibility of Hazel, his guileless orphan niece, of whom he was so proud, could be the victim of a base deception, had never entered his mind, and so it happened that the first shadow that had darkened the serenity of his trust, was, strangely enough, projected by his sister.

As his eyes again fell upon Hazel’s sweet, sensible face, then lifted to the manly, honest countenance of her companion, he at once banished the fear from his mind, and impatiently exclaimed: “Oh, this is nonsense!” Then he turned on his heel, hesitated, and again turned, and looked furtively at Corway, muttering: “Yet I cannot banish the thought. I wonder what causes Virginia – no, I have never suspected him of vice.” Then he slowly disappeared through the vestibule.

As Corway and Hazel approached the steps, Virginia seemed to stiffen and slightly shudder. She felt like ice, and disdained the slightest recognition which he made to her. She turned away with a look of ineffable contempt, and moved slowly over to Rutley and Constance.

Corway instinctively felt that she had been a witness to his scene with Hazel, but he affected unconcern, and allowed the incident to pass without comment.

During the brief time this significant episode was being enacted, Hazel’s attention was attracted to Sam and Dorothy approaching on the drive, so she was unaware of the change that had come over her cousin.

“You must come in, Sam, ’cause I like you, and you haven’t been to see us for a long time – Oh, mamma, we have had such fine fun, Sam and I” – and there appeared from around the corner of the piazza Dorothy Thorpe pulling Sam Harris along by the sleeve.

“Well, Sam,” said Mrs. Thorpe, overlooking him from the piazza, “we thought you had forgotten us.”

“No, indeed,” replied Sam, and as he discovered Virginia, he added under his breath: “At least not while that fair party is around.”

“Of course, you have acted as Mrs. Harris’ escort?”

“My aunt is on the lawn,” he answered, and then as he ascended the steps, greeted Virginia. “Miss Thorpe will permit me to congratulate her upon her safe return.”

“I have had quite a journey,” replied Virginia coldly.

“Well, you have enjoyed it?” ventured Sam, and then he noted a swift questioning glance of anger.

In his dilemma, he felt an awkwardness creeping over him and grinned broadly, and then stupidly faltered: “That is, I guess so!”

“You guess wide of the mark.”

“Aha,” replied Sam, with a roguish twinkle of the eye, “my eyes do not deceive me, eh?”

“Flattery is embarrassing to me. I beg of you to avoid it.” And she thereupon, with a look of weariness, turned and disappeared through the vestibule.

“I guess so! I guess so!” exclaimed Sam, abashed, and a flush of mortification overspread his face.

“Do you like auntie, Sam?” abruptly questioned the child.

She had softly stolen to his side, unperceived, and her voice sounded so close as to startle him.

“Ea, ah! – well, I should think so,” he unconsciously muttered.

“Mercy!” exclaimed Mrs. Thorpe, who could ill repress a smile – “Dorothy, dear! I think the robins are calling for you out in the sunshine.”

“Come, little one,” said Sam, glad of an opportunity to escape from an awkward position. “And while you are listening to the feathered songsters, I’ll keep a sharp lookout for the fair party you call auntie. Come,” and he took the child’s hand and the two ran down the steps. Darting around the corner, they almost collided with John Thorpe and Mrs. Harris, who were approaching to join the company on the piazza.

“Ha – democratic Hazel in the role of ‘noblesse oblige,’ is something new – congratulations, my lord, on the conquest!” said Mrs. Harris.

“I am proud of the acquaintance of so fair a democrat,” and confronting Mrs. Harris, he continued: “England’s nobility lays homage at the feet of your fair democrats, for they are the golden links in the chain of conquest.”

“And it is my hope that soon one of the golden links will bear the distinguished title, Lady Beauchamp,” replied Mrs. Harris, while her eyes flashed a merry twinkle in the direction of Hazel.

“Of course,” remarked Mr. Corway, who, flushed with jealousy resented the allusion. “His lordship doubtless since his arrival in the country has been overwhelmed with offerings of the youth and beauty of America.”

“It seems to me that you are talking in mysteries,” remarked Hazel.

Mr. Corway moved toward her. “I appeal to the shrine of beauteous Hebe for vindication.”

“Ha! ha! ha! ha!” laughed the girl. “Wouldn’t it be a surprise if the appeal should be negative?”

“But the shrine of Hebe is not often invincible,” rejoined Constance. “You must remember there is hope and there is perseverance – but this is irrelevant,” and, turning to Mrs. Harris, continued: “Have you left Mr. Harris at Rosemont?”

“Oh, no! James is out in the flower garden, discussing rose culture with Virginia.”

“Then I propose that we join them,” said Mrs. Thorpe.

“And I suggest a stroll through the lovely lawn, under the glory of Autumn foliage,” added Rutley, who immediately turned and offered Constance his arm, and the two passed down the steps.

Hazel and Corway were following Rutley, when John Thorpe attracted the girl’s attention by quietly exclaiming: “Hazel!”

She at once turned to Corway: “I shall be with you directly – uncle has something to say to me.”

As Mr. Corway and Mrs. Harris passed down the steps, John Thorpe and Hazel entered the house.

“You have something to say to me, Uncle?”

“Yes, Hazel,” and as they passed into the drawing room he bit his lip in an endeavor to appear unperturbed.

With a girl’s intuition, she scented something unpleasant, and with a timid and startled look, she faltered: “What – is it Uncle?”

“Hazel,” he began, and his eyes rested on his beautiful niece – very beautiful just then, her eyes bright and clear and “peach-bloom” of health, the famed Oregon coloring so becoming to the sex, and as he looked at her he became suddenly conscious of a struggle raging in his breast. A struggle

between doubt and confidence – but he stumbled on slowly – “I think – you show more – concern for – a – the company of Mr. Corway than prudence – I mean – Hazel!”

At that moment Virginia pushed aside the portiere and silently stepped into the room.

John Thorpe paused, for he saw the girl’s face whiten, and her eyes look into his with an expression of wonderment, and then his heart seemed to leap to his throat, and choke him with a sense of shame at his implication.

He put his arm gently about her, looked into the depths of her blue eyes, and said, kindly: “As you love the memory of your father and your mother, Hazel, beware that you do not make too free in the society of Corway. Let your conduct be hedged about with propriety” —

“Uncle!” she interrupted, drawing away from him like a startled fawn hit from ambush.

Virginia saw her opportunity to sever the friendship between her brother and Corway.

Before her transformation she would have been shocked beyond measure at so wicked a falsehood, as she then decided to launch. Impelled by a consuming desire for revenge, no blush of shame checked her mad course, and “no still small voice” warned her of her sin.

She said: “John, if our family honor is to be protected from scandal, you will prevent your niece from having further to do with Mr. Corway.”

Both John and Hazel turned toward her. A deep silence ensued.

Implicit trust and confidence, the confidence begotten in perfect domestic peace and contentment, had followed John Thorpe – but now, for the first time, he found a tinge of shame and indignation had crept into his heart – and he could not banish it.

At last he gravely broke the silence – “Have you no answer to this, Hazel?”

The girl’s eyes flashed resentment, but she refrained from angry expression, for to her uncle she always showed the greatest deference, yet her voice trembled a little as she said, with girlish dignity: “I decline to reply to such an absurdity.”

“Hazel!” warned Virginia, “you are dangerously near ruin when in the company of that man, for his reputation is anything but clean.”

Again a painful silence followed, Hazel, appearing incapable of clearly understanding just what it was all about, stood dumb with astonishment, while John’s varied emotions were seen plainly through the thin veneer of tranquility he tried to maintain.

John Thorpe was jealous of the honor of his house. The mere thought of its possible violation bruised and lacerated him.

Proud of his high position in society; proud of his high rectitude; proud of his father’s untarnished life; proud of the fact that not the faintest shadow of scandal could ever attach to his house or name – the hinted criminations of his orphan niece, maintained in his home as one of the family, beat upon him with much the same effect as the horrifying wings of a bat upon the face of a frightened child.

Virginia saw and felt that the crisis of her ruse was near. Again a flush of daring sprang into her eyes, ominous of deeper sin, but John unconsciously spared her from further commitment. Doubt was master at last, for he chose to lean toward Virginia.

“Hazel!” he exclaimed, his white, grave face betraying a keen sense of his shame. “Your rash fondness for that man is a sacrifice of affection, and I shall forbid him visiting our house.”

“A wise precaution,” commented Virginia.

At last Hazel’s indignation broke through all restraint.

“I am astonished at your implications,” she retorted, her voice becoming pathetic with the sense of her wounded honor. “My ‘rash fondness’! Uncle!” and she drew her slight form up erect, her eyes flashing defiance: “If to believe in Mr. Corway’s preferment is a sacrifice of affection, then that sacrifice is to me an exalted honor, for I have consented to become his wife!”

“Hazel!” gasped John Thorpe, amazed and dismayed at her declaration.

“I have suspected such a calamity would happen – but even now it is not too late to prevent it!” exclaimed Virginia, sharply.

“Why, Virginia,” reproached Hazel, with a stamp of her foot. “You insult me!” and she turned away to conceal the tears that arose.

During a short, impressive silence, Mrs. Harris abruptly entered the room, followed by Corway and Sam. “Dear me!” she exclaimed, as she smilingly surveyed the trio, “James has often gone into raptures over the domestic cooing of the Thorpes, but I was quite unaware that it made them careless of the wishes of their guests.

“Thorpe, your arm” – and she swept down the room and seized his arm. “Hazel, I have brought you an escort,” and with a smile at Virginia, “I don’t think that Sam is far away. You cannot refuse to come now.”

Hazel proudly accepted Corway’s arm. Then they turned to leave the room. As they neared the door, Virginia exclaimed, with low but startling irony: “Il. cavalier is careful to make it appear he is delighted with the society of his affianced. No doubt feeling an honorable justification for his mercenary felicity. Ho, ho,” Virginia laughed, her lips quivering with scorn. “The situation is charming. Ha, ha, ha, ha.”

The principals to this little drama understood its meaning perfectly, but while Mrs. Harris paused for an instant in wonderment, her easy nature forbade worry – and so the incident quickly passed out of her memory, and Sam was too shrewd to show that he heard it, and with his round face beaming with unquenchable admiration, bowed and offered his arm to her, accompanied by the characteristic side movement of his head – “Ea, ha, I guess so – eh, Auntie?”

The joyous manner of utterance was like a shaft of sunshine bursting through the dark, tragic clouds of impending storm.

Virginia’s first attack fell short of accomplishing the purpose intended, yet the seed of doubt, of suspicion and fear of family disgrace had been grounded in her brother’s mind, and it would be strange, indeed, if Corway’s position proved invulnerable to more carefully-planned attacks.

It must be remembered that an opportunity had come at an unexpected moment, and she impulsively seized upon it. Through it all, however, Virginia must be credited with a sincere belief that Corway’s intentions toward Hazel were as insincere and mercenary as they had been to her.

CHAPTER II

The night of the Harris reception at “Rosemont,” in honor of Lord Beauchamp, was beautiful. Dark, yet serene and tranquil as the illimitable void through which the myriad of glittering stars swept along on their steady course.

The long, gentle, sloping, velvety lawn, stretching away from the broad steps of the great columned piazza, down to the placid waters of the Willamette, was artistically beautified by clusters of magnolias and chestnut trees and native oaks and firs, while the soft sway of advanced Autumn was disclosed in the mellow, gorgeous tints of the oak and maple leaf projected against the dark evergreen of the stately fir; and afar off, to the north, through vistas in the foliage, gleamed the steady electric arc lights of the city.

Marble statuary glistened in white repose, and groups of majestic palms and ferns and holly stood illumined in the soft light of frosted electric globes and quaint Oriental lanterns.

Out from the deep shadow of a wide-spreading oak, and remote from the range of illumination, an old, decrepit and poorly clad man emerged, peering cautiously about, as if afraid of discovery. As he approached near the house and came under the gleams of light, it could be seen that he was gray-haired and a cripple, for he hobbled slowly with the aid of a stout stick. He proceeded to a clump of ferns and close to a high-back, rustic seat, behind which he stood partially concealed.

Feeling satisfied that he had not been seen, and that he was alone, that part of the grounds being temporarily deserted, he muttered impatiently: “Where the devil does Rutley keep himself? I’ve been dodging about these grounds for an hour trying to locate him, and to get posted.”

The words had scarcely escaped his lips when down behind the seat he ducked.

Simultaneously, Virginia Thorpe and William Harris appeared, descending the piazza steps.

“Congratulations, Mr. Harris, on your reception. It is a brilliant affair, and the grounds are simply beautiful.”

“I am delighted at receiving congratulations from a lady whose taste is acknowledged without a peer.”

“Now, Mr. Harris, you know I object to flattery,” responded Virginia, in a deprecating tone of voice. “Why, I have lost my fan. How unfortunate! I fear I have dropped it in the ball-room.”

“I shall try to find it immediately. No, no; no trouble whatever.”

“Thanks, Mr. Harris. I shall await your return here.”

As Mr. Harris hastened up the steps, Virginia leisurely moved a few yards, and then sat down on a seat, quite unconscious of the figure crouched in hiding behind it.

The proximity of Virginia did not suit the fellow, and he forthwith endeavored to sneak away unseen, but the noise, faint as he made, attracted her attention.

She sprang to her feet with a slight, terrified shriek, but quickly recovering her self-possession, as she noted his aged and bent condition, gently said: “Poor old man, your intrusion on these premises may be unwelcome.” After a pause, evidently for an answer, she went on kindly: “Do you seek alms?”

Leaning on his stick he humbly removed his hat, and said in abject tones: “Pitty da sorrar dees old-a da gray hairs. Eesa mak-a da bolda to come a da here, so much-a da rich-a kind-a people to da poor old-a men lik-a da me. Ten-a years eesa black-a da boot; saw da-ood, sella da ba-nan, turnoppsis, carrotsis, ca-babbages; do any-ting for mak-a-da mon, go back-a da sunny Italy. Look-a da lame! Canna da work – mussa da beg, sweet-a da lady – kind-a charity.”

“Dear me!” replied Virginia, regretfully. “I haven’t a coin with me, but let me advise you to begone, for you must know that if you are discovered here your age will not protect you.”

The old man bowed low. “Essa many tanks, kind-a lady. Essa da go.”

“And mark me, sir,” added Mr. Harris, who had quickly returned with the fan. “Should I find you loitering around these grounds again tonight, officers will take care of you.”

“Oh, Signor! Dona tell a da po-lis. Da poor a da old a man essa much da hunger. Begga do mon to buy a da bread. Eesa da all-a Signor. Eesa da all.”

“Oh, Mr. Harris, please lend me a coin for him. I fear he really is in need,” broke in Virginia.

“There!” responded Mr. Harris, throwing him a coin. “You can thank this benevolent lady, whose presence affords you liberty. Not a word. Off with you from these grounds. Begone.”

The old fellow picked up the half-dollar piece, and hobbling away, soon disappeared into the shadow.

“It is a pleasure to return your fan. I found it in the vestibule uninjured.”

“Thanks, Mr. Harris,” said Virginia, receiving the fan. “I shall be more careful of it hereafter.”

“Ea-ah, I guess so, eh, Uncle!” broke in Sam, striding toward them.

“Oh, oh, Sam! Really!” laughed Mr. Harris, as he looked meaningly at him. “Ah! You seem delighted.”

“I think so, eh, Uncle,” accompanied by the habitual side movement of his head. “Congratulate me on having found Miss Thorpe after a long search,” and turning to Virginia, he added, with a smile broadening his face – “you have promised to dance with me. May I indulge in the pleasure now?”

“Yes, Sam,” she replied, with an air of fatigue, “but I would rather you defer the pleasure.”

“Miss Thorpe is fatigued and Sam is too much of a gallant to deny her a little rest,” appealed Mr. Harris.

“Cert!” answered Sam, as a shade of disappointment flitted across his face. “Anything I can do to serve Miss Thorpe shall be done.”

“Thank you, Sam,” replied Virginia, relieved.

“I will call upon Miss Thorpe to favor me with her company later, eh, Uncle?” and Sam bowed and quickly disappeared.

“Sam is a noble-hearted fellow! Ranged the Texas plains a few years, didn’t he?”

“Yes,” replied Mr. Harris. “When a lad he was threatened with consumption, and physicians recommended a few years of out-door life in Texas. It cured him, but he became a little fixed in the customs. Sterling fellow, though – great heart – all heart. Be seated,” pointing to the seat which she had previously occupied.

At that moment there appeared descending the piazza steps Mr. Corway, with Hazel and Constance on either side of him.

“Your reason, Corway, for doubting his title of lord?” interrogated Constance.

“I possess no proofs,” replied Corway. “I but express an opinion,” and he discreetly refrained from further utterance on the subject, though his thoughts were insistent on his identity of Lord Beauchamp as Philip Rutley.

“But you must have some grounds even for an opinion,” persisted Constance.

“Well, if he is not a lord,” hazarded Hazel, who, purposely or otherwise, by her joining the discussion, released Mr. Corway from an embarrassing reply, which at that time he was loath to make, “he certainly should be one, for he is such a dear, sweet man, so eminently exact and proper.”

“And so distinguished, don’t-che-know,” finished Mr. Corway, with such peculiarly keen mimicry and smiling abandon as to draw from Hazel a flash of admiration, and from Mrs. Thorpe a ripple of laughter with the remark, “Satire unmasked by Cupid.”

Further conversation was interrupted by Beauchamp himself, who appeared alone, descending the broad piazza steps. “It’s so warm in there I decided to refresh a little in the cool air.”

He halted a moment on one of the steps, fixed the monocle to his left eye, and lordly surveyed the two groups.

After evidently satisfying himself as to their personnel, he deliberately removed the monocle from his eye and resumed his passage down the steps. “Miss Thorpe here, and Mr. Harris, and Mrs. Thorpe, and the fair Hazel” – and ignoring Corway, he went on – “then I shall have no need to commune alone with my thoughts.”

“I am sure my Lord Beauchamp is too much of a devotee to the ‘tripping muse’ to absent himself very long from the ball-room?” volunteered Constance.

“Indeed it would be difficult for me to enjoy myself for any length of time away from the place where, as Byron puts it, ‘Youth and Beauty meet, to chase the glowing hours with flying feet.’” And moving over to Hazel, he said: “By the way, you have promised me the pleasure of dancing with you the next waltz.”

“Indeed!” replied the maid, eyeing him archly, “the honor of a waltz with my lord is too rare a favor to be neglected.”

The gracious and suave smile with which Rutley answered her was not at all appreciated by Mr. Corway.

And as Rutley glanced his way, their eyes met. Virginia saw it. She instantly grasped the full meaning of that glance – the deadly hatred of rivals.

Rutley, with familiarity begotten of mutual esteem, as he fondly hoped, linked Hazel’s yielding arm in his and led her toward the piazza. “By the way,” and he spoke very confidently, “Mr. Corway seems to have a warm attachment for Mrs. Thorpe” —

The girl halted and looked questioningly at him.

“I mean,” continued Rutley, in a sort of apologetic tone, “he is apparently quite the lion with her.”

Passing a few feet near them were John Thorpe and Mrs. Harris, who had appeared unnoticed from another part of the grounds.

John Thorpe plainly heard Rutley’s allusion to Corway and his wife, and became profoundly sensible of that same strange feeling infolding him, as he experienced when Virginia first intimated Corway’s questionable character. “Is it possible that, after all, Constance, and not Hazel, is the real object of his attention?”

He was conscious of a sense of jealousy arising within him, and so strong and virulent as to be beyond control, and compelled him to turn aside, to conceal the anger that must be depicted on his face. He halted while Mrs. Harris joined Virginia and Mr. Harris.

“Mrs. Thorpe is most attractive,” Hazel at length replied.

“I have heard that not long ago he was attached to Miss Thorpe, but lately has transferred his affection to another,” continued Rutley.

“Virginia was fond of his society, yet ’tis not always, you may remember, that those who have won our love return it.”

The strains of dreamy music drifted out upon the air.

“Well, at present, Corway seems persistent in his attentions to Mrs. Thorpe.”

Again John Thorpe winced at the connection of his wife’s name with Corway.

And then Rutley felt himself pushed aside, while Corway offered his arm to Hazel.

“Will you accompany me to the ball-room?”

Hazel drew a step aside and exclaimed, half angrily, yet seemingly rather pleased at Corway’s audacity.

“Joe!”

“Hazel!” he responded with just the faintest suggestion of command in his voice.

It was his first assumption of authority over his affianced, and he won – for unlike the “feminine forwards” of the new school, she appreciated his strong character and showed it by clinging to his arm.

Neither of these two men could be considered handsome, though Corway had the advantage of being more youthful and taller of stature, with large, bright eyes and dark curly hair, which with clear-cut, manly features, seemed to charm the fancy and captivate the maiden’s eye.

While Rutley’s graceful and pliant frame carried more elegance, an assumed superb superiority, a cold, ironical disdain and lofty ease, bespoke an imperious nature, indifferent to that soft, beguilement so charming to women.

Corway turned to Rutley, and, bowing low, exclaimed, with studied politeness: "I beg my lord's pardon," and so saying, he passed up the piazza steps with Hazel and disappeared within.

They were closely followed by Mr. Harris and Mrs. Thorpe.

Rutley fixed the monocle to his eye and stared at the retreating Corway in blank amazement.

Meanwhile, John Thorpe was absorbed in profound thought, and oblivious of his surroundings, said to himself: "What can his lordship mean? Corway's persistent attention to my wife! Was that mere accidental gossip? He shall explain!" And he looked fixedly at Rutley.

It was at that moment that Mrs. Harris, having reached his side, said: "Your arm, Thorpe. Dear me!" And she started back at seeing his gloomy face. "Why, I declare, the frowning 'Ajax' could not look more unsociable."

For a moment Thorpe displayed confusion, but by a strong effort subdued his agitation and offered his arm. "Of late," he explained, "my nervous system has been subject to momentary shocks." Leading her toward the piazza, "I beg your pardon."

"I am afraid that unless you provide yourself with a mask for such occasions the shock is likely to become contagious," she remarked, as they passed up the steps.

Meanwhile Rutley, having removed the monocle from his eye, allowed his frigidity to dissolve, and, slowly stepping a few paces toward the east end of the house, paused under the shadow of a magnolia, and at once seemed to plunge in deep reflection, to be startled a few moments later by hearing Virginia close to him, in a low tone, saying: "How does my lord propose to resent that insult?"

Seeing him alone, she had noiselessly and unperceived, stolen to his side, convinced by what she had just discovered, that he was meditating some sort of revenge on Corway, and she determined to ascertain its nature.

Her fertile brain had already conceived Rutley her ally, and it was with no uncertain or wavering purpose that she approached him with a question pregnant with sinister import.

Rutley looked at her steadily, as though trying to penetrate her motive, then, without moving his eyes from hers, said deliberately: "Well, if he doesn't apologize, my friend will call on him."

"You mean a shooting affair?"

"I do not say, but I understand that is a popular way in this country to avenge an outrage."

"Yes, that is true," she said, "particularly in our West, but it is fast going out of fashion. In fact, on the Coast, it is seldom practiced now. Besides, my lord, I advise you not to try it. I've heard he's a dead shot," and she abruptly stopped and looked furtively about, and then, in a more discreet tone of voice, said: "Will you walk?"

He instantly comprehended her desire to confide something of interest to him, and as they slowly proceeded over the soft, velvety grass, and without betraying haste to know what she was evidently anxious to disclose, he replied, sneeringly:

"Ah, he is! Well, these affairs are settled in an honorable way in a gentleman's country."

"I again warn you not to try it," she said. "If you do, you will likely find yourself a subject for some hospital surgeon."

"Indeed!" laughed Rutley, with a sarcastic ring in his voice.

She halted, turned to him, and continued in a low tone. "Yes, there is a better plan – that insult can be wiped out in a more effectual manner."

"How?"

For one moment Virginia looked far off across the placid waters of the Willamette, over and beyond the rugged hills shrouded in gloomy repose. Was it the "still small voice within her crying in anguish 'beware, beware,'" if so, it was unheeded, drowned in the impetuous desire for revenge.

Shocked and enraged by the discovery of what she considered Corway's perfidy, a strain of virulent passion possessed her, and subdued her softer and otherwise most charming personality.

"Corway has done me a wrong I never will forget, and I shall not pause at any opportunity to avenge it. My cousin, Hazel, is betrothed to him. My brother has a rash, impetuous temper, and is

exceedingly jealous of our family honor. By insinuating Corway's insincere attachment to Hazel, his money-mad impecuniosity, and so forth, you will produce a coolness between John and Corway that may end in their complete estrangement. We are watched," she whispered. "Let us move on." Her alert eyes had discovered Sam standing alone on the piazza steps, shading his eyes with his hand as he looked at them.

She guessed his purpose, but was too far away to hear him say angrily: "If that lord attempts any fooling with that fair party, I'll give him some eye-shutters, I guess so!"

Without heeding the episode, Rutley replied: "But you must know that your brother has not insulted me, and you must also be aware that the attempt to influence him may fail."

"If you will follow my directions John will consider you his friend. If properly managed you need have no fear of its ultimate success. For several months last year John was in China. During that time Corway paid frequent visits to his home."

"But" – interposed Rutley, quickly.

"Do not misunderstand my meaning," responded Virginia, with an involuntary flash of indignation. "Corway is a man of great moral probity. But John may be brought to think him something the reverse. Do you understand?"

"I will have satisfaction!" exclaimed Rutley.

"Somebody is following us," whispered Virginia.

"Where?" queried Rutley. "I fail to see anyone."

"It may have been the shadow of the swinging light," at length she remarked, reassured, and, dismissing the thought from her mind, continued: "I have already warned you of a duel. To prove how insincere Corway's affection is for Hazel, you may call my brother's attention to a ring that he wears on the little finger of his left hand. I let Hazel have it for a short time because she admired it, and begged it from me, and Corway took it from her."

"Has the ring any peculiar feature by which it may be distinguished from others?"

"Yes, a single diamond set in a double heart of pearls."

"Is it yours?" he asked, softly.

"No," Virginia promptly answered, but she added in a hesitating manner, as though weighing the propriety of further explanation – "that is – well – it is mine for the purpose. I let Hazel have it unknown to Constance."

And so it happened, a slip of the tongue, one inadvertent, indiscreet admission, gave him his cue. A vision opened to his mind and he immediately speculated on its possibilities.

"Then the ring belongs to Mrs. Thorpe?" he questioned, insidiously.

"Yes," Virginia affirmed, in a halting way. "John gave it to Constance before they were married."

"Oh, indeed!" Rutley exclaimed, and he muttered low and meaningly, while the whites of his eyes gleamed with sinister import. "Corway wears a ring given by John Thorpe to his wife."

Soon as he had spoken Virginia heard and instinctively felt that she had been indiscreet in admitting the ring belonged to Constance, and said by way of caution: "Of course, I trust in the honor of your lordship to refrain from connecting Mrs. Thorpe's name with the ring, or to, in any manner, let it be known that you know it is not mine."

Evidently Rutley did not hear her, for he was absorbed in thought – thought that produced an evil gleam in his eyes.

A slight pause followed, and taking it for granted my lord would not betray the trust she reposed in him, she said, as looking in his eyes with significant daring: "Draw John's notice to it as confirming Corway's bold and deceitful attention to Hazel."

Virginia was aware that John would recognize the ring as his wife's, but she under-rated the violence of the storm it would precipitate, and she trusted too much in her own ability to control it

in the direction she desired. She likewise rated Beauchamp as a weak, egotistical, effeminate sort of man. She was now to experience her great mistake.

Rutley in his turn fixed his gaze steadfastly upon her, and which became so intense, so mysteriously searching, as to cause her, strong-minded woman as she was, to feel she was but a weak thing beside him.

He spoke quietly and without the faintest tremor in his voice. "Do you know to whom you suggested this?"

"Lord Beauchamp," she timidly responded. And then there suddenly sprang into her eyes a new light, accompanied by a slight start.

"Why do you start?" asked Rutley, not for a moment removing his eyes from hers.

"No, 'tis impossible. You cannot be Philip Rutley?" she gasped, as she drew back amazed. "For you have already denied him once to me."

"Yes, I am he!" he exclaimed.

There followed a moment of profound silence. Rutley watching the effect of his disclosure upon her.

And she, at first astounded by his audacious nerve, at length grasped his position, and finally smiled, as though in admiration of his arch achievement. "You are a master imposter," she broke in. "Be as clever with the material I have given you, and Corway will not long stand in your way."

"Did Hazel tell you of my proposal to her three years ago?"

"Yes," she answered promptly.

"I believe she rejected me at that time because of Corway," he musingly added.

"Your opportunity is at hand," she affirmed.

"I accept it;" and then he cautioned in a low tone: "Be careful never to breathe my real name."

"And you – you will continue to be?" – and she smiled quizzically as she put the question.

"My Lord Beauchamp."

"A most consummate scoundrel!" she added pleasantly.

"The scoundrel begs to share the compliment with his colleague, Miss Virginia Thorpe," he ironically replied, again bowing low.

That accentuated remark by Rutley revealed to her with sudden vividness the detestable character she was developing.

Acutely sensitive, the stigma smote her with a repugnance that stung and smarted as quivering flesh under the sharp cut of a lash; and being naturally of a fiery temper, she passionately retorted, "It's false!"

The words had scarcely escaped her lips when she realized her indiscretion, and faltered, "I – I – mean –" and then unable to recover from her sudden flight of passion, or to completely subdue her agitation, she burst out aloud, in utter disregard of her surroundings, "Oh! It is awful, awful!"

Rutley was alarmed, and hastily gripped her wrist, and in low tones cautioned, "For God's sake, hush! Don't shout it to the winds! Remember, you urged this damnable business upon me. Do you want me to give it to the world?"

His artifice succeeded, and under his influence she became quieter. "No! No! No!" she whispered. "Don't, please!" Then again she stared at the ground as though dazed with some vague terror. Suddenly she covered her face with her hands and moaned, "What have I done?"

Then, arising from a place of concealment close by, the old Italian Cripple previously mentioned doffed his hat and said, "Eesa da bet, much-a keep-a do mon! Do poor old-a man, Eesa beg-a da mon, a da charity Signora, Signor."

Tossing him a coin, Rutley said, "This is an unseasonable place for your calling, old man." Then, turning to Virginia – "Permit me to escort you to the house."

"I don't like that old man," she replied. "He is prying about everywhere. Do you think he heard me?"

“I have no fear of that,” replied Rutley, as they moved on toward the house. “He appears quite old and no doubt is partially deaf.”

“Very well,” responded Virginia, “and now that we understand each other, I think it time for me to mingle with the guests.”

As they disappeared in the distance, the old cripple followed them, flitting from shadow to shadow, with catlike agility, astonishing in such an apparently old man.

Having arrived at the piazza steps, Rutley and Virginia parted.

Returning some distance into the shadow, he softly laughed. “A little startled, eh? Didn’t think I could impersonate a peer of England’s realm. Well, she knows the secret now and I can safely rely on her assistance because Corway has cast her aside for Hazel. She has given me material with which to strike at him and I will strike home – but not as she suggests. Oh, no!” and again a sinister smile crept over his face. “Dangerous, but Hazel’s wealth is worth the risk.

“Meanwhile, I am getting short of funds, and cannot keep up the pace much longer, unless my other plan succeeds. But should I fail altogether – ” and he became absorbed in deep study, silent and motionless as the statue of Lincoln by which he stood, but only for a moment. “Everybody here lionizes me, believing I am a genuine nobleman.” And then he looked up with a far-off, triumphant expression in his eyes and a cunning smile on his lips, “My lord will borrow a few thousand on his – name – just for a temporary accommodation, and then he will vanish.”

A slight noise behind startled him and caused him to look about; but, discovering no one, he regained his composure. To make sure, however, he called in a low voice, “Jack! Jack!”

Whereupon the old cripple again stood forth from his concealment, this time from behind the trunk of the wide spreading oak and, leaning on his stick, obsequiously doffed his hat. “I uncover to a prince of villainy.”

“Ha, ha, to my arms, you rascally imposter!” joyfully exclaimed Rutley, as he embraced him.

Halting and drawing away in pretended surprise, Jack exclaimed with dreamy reflection, “Naw, Eesa, not-a bees-a da imposeator. Eesa be Ital-e-own!”

“Splendid, Jack!” exclaimed Rutley with admiration. “Your disguise is perfect, but” – and Rutley laughed – “a little pale about the gills, eh?”

“Eesa look-a like-a ma fadder,” and Jack proudly expanded himself. “Make-a da great-a soldier. Note-a da pale here – Naw,” touching his ears. “Garibaldi geev-a ma fadder dees-s da Palestrino,” and Jack threw open his coat and proudly displayed a medal.

“Palestrino!” exclaimed Rutley gleefully. “Jack, things are coming our way with a rush. Did you hear her – the maiden fair, with the blue black hair, how she plays into our hands?”

Jack grinned and chuckled, “Ah, ah – a Portland rose, Phil!”

“Incomparably beautiful, Jack! But, oh, such devilish thorns!”

“Good for twenty thousand simoleons at any rate? Eh, Phil?”

“Twenty thousand or bust, Jack,” grinned Rutley. “You watch me do the trick. I’ll make Thorpe wish he were dead. I shall connect his wife’s name instead of Hazel’s with Corway.”

“What!” gasped Jack, dismayed by Rutley’s daring.

“By a little juggling of facts, as it were, I’ll make Thorpe believe Corway wears the ring given him as a love token by Constance. It was Thorpe’s gift to his wife. Do you comprehend? Now, do you understand how simple a thing it will be to make Thorpe wish he were dead? Remember how he and old Harris broke up our investment company?”

“Maybe I don’t,” replied Jack dolefully, rubbing his stomach in a significant manner.

“And, Jack!” and Rutley glinted at him meaningly and said very seriously, “That fellow Corway suspects me.”

“The devil he does! We must get him out of our way.”

“Tomorrow!” – and for the space of perhaps five seconds they looked meaningly at each other. Then Rutley broke the silence.

“The child is in the house,” continued Rutley seriously and in a low voice.

“Good!” responded Jack. “I was afraid your tableau scheme had failed and Dorothy remained at home.”

“Not at all. They jumped at the idea,” laughed Rutley, “and on my suggestion Mrs. Harris begged for Dorothy’s presence at the ‘Fete’.”

“Fate!” corrected Jack.

“Too pointed,” calmly remarked Rutley.

“Well, the tableau was a great success, ‘Hebe’ attended by ‘Circe’ and ‘Cupid’.”

“Dorothy as ‘Circe’ posed splendidly; she is the pet of the guests” – and, lowering his voice, Rutley continued gravely:

“I have persuaded her indulgent mother to let the child remain up and enjoy her honors a little longer; she may be out and around now at any moment.”

“She wears a white dress and with a light brown sash about her waist. Long golden hair – oh, you know her.”

“I shall keep a sharp lookout and take her the first opportunity.”

“Skip!” suddenly cautioned Rutley. “Somebody’s coming. Keep in the deep shadow.”

“Trust me.” And as Jack turned to move away he said to himself, “Tonight there’ll be things doing, for the devil is at work and hell’s a-brewing.”

Rutley watched Jack vanish in the gloom, then muttered to himself, “Why this fear? Out with it and to my purpose.”

Some readers would call it fate, others would probably have construed it as accidental, while yet again others of a more scientific turn of mind would have reasoned it a result of that strange magnetic attraction whereby two minds, simultaneously engaged in deep absorbing thought on the same subject, are mysteriously drawn toward each other.

That John Thorpe was alone at that moment descending the steps of the piazza, was proof of the phenomenon, there could be no question, and that he was deeply thinking of a subject very near and dear to him was also evident, for he paused on one of the steps and clapped his hand to his forehead as though to draw out some evil thing that lay leaden within.

Once he shivered as if shaken with a cold of the shadow of some indefinable disaster about to overwhelm him, and then he passed on down the steps muttering to himself in an abstracted manner, “Doubt; terrible, torturing doubt; I cannot endure it!”

“Welcome, Mr. Thorpe,” came from Rutley in the mild regularly moderated voice of a man content with his surroundings. “It only needs the quiet tones of a gifted conversationalist to make this beautiful spot supremely pleasant. All honor to Mrs. Harris and her companion.”

Mrs. Harris, accompanied by Virginia, had just then appeared from around the east side of the house – “Ah, my lord, your absence from the ballroom occasions much inquiry,” said Mrs. Harris.

“Mrs. Harris will confer a favor by satisfying the inquirers with the excuse that his lordship is enjoying a smoke with a friend. Does my lord approve the answer?” replied John Thorpe, eyeing Rutley furtively.

“Most decidedly!” he affirmed.

“Then Virginia and myself will be spectators of the next waltz. Your lordship will favor us with your company soon? Mr. Thorpe, you will not forget your promise to Constance for the Newport?”

“Just in time, eh, auntie, I guess so!” cut in the cheerful voice of strenuous Sam, who had bounded down the steps and stood in front of them before they could turn around.

“Oh, horrors!” gasped Virginia under her breath.

“Why, Sam!” laughed Mrs. Harris, “you want me to dance with you again and Virginia here?”

“Oh, no, not you! I mean her, auntie. If you please,” and he bowed to Virginia as he offered her his arm.

Without an instant's hesitation she accepted his arm and at the same time so artfully masked her real feelings that the hot blood raced with joyous glee to the very roots of his hair and caused him to say proudly, "Ha, ha! at last, eh, auntie!"

"I shall be a witness, Sam," replied his aunt in a tone which conveyed a warning.

On ascending the steps Virginia paused to gather up her skirt, turned half around and looked very significantly at Rutley.

He met her glance and bowed. The action brought Mrs. Harris also to a stop.

Observing the halt, Mr. Thorpe exclaimed, "His Grace and myself will be along presently. Au revoir."

And as the party moved on, Sam rejoined under his breath, "I guess so, but not with his fair party, not if Sam knows it."

In the silence that followed for both men, now being alone, were alert, instinctively apprehending danger, John Thorpe drew from the inside pocket of his coat a small cigar case and tendered it to Rutley.

Silently and with studied poise, Rutley took therefrom a cigar and returned the case.

Thorpe then took from the case a match, lighted and offered it to Rutley, who, having meanwhile clipped the end of the cigar with a penknife, accepted the light and then broke the silence with, "Are you not going to smoke, Thorpe?"

"Not at present. A stroll through the grounds is more to my fancy."

"Agreed!" promptly responded Rutley, who added, "and may the exercise lighten your spirits, which appear heavy tonight."

"Yes, unfortunately I have never been able to conceal my emotions, hence the correctness of your conjecture. My spirits are heavy tonight," replied Thorpe in a low voice and with a deep, long drawn sigh.

It was plain to Rutley that Thorpe was evading an abrupt approach to some potent question in his mind, feverishly eager, yet dreading the kind of information it might elicit.

"Bad digestion, Thorpe. Headaches, troubled dreams and the like fellow," suggested Rutley in his jerky manner.

"Deeper!" added Thorpe in a low voice.

"Ha!" exclaimed Rutley significantly, as he eyed his companion askance. "Family!"

"Oh, God! what shall I do?" suddenly broke from Thorpe in a stifled cry of anguish. "I cannot carry the load!" And then he did that which some readers might term a cowardly thing. No doubt he was actuated by motives irresistibly impelling in a man of his peculiarly sensitive nature.

With head bent low, much as a culprit condoning his infamy, humbled as was his pride, to thus confide his misgivings to a stranger, he began in a low voice:

"My Lord, a few moments since I casually heard you drop a remark suggesting a knowledge of my domestic affairs. I speak to you in confidence, and I am sure Your Grace will spare me the humiliation of feeling that confidence is misplaced. Your position gives you at times the advantage of hearing – a – things said of others that is of no moment or concern to you."

Rutley's first thought was, "My opportunity to strike at Corway has come," and if Thorpe at that moment could have seen the cunning leer play about the corners of Rutley's mouth and the flash of exultation that sprang into his eyes, he might have hesitated, nay, ceased to have conversed with him further on such a grave subject.

But the fleeting smile went unseen, the exultant flash as quickly disappeared, and in its place a very serious look came over Rutley's face, as in a low voice he replied, slowly but very distinctly. "Really, Thorpe, I am at a loss to understand your motives in questioning me on matters relative to your domestic affairs, and though I may possess information in which I am not particularly interested, still to asperse the character of any person on mere rumor is not compatible with the dignity or honor of my house; however, if you will be explicit on the subject of your singular request, I shall, through

sympathy, communicate all I have heard to relieve or confirm your mind of a – I fancy – a terrible suspicion.”

For a few moments Thorpe could not control his agitation. Overpowered by a sense of shame, his imagination at once conjured up dreadful thoughts.

“Sympathy! a – a – to relieve or confirm a terrible suspicion! My God! what does he mean?” And he placed his left hand tightly over his breast as if something hurt him there, while a cold sweat stood out on his brow. Then with a forced calmness, said:

“A – a – have you heard any disparaging remarks about – a – Mr. Corway?”

“Well, Thorpe, you know ’tis not honorable to repeat the ‘chic’ scandals one hears, though to satisfy you I will say that if you will look at the little finger of Corway’s left hand, you will see a gold ring with a single diamond set in a double heart, which he at times – a – carelessly displays.”

“A ring with a single diamond! What of it?” impatiently questioned Thorpe.

“Oh!” replied Rutley, with an imperturbable stare, “it was a love token from Mrs. John Thorpe.”

“You lie!” exclaimed Thorpe, the nails of his fingers imprinting deeply in the flesh of his tightly clenched fists, with the fierceness of the passion that had flamed within him.

“I do not lie!” Rutley calmly and slowly replied, as he looked steadily into Thorpe’s eyes.

“You confound my wife with Hazel,” hoarsely accused Thorpe.

“I reiterate,” responded Rutley, in the same even tone of voice, “the particular ring in question was a gift from Constance, John Thorpe’s wife, and not from Hazel.”

Gasping for breath, Thorpe turned his head aside and groaned as he remembered it was his gift to Constance before they were married.

Suddenly he gripped Rutley by the sleeve. They halted and confronted each other. And the dark formless shadow that had followed them also halted.

“From whom have you your information?” queried Thorpe, looking into Rutley’s eyes.

“I do not feel at liberty to mention, but it can be substantiated.”

“By whom?” demanded Thorpe.

“Well, I don’t know of any person more capable than a – a – Mr. Thorpe’s wife!” replied Rutley in a most nonchalant and matter-of-fact manner.

And even through the depth of the gloom that surrounded them he saw the scarlet flush of rage and shame flame across Thorpe’s white brow as he bowed his head, humbled to the dust.

For a moment not a word was spoken by either of the men. Suddenly Thorpe looked up and hoarsely said:

“My wife! Give me two or three, one which she can substantiate.”

“My dear Thorpe,” deprecatingly pleaded Rutley. “You have called upon me to undertake a very unpleasant task.”

“Your Lordship has gone too far to recede. I must know all” – and there was imminent danger in Thorpe’s quivering voice, which Rutley felt was not to be trifled with.

“Well – one thing – Corway’s close and steady attention to her during your absence in China.”

“You mean to Hazel?” said Thorpe, with a look so deeply concentrated that the movement of a single hair of Rutley’s eyelash would have meant an instant blow on the mouth.

“No, I mean – to your wife,” accentuated Rutley. “Their secret and protracted wanderings offended your sister. Reproofs, reproaches and warnings were unavailing and ended in Corway being refused admittance to your house, which resulted in frequent quarrels between your wife and your sister.”

Thorpe here recalled Virginia’s warning, “Corway will bear watching,” and he moaned, “Oh, God!”

“He tried many pretenses to regain communication with your wife,” resumed Rutley, “one being to visit Hazel Brooke, for whom, except for her money, he has no regard whatever. At length on the discovery of secret correspondence, Virginia became aghast at his boldness and contemplated

seeking legal aid when you returned. Of course, she retired and left the matter in your hands and she was unwilling at that time to shock your home-coming with a knowledge of the truth.”

“Enough! Enough! Oh, God, what a vile thing has nestled here!” And John Thorpe pressed both hands tightly over his heart in a vain endeavor to suppress the emotion that filled his throat and choked his utterances, and tears of shame gathered in his eyes as he continued slowly:

“When – I – wedded Constance – I took to myself the purest angel out of heaven. But now – ! Farewell happiness – farewell peace – forever! Oh, Corway, I want to clutch you by the throat!”

Turning to Rutley, he added tensely, “Follow me.”

“Now for satisfaction,” muttered Rutley exultantly, and with a sinister smile on his lips he followed John Thorpe up the broad steps and into the blaze of the brilliantly lighted ballroom.

A shadow straightened itself up behind a bed of massed asters, deepened, grew thicker and resolved itself into the solid form of a man. It was Jack Shore. He had dodged them unseen and overheard their conversation.

Perhaps it was through hearing the conspiracy and its masterly execution that shocked him into moralizing on man’s inhumanity to man.

At any rate, he exclaimed half aloud, “As cold-blooded a bit of villainy as possible to conceive. I didn’t think Phil had it in him.” Suddenly he shrugged his shoulders.

“I say, old man,” cut in Sam, appearing from the east side of the piazza, “you want to look alive there. You are getting too near the front. First thing you know uncle will have you sent up as a vag.”

Though taken by surprise, Jack, having just turned to move off into the deeper shadow, halted and, removing his hat, faced Sam in an assumed most humble and abject terror, “Signor, I don-a mean to come-a da close. Jess-a tried to get-a da peep ov-a da grand-a fete of-a much-a da rich people. Eesa da all, Signor.”

“It’s all right, old man, but take my advice and keep off the grounds. ’Twill be better for your health.”

In the meantime Dorothy had fluttered down the great steps and ran toward Sam.

“Hello, little one! Having lots of fun, eh!”

And with the same, he caught Dorothy’s hands and he commenced to dance her about as he sang the words, “Little Bo-peep had lost her sheep and couldn’t tell where to find them.”

“Oh, don’t Sam; I want to find papa!” replied the child, impatiently.

“You do, eh? Now, don’t you want me to be your escort?”

“Come, I’ll tell you how to find him. You shall sit on my shoulder and be the tallest queen of the party, while I be the horse to ’lope about in search of your papa.”

“Thank you, Sam, but I can’t stay for a ride now. I’m in such a hurry; some other time,” and the child turned from him and ran toward the slowly retreating form of Jack.

“You are, eh? All right, and while you are looking for papa, I’m going to look for the fair party you call auntie. I guess so!” Whereupon Sam quickly sprang up the steps. Arriving on the piazza he halted, turned around and looked toward the child as though the premonition of something wrong – something associated with the child’s insecurity, being alone – had suddenly darted into his brain; but seeing others of the guests at that moment emerging from the east front of the house on the well lighted grounds, he dismissed the “still small voice” of warning from his mind and passed in among the dancers.

“Papa, papa! Where is my papa?” called Dorothy.

Jack, while pretending to leave the grounds, had kept a sly eye on Sam, and upon that individual’s disappearance, at once turned and answered the child in a voice soft and gentle, and soothing as that of dreamy Italy.

“Yous-a tink-a your-a papa was-a da here-a. What eesa da name?”

“Thorpe!” replied Dorothy, without the faintest fear or hesitation. “That is my name, too. I want to find him right away. Can you tell me where he is? Mama sent me to ask him to come and dance.”

“Yes-a da child-a. Eesa da know where eesa papa be. Eef-a youse-a be note-a afraid and will-a come wid-a me, Eesa take-a youse-a da papa,” and the sly old man looked into her eyes with such beaming kindness that at once won her confidence.

“I’m not afraid of you. I like old men. Mama says we should respect old men. But I’m in such a hurry, you know. Mama is waiting for me.”

“Well, geeve-a me youse-a da hand and Eesa take-a you straight-a da heem.”

Without the least suspicion or timidity, she instantly placed her little hand in his and the two proceeded toward the river, much faster than his supposed crippled condition would lead an older person to expect.

“Youse-a love-a da papa and da mama much-a, donn-a youse?” he continued.

“Oh, yes! Ever so much.”

“Eesa good-a girl. We’ll soon-a da fine eem,” and he added to himself, “when the horn of plenty pours its golden stream into Jack’s pocket.”

While they were crossing a depression, or rather a long hollow formation in the contour of the grassy slope, and close to some locust trees, the thick foliage of which threw a deep shadow on the spot, Jack thrust his free hand into his pocket and removed the stopper from a bottle of chloroform which he had provided for this occasion, and saturated a colored handkerchief with it. Some of it passed through the lining of his pocket and immediately impregnated the air with its odor.

Dorothy got a whiff of it and drew away with the remark, “Dear me, what a funny smell!”

“Naw, eesa – nicey da smell, jes like-a da poppy, so beautiful-a da flower,” replied Jack, reassuringly.

“Well, I don’t like it, anyway,” she said.

At that moment she was standing a couple of yards from him, they had come to a halt, and it was necessary for him to act adroitly and with promptness, to reassure her and avoid arousing her suspicion, so he pretended to stumble and then fell to the ground.

Arising to his knees, he groaned as though in seeming pain, and gripped his right wrist with his left hand.

“Oh, oh! Eesa da hurt-a bad. Break-a da arm; oh, oh!” And in order to get her close to him, he said, “Get-a da bot’ in-a da pock’.”

The cunning fellow knew well how to touch the chord of sympathy that is ever present in the guileless heart of innocent childhood.

The response came in a wondering look of infinite tenderness and compassion, for the child did not clearly comprehend Jack’s request and she asked:

“Did you break your arm?”

“Eesa da hurt-a bad. Oh, oh!” he groaned, “get-a da bot’, da bot’-a, child; get-a da bot’.”

“Poor man! Shall I run for the doctor?”

“No, no, no, note-a da dock! Help-a me get-a da bot’ in-a da pock! Quick-a, deeze-a side. Put in-a da hand. Take eem out – oh, oh!”

Perceiving that he meant her to take something out of his pocket, on the right side of his coat, and not understanding the significance of the word “bot,” she drew near to thrust in her hand.

That instant Jack’s left arm encircled her form and his right hand clapped the saturated handkerchief over her mouth and nostrils and held her to him.

She struggled in his arms to free herself, but without avail.

As a feeling of stupor stole over her senses, Jack, still on his knees, watched her with the keenest of eyes, and muttered soothingly, “Eesa nice-a da girl. Nice-a da smell lak-a da dreamy Italy.”

Some rascals would have made short work of the matter, but Jack was by nature very tender and considerate of children, which accounted for his slow application of the powerful drug. It soon had her under its influence, and when she became limp and nerveless he laid her on the grass. Again

he saturated the handkerchief and held it to her nostrils, and with distended, tragic eyes watched her doze into unconsciousness.

Feeling satisfied that she would not speedily recover, he let the handkerchief lie loose on her nostrils and mouth, then he arose to his feet and with the stealthy, catlike tread of an Indian, skulked from shadow to shadow until he had made a complete circuit of the spot.

Having assured himself that no one was in the vicinity, he swiftly turned and again fell on his knees beside the child.

He looked intently in her face and noted the sweet expression of childish innocence and trust in the repose. "She sleeps, beautiful child! As sweetly innocent and confiding as God ever inspired with the breath of life."

Then from under his coat, where a hump appeared in the back, he drew out a grey woolen cloth about four feet square and folded it about the child, gathered her in his arms and arose to his feet.

"Mine, mine, though no harm shall come to you, pretty one! Twenty thousand dollars shall be the price of your liberty."

And, keeping in the shadows and away from the lights as much as possible, he wended his way toward the river and soon became obscured in the distant gloom.

When John Thorpe, closely followed by Rutley, entered the great ballroom in search of Corway, the guests who saw him were struck with the pallor of his face and the strangely piercing yet lustreless dark eyes that shone out from beneath his shaggy, frowning eyebrows. His cold, stony look repelled all smiles and discouraged all questions. Through the room he strode, regardless alike of the timid whisperings of women and offended stare of men. He cared not what they thought, for every sentiment of rudeness or discourtesy, every tender feeling of grief or pain, was drowned by his one great mad, overpowering passion to wreak summary vengeance on the author of his bitter shame.

Not for a moment had he suspected "My Lord's" integrity and utter disinterestedness, and the maddening fire of his disgrace kindled within him and fanned to a crucible heat by Rutley burned with unquenchable fury.

Men of the temperament of John Thorpe are not blessed with a stoical mind in moments of great excitement, nor are they apt to pause and tranquilly reason out the pros and cons of this most prolific source of human tragedies.

He had loved his wife too fondly and too well to go and openly charge her with unfaithfulness.

His life heretofore had been very happy, but now the first "damned spot" in the clear blue of his domestic horizon would not out, the feeling of suspicion would not smother. And it grew and enlarged with amazing rapidity, and haunted him till the very thought of Corway aroused his latent jealousy to a pitch that became unbearable. Rutley had developed the demon within him.

The love that had become a fixed part of his being, flooding him with its radiance, had been violently wrenched from his heart, and his only, all-absorbing, insatiable desire was to confront the man who was responsible for it.

Oh, for the frailty of human happiness!

Out near the steps of the east piazza a group of ladies and gentlemen, composed of Mr. and Mrs. Harris, Mr. Corway and Hazel were chatting merrily about the new waltz and incidentally they had referred to the prolonged absence of "My Lord" and John Thorpe from the ballroom. Mrs. Harris discovered them on the piazza approaching the steps and exclaimed, "Ah, here come the truants."

Without a moment's hesitation, John Thorpe descended the steps alone, Rutley remaining on the piazza.

"Mr. Harris," said John Thorpe in a husky voice, "in the name of the society whom he contaminates, I demand that you eject that man from this place."

This peremptory and extraordinary demand, coupled with its insinuation, stunned the hearers, who looked from one to the other in startled amazement.

The dead silence that followed was broken by Mr. Harris, who answered in a grave, dazed way, as thoughts of Thorpe's sanity flitted through his brain, "But, Thorpe! I – what – I don't think – my hearing is not exactly right of late. I did not understand –"

Without removing his steady gaze from Corway, Mr. Thorpe reiterated his words slowly and with stinging accentuation, "I demand that you eject that man from this place," and he pointed his finger dramatically at Corway, while glints of merciless intent shot from his eyes.

The red flushed into Mr. Harris's face as he realized the indignity his guests and himself were being subjected to.

"Thorpe – John – you are insulting all of us. Mr. Corway is my guest. What is the meaning of this affront to my hospitality?"

"To defend my honor!" cried the distracted man, lost to all sense of propriety or decorum, "or to add my blood to the other crimes that disgrace him."

"In the name of all that's astounding, what do you mean, Thorpe?" exclaimed Corway.

"I mean that I intend to avenge the irreparable wrong I have suffered," replied Mr. Thorpe, fairly hissing the words from between his teeth.

"Irreparable wrong! To whom do you refer?"

"To you, scoundrel! Tell how you came by that ring!"

Mr. Harris had listened to the two men with ill-concealed impatience, but when Mr. Thorpe called Mr. Corway, one of his guests, a scoundrel, and dangerous business appearing imminent, he could control his indignation no longer and shouted, "Mr. Thorpe's carriage immediately! Here, Sam, your assistance. Wells, get some more help to maintain order."

The words had scarcely been uttered, when Sam, who had appeared with Virginia on the piazza, sprang down the steps to his uncle's assistance. They were quickly joined by the coachman and gardener who, having chanced to meet in a nearby secluded angle of the porch, had heard the loud, passionate words and were at once available for duty.

"Hold, Mr. Harris!" spoke up Corway, who seemed to be less disturbed than either Thorpe or his host, "don't be hasty in this matter! Mr. Thorpe is certainly laboring under some delusion."

"I will not listen to you," replied Mr. Harris, now worked up to a fury. "Mr. Thorpe's conduct is outrageous. Away with him to his carriage."

"I guess so!" responded Sam, pulling off his coat and looking at his uncle sideways, "stampede the corral, eh, uncle? That's what you want!"

"Away with him!" repeated Mr. Harris, gesticulating with his arms wildly.

The two lackeys advanced, encouraged no doubt by the assurance of Sam's assistance.

They were brought to an abrupt halt by Corway, who stepped in front of them and declared with heat, "Stand back! I demand an explanation!"

In a low, hoarse voice that quivered with the intensity of his passion, with ghastly white face, and glittering eyes that flashed the lie to his forced calmness, Thorpe replied: "You shall have it – blackguard, liar, and coward!" With which he struck Corway on the mouth with the back of his closed hand.

Corway passionately rushed at him and attempted to strike, but Mr. Harris sprang between them and caught his upraised arm, and with the help of Sam, separated them.

When Sam sprang down the steps to his uncle's assistance, Virginia was left standing on the piazza watching the progress of the quarrel with intense interest and also evidently alarmed at the violent passion her brother displayed.

With a woman's intuition, she surmised that Rutley had worked on John's jealous susceptibilities with merciless finesse.

Rutley, who was watching her, noted her alarmed expression, and feeling it to be a sign of weakening purpose, stepped over and stood beside her, so silently that she was quite unaware of his presence.

“It’s a horrible wrong,” she muttered.

The words were caught by Rutley, and he whispered, so close as to startle her, “Remember the wrong Corway has done you.”

The excited men barely had been separated when Corway spoke with passionate emphasis, “You shall hear from me.”

“Quite soon enough for your courage,” sneered Thorpe.

“No, no, my brother shall not fight with him!” exclaimed Virginia, appalled at the magnitude the quarrel had assumed.

Swiftly she glanced at Rutley and said with tremulous lips: “What have you told him to cause such fearful passion?”

“What you bade me,” he coolly replied, and with a gloating smile on his lips, added: “The result is what you wanted, isn’t it?”

“Not so terrible,” she gasped. “There must be some awful mistake.”

And Rutley’s smile deepened, but as he looked into her horrified eyes and blanched face, and noted the change from vengeance to anxiety and consternation fast coming over her, he knew but too well when the change was complete, in a moment of frenzied zeal to explain and save her brother, she, womanlike, was likely to undo and wreck all his work.

He realized that the moment was fraught with the gravest danger to his plans and person, and he acted quickly, but with the utmost coolness.

Her hand held straight down by her side was closed tightly, expressive of immediate and determined action.

He gripped her wrist. It hurt her. The action concealed from others by the folds of her dress, succeeded in diverting her attention, and he followed it up by whispering, so that she alone heard him, “Remember – the material you gave me; Corway has met his deserts and you are avenged!”

And then the voice of Constance cleft the air, in a wild, terrifying scream. “John, John! Save Dorothy! She’s adrift on the water.”

Her piercing cry freighted with a mother’s anguish, at once filled all who heard it with consternation, in the midst of which Mrs. Harris exclaimed, “Dear me, how dreadful it all is!”

All turned in the direction of the cry and almost immediately Constance, in an agony of despair, and deathly white, frantically rushed among them.

She looked appealingly from one to the other, her heart in her throat and pathos in her voice. “I heard her cry, ‘Mama! Papa! Help! Save me!’ Oh, will no one rescue my darling?”

“I’m off,” said Sam, in his short, sententious way, and rushed toward the river.

The sudden strain on her nerves was greater than Constance could bear.

Naturally of a weak constitution, the ordeal was overpowering; the mother’s affection, forming a magnetic part of her heart, leapt out to her child and left her numb and cold almost unto death, and then her limbs trembled, and with Sam’s words ringing in her ears, down she sank, a senseless being.

Virginia’s consternation was complete. She rushed down the steps, knelt beside her prostrate form, thrust her arm lovingly under her head and sobbed: “Constance! Dear Constance! Don’t give way so. Dorothy will be found.”

CHAPTER III

When Constance revived, she found herself in a quiet room remote from noise or intrusion, whither she had been tenderly carried. Virginia was with her, and with the aid of a professional nurse, who lived near by and was called in by Mrs. Harris, had been successful in restoring her to consciousness.

The reception was still swinging along at its full height, and while a few of the guests had heard in an indifferent way of some trouble on the lawn, the reports were so varied and coupled with the fact that no names were obtainable to give the reports zest, the incident was soon forgotten, and by the great mass of the guests was not even heard of.

It was a sore spot in her breast that throbbed and beat heavily upon the door of its prison as later she was being driven home in her carriage. Not a word from John to soothe the aching void. She did not even inquire about him, contenting herself with the simple assurance that he was doing his best to find Dorothy.

For two days the strain was upon her, breaking down by its heart violence her constitution, already frail to the declining point. Scarcely more than a year had passed since Constance had been stricken down with typhoid fever of a malignant type.

She had never regained her usual health and strength, and though the family physician had pronounced her recovery complete, there were those of her friends who, with bated breath, questioned his conclusion and predicted an after effect which in time would develop some strange and serious ailment.

Telephone inquiries regarding the lost child began to come in the second day, but none of any comfort to the distracted mother.

Not one intimation of her husband's quarrel with Corway had reached her. Mrs. Harris had been careful, upon Constance's recovery at the reception, not to breathe a word, or to allow, where she could control it, the faintest whisper likely to arouse her suspicion.

And as for Hazel, she had not clearly understood Mr. Thorpe's drift when he assaulted Corway. Nevertheless, she somehow had a vague idea that Constance was the cause; but being a discreet young woman, she had refrained from mentioning anything about it to her, thus leaving Constance completely ignorant of the true cause of John Thorpe's absence from home.

Perhaps if she had not been so absorbed in the recovery of Dorothy, her attention would have been arrested on perusing one of the daily papers by an ambiguous paragraph referring to a choice morsel of scandal on the "tapis" in a prominent family, and which was likely to terminate in a tragedy. It was a society paragraph separate from the report of the probable drowning of the child, Dorothy Thorpe. Several personal acquaintances had become aware, through the crafty Rutley, of a serious difference having arisen between John Thorpe and his beautiful wife, and some of these personal acquaintances, with significant looks, at once connected it with the mysterious disappearance of the child.

The fact that none of the fashionable set had visited her since the reception did not suggest a thought of being shunned. And so she waited for news of her child – waited with heart leaden with the chill of hope deferred – waited in momentary expectation of the home-coming of John.

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