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SWORN TO SILENCE

or, ALINE RODNEY'S SECRET.

By MRS. ALEX. McVEIGH MILLER.

THE SWEETHEART SERIES.



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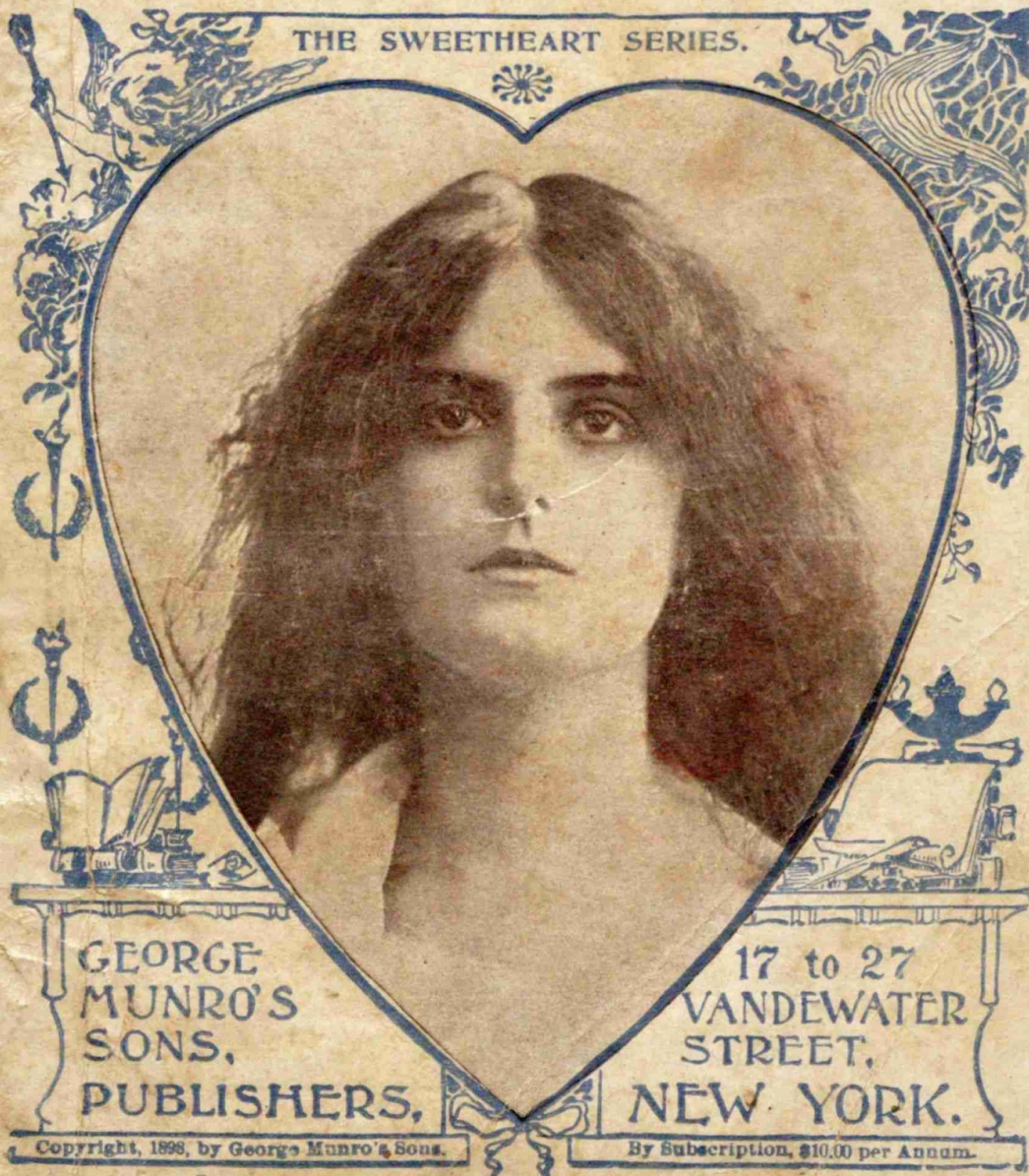
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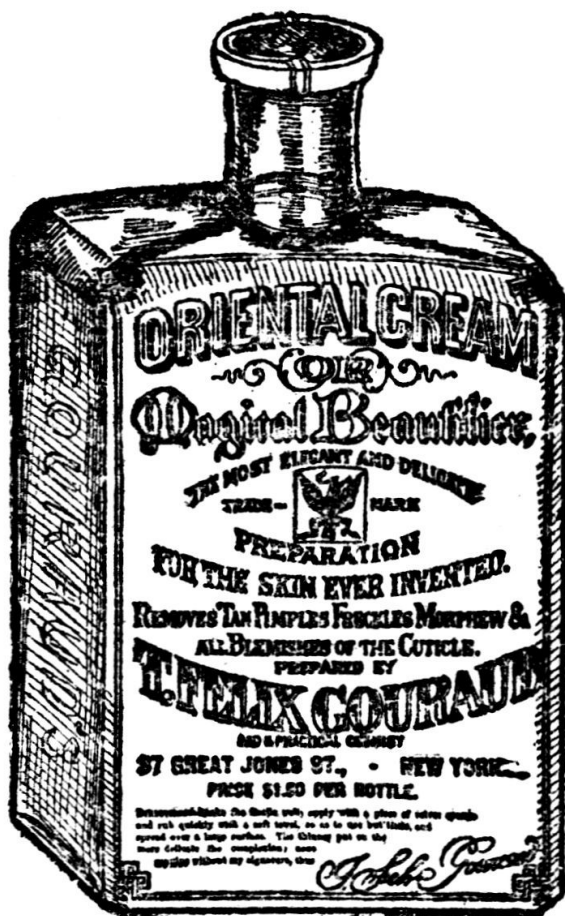
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CHAPTER I.

“Fair roses from far countries
Around my portals twine;
Bright on their radiant faces
Caressing sunbeams shine,
But my neighbor over yonder
Has a fairer rose than mine.

“I see his dainty cottage
Beyond my garden bowers,
High o’er it, tall and stately,
My shadowing mansion towers;
But my neighbor’s Rose of roses
Is sweeter than my flowers.”

The family carriage of the Rodneys stood before the gate, and Mouse and Kitty, the two sleek gray ponies, champed their bits impatiently while the Rodneys, great and small, issued forth in gala attire.

They were going to the picnic in Walnut Grove—mamma, papa, Effie, and little Max—all but Aline, and *she* was in disgrace and forbidden to go. (Not that the command itself would have been sufficient to detain her, but she was locked into her room, “in durance vile,” and left in charge of the cook for safe-keeping.)

Aline was usually in disgrace with the family. She had the sweetest face and the warmest heart in the world, but with her high spirits and willful ways she had a most lamentable faculty for getting into mischief of some sort daily, and it was for some more flagrant offense than usual that mamma had sternly vetoed the picnic to-day and locked her into her room to meditate on her many and grievous faults.

The culprit, from her upper window, flattened her pretty piquant little nose against the window-pane and gazed after the departing quartet with great

sparkling tears in the lovely eyes whose rare and peculiar shade of deep purple-blue had been caught from the far-off strain of Irish blood that flowed in her veins. They were “sweetest eyes were ever seen,” at once arch and tender and shaded by long, black-fringed lashes overarched by—

“Slender brows of shining jet,
Limned against the forehead’s snow,
Like triumphal arches set
O’er the conquering eyes below.”

The Rodneys entered the carriage, and Aline flung them one last despairing kiss from the tips of her slim white fingers, but no one saw except, perhaps, her little brother, who looked up regretfully and saw the lovely, girlish face smiling at him through its sparkling tears. Then the carriage door was closed, Mouse and Kitty broke into a sedate trot, and the sweet face retired from the window and hid itself in a small square of snowy linen. Aline’s heart was for the moment completely broken.

It was no small trial to be shut up in that hot, stifling little chamber all that lovely, sunny July day. She thought of the beautiful green grove close by the shining river, with the light winds ruffling its cool breast, of the happy gathering of young people, the games, the dancing, the hamper baskets of cold chicken and sweetmeats, indigestible pickles and pies and cakes, prepared for the gay, unceremonious dinner, and her heart sunk heavily. She would not willingly have foregone the delights of that day for anything she possessed. Any other punishment she could have borne with equanimity, but it did seem as if mamma had been actuated by malice prepense in forbidding the picnic to which Aline had looked forward eagerly for two long weeks.

She wept some bitter tears, distinctly tintured with anger, into her snowy handkerchief, then she wiped her eyes and looked about her for some means of passing the tedious time away. Her mother had brought her up a volume of sermons, by way of profitable reading. Aline vented her spite and disappointment most unjustifiably on the unoffending volume, by tossing it out of the little end window into her neighbor’s garden, and the innocent missile, in its rapid descent, hit her neighbor sharply upon the head.

When she saw what she had done, a little cry of dismay broke from her lips. The great gray stone mansion standing in the beautiful garden next door to Mr. Rodney's cottage was known throughout the little village of Chester as a haunted house; and its owner, the dark, moody-looking man who had just returned from a protracted sojourn abroad, was generally considered a very mysterious man. He was immensely rich, a bachelor, and handsome in a dark, corsair-like style that the girls of Chester considered very fascinating although it was so inaccessible.

As for the gentleman himself he neither knew nor cared what the good villagers thought of him. He was among them, but not of them. He sought no society and received no guests. He dwelt alone and lonely in the grand old mansion where several generations of his ancestors had lived and died, and which popular imagination peopled with ghosts. Indeed, it was positively asserted that at the dread midnight hour shrieks of woe had been heard to issue from the deserted house, and lights had been seen flashing from window to window as if waved in phantom hands. The Delaneys had been a hard, proud, cruel race, so said Mme. Rumor, that knowing dame, and it was no wonder if some of them returned to earth in spirit to bewail the deeds done in the flesh.

The humbler home of the Rodneys, a simple two-storied cottage, stood next the gloomy gray stone mansion, and the small end window of Aline's little room overlooked the beautiful garden where the taciturn, grave-browed master strolled at will, and smoked his choice Havanas and switched off the heads of his splendid roses and lilies with his slender ebony cane as if hating all things beautiful and sweet.

Many a time and oft Aline had watched this strange, mysterious unknown neighbor of theirs through a crevice in the white curtain, and speculated curiously over his history, while she inwardly deprecated the fact that those splendid flowers belonged to such a monster.

"The cruel wretch! To snap off their heads with his ugly stick! I should like to knock *his* head off!" Aline often muttered indignantly to herself, and lo! now in her eagerness to place the obnoxious book forever beyond her mother's reach, she had almost compassed her wish. She saw the tall, straight figure reel a moment under the suddenness of the blow, saw him put his white hand quickly to his head, where a sharp corner of the book had

inadvertently struck it. In her terror and dismay she uttered a little cry of alarm and regret. He looked up quickly at the sound—so quickly that she could not retreat.

As he looked up he saw the sweetest girl face he had ever beheld in his life—beautiful even through its frightened pallor—with startled, wide-open blue eyes, the long black lashes curled upward, giving them an expression of almost infantine innocence and purity. The delicate oval of the lovely face was daintily broken by a deep dimple in the rounded chin, the parted red lips disclosed teeth like pearls, and the dark, silken hair, worn in short, babyish rings on the round, white forehead, fell over her shoulders in long, loose, natural ringlets to the slender, rounded waist. Framed in the small, white-draped window, with a vine of his own rare clematis clambering up from his garden and twining luxuriantly about the casement, she looked like some beautiful picture—a picture that Oran Delaney carried in his heart to his dying day, “unforgotten in every charm.”

For her, she looked down into the dark, wondering eyes of her mysterious neighbor, and set her little teeth and held her ground bravely, determined not to fly from his wrath. Some confused, remorseful dread of mamma’s and Effie’s anger at this new scrape flashed into her mind momentarily; poor mamma, who thought that for this one day, at least, she had secured her willful, thoughtless darling from the commission of the smallest bit of mischief—and she determined to make a treaty of peace with this *bête noir* of hers, in order to secure his silence, little dreaming that with this culminating act of folly the story of her life would begin.

Aline was ordinarily a brave girl, but she was honestly frightened now at what she had done. Oran Delaney was an ogre in her eyes, and her youthful imagination, fired by the descriptions she had heard of him, recoiled in dismay at the thought of his wrath. Of course he would suppose that she had hurled the book at his head on purpose. His anger would be something fearful, she did not doubt. Would he report her conduct to her parents? She resolved frantically that, at all odds, he should not do that. She could not endure it.

CHAPTER II.

She tried to summon a smile to her lips, but they only quivered instead. Spite of her innocent propensity for getting into trouble, Aline was very sensitive. The ludicrous side of her position did not strike her in her awe of Oran Delaney. She summoned all her fortitude to her aid, and looked down into the dark, handsome face, waiting to hear him speak.

But he did not do so. His upraised eyes stared straight into her own with a gaze full of wonder and perplexity; his dark mustached lips even smiled slightly. He would not speak. He was evidently waiting for her to take the initiative.

Seeing this, Aline made a great effort. She leaned out of the window, and gasped, rather indistinctly:

“I—I beg your pardon, Mr. Delaney. I didn’t mean to throw the book out—that is, I meant to throw it out, but I didn’t mean to hit you! I didn’t know you were there!”

Having mumbled out this comprehensive apology, Aline waited anxiously for his answer.

She saw a smile creeping around his lips, as the ludicrous state of the case dawned on him. The face that looked so cold and stern, as she watched it daily under the shadow of his broad-leaved hat, did not appear so terrible now, as he stood with uncovered head gazing up at her. It even had a beauty of its own, if one fancied straight, even features, an olive skin, dark, magnetic eyes, dark, clustering locks, tossed carelessly back from a broad, intellectual brow, and a smile that, when it curved the mustached lips, lent the charm of fascination to his whole face. That smile, as it shone on Aline now, inspired her with unconscious courage. She continued, pleadingly:

“I hope you will excuse me, sir, and—and—if you please, I hope you will not tell mamma.”

He picked up the book, and, turning the leaves, asked, in a deep, musical, slightly amused voice:

“If you did not intend the missile for me, may I ask why you threw the book out at all?”

“I was mad,” said Aline, flushing a little at the admission.

“Mad—with such a good book as this? Sermons, aren’t they?” inquired Oran Delaney, lightly, as if talking to a child, which, in fact, she appeared to be, as seen at the window. Her face looked very young. He could not judge of the tall, rounded figure as she rested on her elbows, and looked down at him.

“Yes—sermons—but awfully dry, you know,” she returned apologetically; “but, after all, you know, I oughtn’t to have thrown them away; mamma wouldn’t like it. Will you please throw the book back to me, Mr. Delaney?”

He made several attempts to do so, but Aline was not clever at catching. It eluded the white, outstretched hands every time, and fell back into her neighbor’s garden. They both laughed. Aline began to think that her neighbor might not be such an ogre, after all.

“Twice you have let it fall back upon my head,” he said. “You are too clumsy to catch it at all. Come down to the window in the first story, and I will hand it up to you.”

“I—can’t,” replied Aline, flushing very red indeed.

“Why not?” wonderingly.

“I am locked into my room,” flushing deeper with shame.

“Impossible! Who is your jailer?” inquired the gentleman.

“Mamma; she has locked the door and gone off, leaving me here to read those dreary sermons that I threw away.”

There is a moment’s silence. Aline reads palpable surprise on her neighbor’s face. The shame-flush deepens on her own.

Presently, with a laugh, he says:

“You must have been a very naughty girl, weren’t you?”

“I didn’t mean to be, but mamma and Effie said I was. So they went off to the picnic, and locked me in here to punish me,” Aline said, growing confidential as her dread of Mr. Delaney grew less. “And oh, if they ever find out that I threw a book and knocked your hat off, I shall never hear the last of it. You won’t tell—will you?” pleadingly.

“What would they do to you?—lock you into your room again?”

“Worse than that, perhaps. I dare say they would devise some new punishment worse than any I have suffered yet,” sighing.

“Are they cruel to you?”

“Oh, no, only when I get into scrapes, as they say I am always doing. I am mischievous, they say, but I never mean to be. The way I get into trouble is like I did just now, you see, without knowing it,” she explains, plaintively.

“A spoiled, willful child,” Oran Delaney says to himself, smiling; then, aloud: “Well, about this book—how am I to return it to you?”

“I don’t know—and mamma will be so vexed with me,” plaintively. “Cannot you think of a plan?”

The sweet entreaty in the blue eyes moved him strangely. He looks around.

“Let me see. There is a step-ladder hereabouts used by the gardener in training vines against the wall. I might climb that.”

“Oh, pray do,” she clasps her hands entreatingly, and he goes away in search of the article.

Returning with a light, convenient step-ladder, he places it against the side of the house beneath the window. Her voice arrests him as he is about to ascend it.

“Oh, if you please, Mr. Delaney, I should like a bunch of your nice roses,” this rather timidly.

“Should you?” he says, surprised; then he looks around him at his beautiful garden glowing with all the lavish wealth of July—roses and lilies, and all the sweet sisterhood of flowers. From the green bowers and blooming beds of the garden, he lifts a keen glance to the upper windows of his stately house. The blinds are tightly closed at every window, an air of gloom and

desertion pervades the scene. His glance goes back to that girlish face that is sweeter than all his flowers.

“You love flowers?” he says.

“Oh, so much!” she breathes, clasping her hands in pretty unconscious earnestness. “I wish that your garden were mine!”

“Are you aware that you are transgressing the tenth commandment?” he inquires, dryly.

“Am I? I don’t care. I can’t help envying you that splendid garden. You may have your house, and its ghosts, and welcome, but I do want your flowers.”

“Ghosts,” he says, and a slight frown darkens on his brow.

“Yes, there *are* ghosts in that big, gloomy house, aren’t there? People say so, at least,” she answers.

He makes no answer. The half smile he has worn until now fades from his face. He remains lost in thought a moment, then abruptly turns the subject.

“Since you like flowers so well, you may come down and take all you want.”

“How?” she asks, bewildered.

“Down the ladder,” he replies, carelessly, and Aline catches her breath.

To be permitted to set foot in that lovely spot, than which it seems to her the garden of Eden had not been lovelier—to fill her hands with those exquisite flowers, and her heart and soul with their fragrance. It seems too good to be true. But, down the ladder? Would that be right? A premonitory vision of mamma’s horror darted into her mind. She set the temptation side by side with the scolding and the punishment, and weighed them, and, a true daughter of Mother Eve, she let her own willful desires triumph.

It was so pleasant to think of escaping from that stifling chamber, and reveling in green grass and tender flowers and springing fountains. She asked herself if it could be very wrong to escape from her prison for a very little while? As for descending the ladder, she did not mind that very much. I am ashamed to state that my heroine had been reproachfully accused of tomboyish propensities by her relations.

She looked down a little wistfully into Oran Delaney's dark, proud face.

"Do you think it would be very wrong if I came down?" she said.

"I cannot see where the harm would be," he replied, lightly.

"Then, if you will go away down that path there, I will come down the ladder and get some roses," said Aline; and he laughed and walked away.

CHAPTER III.

When she had set foot in the garden and he came back to her, he was honestly surprised. He had thought her a precocious child of thirteen. Here was a tall girl up to his shoulder, with a figure that was rounding into the gracious curves of womanhood—eighteen at the very least, he decided, in spite of her childish manner and the simple blue gingham dress whose ruffled skirt was still short enough to betray half an inch of *écru* stocking above the top of her trim little buttoned boots.

She looked back a little apprehensively at the step-ladder at the window.

“You may move the ladder until I get my flowers,” she said. “I am afraid that if cook came up to see after me she would find me out.”

He was rather amused at her pretty air of command as contrasted with her frightened, appealing tones of a little while ago. He obeyed her command, then sat down carelessly on a rustic seat, and watched her as she flitted about among his flowers. First she adorned herself, after the manner of a vain woman, with a bunch of rosebuds in the soft little fichu of white lace at her neck, and another at the belt of her white apron. Then she roved about from flower to flower, daintily and capriciously as a butterfly, but culling sweets as industriously as a bee, her white apron soon being filled with the scented beauties. Absorbed in her delightful occupation, time flew unheeded. She seemed to forget her neighbor, and the grim, gray house, whose shadow reached out long and dark and forbidding across the garden and compassed her in its gloom like a fateful prophecy.

He watched the child, as he called her to himself, idly, and yet with that something of interest that even the cold and world-hardened cannot deny to youth and happiness. Something of pity mingled with his careless thoughts. She seemed so young, and gay, and light-hearted, and he knew that it could not last, that the years would overtake her, and teach her that

“Youth’s life is but a brief one,
Foam from an ebbing sea.”

She passed out of sight under the shady arches of the trees, and for a little while Oran Delaney forgot her. He smoked a cigar with his hat drawn over his eyes, and his moody brows drawn together. The sudden silvery tinkle of a bell from the house aroused him to a remembrance of luncheon and his guest.

He glanced around him, and caught the glimmer of a blue dress among the trees. Following it, he found her hovering over a bed of exquisite pansies, murmuring softly to herself little exclamations of girlish pleasure and delight.

“I hope you will forgive me for rousing you to the prosaic realities of life,” he said, “but my luncheon is ready, and I came to ask you to share it.”

“Luncheon!” She glanced up with a startled face. “Is it so late as that?”

“How softly falls the foot of Time, that only treads on flowers!” he quoted. “Yes, it is two o’clock”—glancing at his watch—“has not your physical entity already reminded you of that fact?”

“If you mean that I ought to be hungry by this time, I believe it is true,” said she, smiling. “Although I had not thought of it before, I believe I should like a biscuit. But I must go home now; I cannot stay to lunch with you. Do not look at this great load of flowers, Mr. Delaney; I am afraid you will scold.”

“You have tried to carry off every one in the garden, I see,” he returned, uncaring. “But my peaches and grapes are as sweet and lovely as my flowers. Come and try them.”

Another temptation! Nothing ever tasted so delicious to Aline as the sunny side of a peach. She was curious over Mr. Delaney’s lunch, too, and wondered who prepared it, and what the inside of that great house looked like. Ever since they had come to the cottage to live, she had been curious over it. Should she let the opportunity to enter it and see go unimproved?

Aline was a true descendant of our common mother Eve—she preferred knowledge at any risk. Her curiosity and her liking for peaches carried her beyond the bounds of prudence. She went boldly into the “lion’s den.”

Dear reader, do not think my heroine altogether bold and frivolous. She was only simple, innocent, and ignorant. She had never been to Wisdom’s

school. She was at heart a child still, with a child's free, willful impulses.

It did not occur to her that it was very improper to accept Mr. Delaney's careless invitation to go into his house and take lunch with him. She wished very much to do so, and, being used to having her own way—very often with only occasional condign punishment, such as she had received to-day—she went.

She went, and she was almost startled at the gloomy magnificence of the long and stately dining-hall, with its costly carpet, thick and soft as moss, its dark, rich, walnut furniture, glittering side-boards, paneled walls, and splendid pictures. On one end of the long, imposing table was spread a delicate, luxurious luncheon of cold chicken, flaky biscuit, sweetmeats, and cake, with grapes, peaches, and wine. The service was of gold, and silver, and crystal, and glittered in the subdued light that stole into the room through the closed curtains. There was no attendant in the room, and the whole house appeared as silent as the tomb. Nevertheless, Aline enjoyed her lunch very much; its mysterious origin seeming as if served by magic, and the costly plate on which it was laid did not detract from its charm. In her enjoyment of the delicate repast she quite forgot her original intention of eating only just one peach and hurrying home. She discussed the whole bill of fare with the keen appetite of a healthy girl used to out door exercise and fresh air; and then she was quite frightened to find that it was three o'clock.

"Cook will have taken luncheon up to my room and found out that I have gone. What shall I do?" she said, growing suddenly frightened and lifting her large, anxious eyes to her entertainer's face.

"Cook will not tell of you, I hope. Will she?" asked Mr. Delaney, coolly peeling a peach with his white, aristocratic hand, on which a magnificent diamond glowed with iridescent fire. "Have this peach, Miss—Miss—do you know I haven't found out your name yet?"

"It is Aline—Aline Rodney. I thought you would know that much, as we are neighbors," she said; then returning to her grievance, she added: "Cook will certainly betray me. You should have sent me home sooner. Why didn't you?"

"That would have been discourteous," said Oran Delaney, with his winning smile; "and, besides, Miss Rodney, I forgot you. Will you pardon me for it?"

I was smoking and dreaming, you see, and you escaped my mind for the moment.”

““Out of sight, out of mind,”” said Aline, quoting the old adage with perfect good humor. “Well, it was just the same with me. I thought of nothing but the flowers until you came up suddenly behind me. But I must go home now and see if I am found out. Ah, dear me, I am into another scrape, and, indeed, indeed, I never dreamed of it when I came down into the garden. I shall have to go down on my knees to cook, and beg her to keep it silent about the ladder and the book.”

“Since you feel so sure that you are found out, there can surely be no need to haste to return to your prison,” said Oran Delaney, toying with a purple, bloomy bunch of grapes. “An hour more or less cannot matter materially, I suppose, in the extent of cook’s wrath?”

“N—no, I suppose not,” said Aline, paltering with temptation weakly. “And I do hate to go back to that lonely room just yet. But, perhaps,” gazing at him, anxiously, “perhaps you would like for me to go. Perhaps you are weary of me.”

A sudden sigh, deep, subtle, profound, breathed over his lips. He looked at her strangely.

“I am weary of everything,” he said, abruptly. “But if it pleases you to stay, child, pray do so. It will be no annoyance to me.”

From being terribly afraid of him at first, Aline had become quite trusting and confidential. She looked at him with a smile.

“Thank you for your kind permission,” she said. “I will not go just yet. There are some things I should like to find out before I go home.”

“You are very frank.”

“Do you think so?” asked his unconventional guest. “And will you answer truly what I am about to ask you?”

“*Cela depends*,” he replied, with a slight frown.

“That means that you anticipate impertinent questions from me!” she laughed, easily. “But do you know, Mr. Delaney, that you have long been an object of curiosity to me?”

“You flatter me,” said Oran Delaney, lightly.

“I don’t know whether the curiosity is flattering or not,” said frank Aline. “The greater part of my curiosity is over this great, gloomy-looking house of yours. Is it really haunted, as they say?”

“It is haunted by my presence—nothing more ghostly than that,” he replied, laconically.

Aline looked as if she did not quite believe him, but she went on, perseveringly:

“Do you really live in this house all alone, sir?”

“Yes,” he replied.

Her large eyes wandered over the delicately prepared luncheon, then returned to his quiet face.

“But, really now, Mr. Delaney, there must be a housekeeper here. Else by whom could your meals be served?” she said.

“By the fairies,” he replied, with perfect gravity.

“You don’t expect me to believe that?” said Aline, pouting her rosy lips.

“I hope you will. At least it is the only answer I can give you,” he retorted.

Aline looked curiously at him. There was a slight smile on his face, but he spoke in grave earnest. She understood then that the secrets of the haunted house would remain secret still. He had no mind to reveal them to her.

The rich color rose to her face as it suddenly flashed over her that he must think she made him a poor return for his courtesy by her pointed questions.

“I beg your pardon for my impertinent questions,” she said. “I did not really mean to be rude. I was merely thoughtless.”

“You are freely forgiven,” he answered, courteously.

“And now I will thank you for your kindness, and go,” Aline continued, moving from the table and turning toward the door.

Mr. Delaney walked by her side and opened the door for her with his quiet, courteous air.

“You have done me the honor to be curious over my old house, Miss Rodney,” he said. “Perhaps this glimpse of its interior has not satisfied you. Do you care to examine any of the other rooms?”

They were walking slowly along, side by side on the echoing floor of the wide, marble-paved hall, and Aline had just opened her lips to speak, but her answer, whether negative or affirmative, will never be recorded. It was frozen on her lips by a terrible interruption.

The strange, brooding stillness that reigned throughout the great, gray stone mansion, was broken startlingly by a loud, prolonged shriek—a shriek of such terrible, diabolic, blood-curdling rage and hate, that it seemed to freeze the blood in Aline’s veins, and to cause every individual hair to stand erect upon her head with horror.

Instinctively she threw out her hand, and clutching Mr. Delaney’s arm, stared up into his face with wide, terrified blue eyes, like a child’s appealing for protection.

The shriek was repeated, followed by another, and another, each more terrible than the last. Those fearful cries struck terror to Aline’s heart. She could not determine whether they issued from male or female lips. It seemed to her frenzied fancy as if they did not belong to a human being, but rather to some vicious and diabolic spirit of the nether world. It

“Was neither man nor woman,
It was neither brute nor human,
’Twas a ghoul.”

CHAPTER IV.

As those wild, unearthly cries rang through the house, Oran Delaney stood for a moment like one rooted to the floor. His face had whitened to the ghastliness of death, a smoldering fire flashed from his splendid dark eyes, he ground a fierce, smothered imprecation between his strong, white teeth.

“What is it? Oh! Mr. Delaney, what is it?” shuddered Aline, clinging convulsively to his arm.

He started, and looked down at the sweet, white face, with its frightened blue eyes and chattering teeth. He did not answer, for again that dreadful, diabolic shriek of anger, frightening all the sleeping echoes into hideous sound, rang through the house:

“Ah—h—h! Ah—h—h!”

This time it sounded nearer, as if the ghostly utterer were coming rapidly upon the scene. Horror flashed from Oran Delaney’s eyes.

With a sudden, swift, abrupt movement he shook the little, clinging hands from his sleeve, and moved toward the grand stairway that led to the upper regions of the house.

With his foot upon the stair, he turned and looked back, pierced by the low, reproachful wail of fear and pain that burst from Aline’s lips.

He saw the beautiful, graceful figure of the girl standing in the dark, gloomy hall, lighting its gloom with her beauty, like a flower or a star.

Like one distraught, he waved his hand to her.

“Fly, fly!” he shouted, hoarsely. “Lose not a moment! To linger in this terrible place means death!” Then he flew up the wide and winding stairway as if his feet were winged, and the girl, whose own willful folly and curiosity had brought her to this pass, stood like one rooted to the spot, filled with trembling and horror.

She knew not where to fly. She was in the center of a long, dark hall, with doors opening into rooms on either hand and at either end. Through one of these latter doors she had come with Oran Delaney to the dining-room, but to save her life she could not have told which one. Oh, how horrible it was standing there, with those strange shrieks ringing in her ears, and feeling, with a strange despair at her heart, that Oran Delaney had fled from her like a coward, and left her to perish of this mysterious, unknown danger, rushing nearer and nearer!

“Ah—h—h! Ah—h—h!” again rang shrilly in her frightened hearing, and, impelled by maddening fear, Aline sprung wildly forward and rushed to one of those wide hall doors, which she hoped would give her egress from this horror-haunted house, into sunshine and security again.

She reached out her white hand gropingly for the door-knob, opened and fled through it as if pursued by a legion of fiends. It swung to heavily behind her, and her feet sunk deep into the velvet pile of a fine, rich carpet like softest moss. She was in the long and lofty parlors, where the dust lay thick upon the linen covers of the costly furniture, and the gleaming mirrors and splendid paintings were curtained from the sight. A cry of despair escaped her lips as she realized the truth.

“It was the wrong door. I must retrace my steps,” she thought; but even as she laid her hand upon the knob she was startled by those hideous screams again—this time they seemed to come from the hall itself, and with a stifled exclamation Aline darted into the curtained alcove of a bay-window and let the heavy draperies of velvet and brocade fall heavily around her. She had scarcely done so before a hand turned the door-knob softly, something swished through the door, it closed again and she was conscious of an alien presence in the room. She could hear distinctly a heavy, muffled breathing, and the rustle of drapery trailed over the floor.

Aline’s heart seemed beating in her throat almost to suffocation. She crouched upon the floor, her young face pale as death, her sweet eyes wild with horror of she knew not what invisible evil that was approaching her with swift, cat-like movements across the echoless floor. Was it ghost or human? she asked herself, fearfully.

Crouching there, a little crumpled blue heap in the darkness, fearing to breathe lest her presence might be betrayed by even that stifled sound, Aline

summoned courage to draw aside the lightest fold of the curtain to form a tiny aperture through which, herself unseen, she might see what or who had entered the darkened, dreary, deserted parlor. Curiosity, our little heroine's besetting sin, had not deserted her yet, despite her fear and terror.

She gazed fearfully through the tiny crevice in the curtain, and it was only by the exercise of a strong will power that she prevented herself from crying out aloud.

A little dwarf-like, misshapen *something*, clothed in trailing garments like a woman, was approaching the alcove steadily and swiftly, as if guided by the unerring instinct of hate and murder to the hiding-place of its prey. The crooked hideous form was clothed with rich white satin and lace, all soiled and frayed as if from a terrible struggle, for there were wet and gory blood drops all spattered down the deep flounces of white lace that adorned the front breadth of the robe.

Over a monstrous head, covered with rough matted locks of coarse black hair was thrown a long and splendid bridal veil of costly Brussels lace, and this, too, was soiled and tattered like the bridal robe. There was no face visible, for a mask was worn above it—a horrible mask of thick black crape; and Aline shuddered as she thought of the distorted features it hid, for the narrow slits for the eyes were not cut in a level line below the brows, but by some dreadful freak of nature the eyes of the creature were placed one below the brow, the other far down upon the cheek, and in this distorted form they glared through the holes of the mask like the yellow orbs of a tigress filled with the spirit of destruction.

But these monstrous, baleful eyes were not all that struck terror to Aline's heart as she knelt there, shuddering in the semi-darkness of the death-trap into which she had blindly rushed.

The long, skinny, claw-like hand of the creature presented a yet more terrible aspect to her straining gaze, for the long white kid gloves that covered them were stained with crimson gore, and one hand grasped a slender, jewel-hilted dagger, from whose shining blade dripped human blood!

The wild instinct of self-preservation blazed up in Aline's heart. She thought of the beautiful, sunny world outside this horrible haunted house,

and the fierce desire for life flamed up within her. Should she die here like some wild thing caught in a trap, without one effort for escape?

She sprung to her feet and made a desperate rush past that horrible creature toward the door, but the footsteps of hate were swifter even than those of fear. Even as she tore open the door she felt the sharp clutch of cruel fingers on her arm, she was whirled violently backward, and the murderous dagger, already red with human gore, flashed in the creature's hand, and the next instant sheathed itself in Aline's breast. She fell across the door-sill, and lay motionless in a pool of her own spurting life blood.

CHAPTER V.

The town-clock of Chester clanged the midnight hour out heavily from its hoarse, brazen throat—twelve!

Aline opened her blue eyes languidly—they were heavy, as if weighed down with lead—and looked about her.

They fell upon a scene utterly new and strange to her.

She was lying on a downy, rosewood couch, with draperies of pale blue silk and snowy lace, in the center of a large and high-ceiled room hung with azure silk, the elegant rosewood furniture being upholstered in the same lovely material. Everything about her breathed of unlimited wealth and taste, and the sweet aroma of flowers floated delightfully through the beautiful apartment from the delicate vases on the mantel, which had been filled with the choicest wealth of the garden by a lavish and unsparing hand.

“She revives, doctor,” said a woman’s voice.

Aline lifted her eyes quickly. An elderly grave-faced woman had come forward to the bedside, and was bending curiously over her. She was dressed in a nurse’s cap and apron, and had a kind, though homely looking face.

“Who are you, and where am I?” asked Aline, gazing at this strange face in bewilderment.

“Hush, my dear! You are sick, and must not talk,” answered the nurse with a slight frown.

She moved aside, and Aline saw two men behind her. A cry of fear broke from her lips. Both wore masks upon their faces; but, in the tall, well-knit figure of the foremost one, she recognized Oran Delaney.

He came forward and bent over Aline, whispering, hurriedly:

“Miss Rodney, I beg you, as a special favor, to keep silence a little while. Say nothing to this stranger of how you came by your wound.”

Her wound! She gave a start and memory rushed over her. She was conscious too of a sharp, stinging pain in her breast, and the clothing upon it, she perceived, was stiffened and red with clotted blood. So that horrible creature had not quite killed her!

She made no answer, for Oran Delaney moved quickly away, giving place to the masked physician. The nurse brought a basin of water, sponges, and linen, and he deftly bathed and dressed the wound, gazing curiously, now and then, at the beautiful, frightened face of his patient, who lay still as death with only a smothered moan, now and then, instantly stifled on her pale, almost icy, lips.

"I will be as gentle as I can," he said to her, kindly, but Aline did not speak. She had closed her eyes and relapsed into unconsciousness.

When she unclosed them again, the masked physician was gone. She was alone with the quiet, grave-looking nurse in the dimly lighted room. A sensation of fear came over her. Why was she kept in this mysterious house with this strange woman? Where was her mother?

She looked at the stranger, and asked, anxiously.

"Am I in Mr. Delaney's house?"

The woman gave her a quiet, affirmative nod in reply.

"And mamma—have you sent for her?" inquired Aline.

"You must not talk, my dear," answered the woman, soothingly.

"You have not answered my question, and I want mamma, I must have her!" Aline cried out, in her imperious young voice, for she had forgotten her fear of her mother's anger in her terror at the mysteries surrounding her. Oh, to be back under the safe little roof of the cottage that nestled under the shadow of this frowning mansion, to fling her arms around her mother's neck, confessing her folly and pleading for forgiveness.

"You do not answer me," she said, after waiting vainly for an answer from the quiet nurse. "Tell me, why am I detained in this house?"

"You ought to know how you came to be here, miss," the woman answered, almost sullenly. "As for the rest, you are seriously wounded, and not able to be moved."

“Then you should have sent for my mother,” said Aline, with pretty, peremptory dignity. “She will be dreadfully frightened at my absence. Let some one bring her at once.”

“Let us wait until to-morrow, dear,” said the nurse, persuasively.

“I cannot wait,” said the girl, uneasily, and with an unutterable yearning at her heart for the mother whom she had so often grieved by her follies and willfulness. “Where is Mr. Delaney? Go, and send him here. Surely he will let me have mamma.”

The woman glided softly out, and Aline, left alone in the strange room with its shadowy corners and dimly burning lamp, shuddered with fear. What if that dreadful, murderous creature should return and finish her work!

“I shall die here miserably, and never see mamma and home again. Oh, how terribly I am punished for my thoughtlessness and folly!” wept Aline, filled with bitter repentance.

The door unclosed, and Oran Delaney walked slowly into the room, followed by the nurse, who sat down discreetly at a distance from the bedside of her troublesome patient.

He turned up the dim, flaring night-lamp so that its full light fell on Aline’s beautiful, pale, distressed face. He had removed the disfiguring mask that hid his features from the masked physician, and his dark face looked stern and pallid and troubled.

“You sent for me?” he asked, in his grave, quiet voice.

“I want mamma,” she answered, like a child.

His slender, straight, dark brows met in a slight frown.

“Miss Rodney, you must not excite yourself. I cannot answer for the consequences if you do,” he said.

“I am not excited, I am quite calm; but I want mamma. Will you not bring her to me?” she pleaded.

He laid his warm, strong hand gently for a moment on the dimpled little white ones that lay outside the silken counterpane.

“My child, I am very sorry, but—I cannot,” he answered, slowly.

She tore her small hand violently from his clasp, and looked at him with the dignity of a suddenly awakened womanhood flashing into her fair young face.

“Mr. Delaney, surely I have misunderstood you,” she said. “You do not mean that you will let me lie here suffering, dying, and refuse to bring my friends to me?”

“Dying? Oh, no, it is not so bad as that,” he said, almost shudderingly. “You have only a flesh wound, Miss Rodney. With patience on your part, and good nursing from Mrs. Griffin, here, you will be quite sure to recover.”

“And in the meantime?” she asked, with a wistful meaning in her voice that he could not affect to misunderstand.

He turned his head aside, disconcerted, perhaps, by the steady gaze of the blue eyes.

“In the meantime, Mr. Delaney?” she repeated, in a slightly raised voice.

He turned toward her again, and answered, abruptly, almost sternly:

“I hope they will not be seriously alarmed about you, Miss Rodney, for it is quite impossible for me to make any communication to them regarding your whereabouts.”

CHAPTER VI.

A cry of reproach, astonishment, and dismay came from Aline's lips.

"You will not be so cruel," she cried. "What have I done to you that you should punish me so?"

"I do not mean to punish you, Miss Rodney. On the contrary, I am exceedingly sorry that I cannot grant your wish," he said. "But there are reasons—" he paused abruptly, and did not finish the sentence.

"Strange reasons they must be that can keep a mother from the side of her suffering child," cried Aline, with all the harshness of a young girl's judgment.

A heavy sigh breathed over Oran Delaney's lips. His dark eyes turned to hers with more sadness than sternness in their gloomy depths.

"They *are* strange reasons," he said, bitterly. "Ah, Miss Rodney, I was wrong, I was culpably thoughtless when I brought you into this house! You should not have come! No one ever crosses the threshold of my home. Do not ask that your friends should be brought here. I can never consent. I can only beg your pardon for my folly in leading you into this death-trap. It is a horror-haunted house. The legend of Hades should be written over its portals: 'Who enters here, leaves Hope behind.'"

His voice had an indescribable cadence of bitterness and regret in it. The dark, handsome face was profoundly grave and stern, the gesture of the hand as it brushed back the waving locks of dark hair that fell over his broad brow, was full of a hopeless woe. But Aline was too young and thoughtless to comprehend the tokens of despair in a man whose age almost doubled her own. Yet she was strangely impressed by his concluding words. She repeated them over thoughtfully:

"'Who enters here, leaves Hope behind.' Ah, Mr. Delaney, I hope the legend will not come home to me!"

But the day came when she knew that it had done so—that the shadow of the old gray stone house had stretched itself out long and dark, and fatally, across the budding hopes of her lifetime.

He did not answer, and she went on impatiently;

“If my friends may not come to me at least let me go to them. I am not too ill. Surely, I may be moved. It is such a little distance,” pleadingly.

“It is quite impossible that you should leave this house until your wound is healed,” he answered, decisively, and Aline, completely crushed by his answer, began to weep heart-brokenly.

He waited in painful silence for her to grow calmer. Like many another man, he was unable to reason with a woman’s tears.

But Mrs. Griffin came forward, feeling her presence needed now. She said grimly to her master who stood gazing blankly before him:

“If she is allowed to go on like this she will fall into a fever. I shall administer the composing draught the doctor left with me.”

“Yes, that will be best,” he said, relieved. “I do not wish her to be excited, certainly. Miss Rodney,” he just touched one of the hands that hid Aline’s face, “pray do not take it so hard. You shall soon be restored to your home and friends, I pledge you my sacred promise! Only be patient a few days.”

But the girl only wept more bitterly, and when Mrs. Griffin brought the composing draught she angrily waved it away. She would have none of it.

“I never saw such a great, willful baby,” declared Mrs. Griffin, vexedly. “She needs the medicine. I’m afraid she’ll not get on without it.”

“I hope you will not drive us to use force with you. It is quite imperative that you should obey the physician’s orders,” remonstrated Oran Delaney.

“I do not wish to be put to sleep like a child. I wish to talk to you about your cruelty in keeping me here!” Aline sobbed out angrily through the white hands that hid her tear-stained face.

“We will talk about that to-morrow,” he replied, and suddenly Aline felt a strong arm passed around her shoulders, her hands were drawn away from her face, the point of a teaspoon was pressed against her lips, and held there

firmly in spite of her struggles, until she had swallowed every drop of the odious draught.

“How dared you?” she cried, her face flaming with anger and resentment; and Mrs. Griffin remarked dryly:

“If you act like a baby, you must expect folks to treat you like one.”

Aline turned from her to the rash offender, who did not look very frightened or sorry, but only amused at her ebullition of wrath.

“I beg your pardon,” he said, gently, but coolly. “I did not wish to offend you, Miss Rodney, but it was quite necessary you should take the doctor’s prescription. Do not think too hardly of me for doing my duty,” and then he walked quietly out of the room.

CHAPTER VII.

Aline was so indignant at the gentle force Mr. Delaney had used in compelling her to swallow the physician's prescription that she angrily resolved not to submit to its influence, but to lie awake in spite of it, and bemoan her hard fate, in being thus cruelly separated from home and friends. She indulged herself for a little while in the most vehement sobs and tears, reckless of the injury she was doing herself in her feverish condition, and willfully intent on making herself as disagreeable as possible to her hard-hearted jailers.

But the potent drug she had unwillingly taken was stronger than her will. The lids fell lower and lower over the heavy, tearful eyes, her moans grew fainter and fainter, until at last they ceased altogether, the dark lashes drooped upon the warm, flushed cheeks, and she fell asleep like a grieved child, sighing now and then in her slumber, and tossing restlessly, as if her sorrow had followed her even into the land of dreams.

Mrs. Griffin remained on guard by her side a patient, untiring watcher, like one accustomed to such nightly vigils, until the brief summer night passed away and the "gray-eyed morn" peered in through the close drawn shutters upon the beautiful girl who still remained wrapped in deep, unbroken slumber.

The grim, careful nurse looked at the fair, sleeping face from time to time with irrepressible admiration. She contrasted it, in fancy, with a monstrous face on which she was compelled to gaze daily, and she shuddered at the difference.

"She is as beautiful as an angel. How terrible it would have been if that devil had murdered her!" she thought.

She left the room after awhile, and locked the door after her, remaining absent nearly two hours. When she returned with a light, appetizing breakfast arranged upon a tray, Aline was awake and gazing dreamily around her at the unaccustomed room.

“You feel better after your sleep, I hope, Miss Rodney, do you not?” she inquired, and Aline was obliged to admit that she did, feeling half ashamed at the petulance she had displayed before falling asleep.

She found that, in spite of her painful wound and her anxiety, she had a very fair appetite for breakfast. She determined that she would get well, as fast as she could, in order to leave this dreadful house and return to her home. She wondered anxiously what poor mamma would say to this last new adventure of hers, more terrible than all the rest. She would not punish her by anger and blame and coldness, surely. Had she not already suffered enough?

Poor Aline thought that she was well cured now of her mischievous propensities. After this she would never indulge her willful, thoughtless desires again. She would be as prim and perfect as her sister Effie, whom now she heartily reproached herself for having called a “starched-up old maid.”

When she went home again she would beg Effie’s pardon, she was resolved upon that. They would be so frightened, so glad to have her back, they would forgive her for all her wildness and carelessness in the past if she promised never, never to do so again.

She lay musing in this wise, remorsefully, when she was suddenly startled from her castle building by a repetition of the terrible shrieks of the day before. The awful sounds woke all the sleeping echoes of the place into dreadful concert. Aline screamed aloud in nervous terror and hid her face in the bed-clothes.

Mrs. Griffin bent hurriedly over her.

“Do not be frightened, my child,” she said. “I am compelled to leave you for a little while. But I shall lock your door securely. No harm shall come to you again.”

She went away, and even though Aline heard the bolt turned carefully in the lock and the key drawn out, she felt terribly afraid that that hideous creature who had assailed her on yesterday, would gain access to her again and complete its murderous work. The cold dews of anguish beaded her white brow as she lay there alone in the beautiful azure room, listening to those wild, unearthly screams. She was afraid to look out from behind the shelter

of the silken cover where she had hidden her eyes, fearful that they might be blasted by the sight of the *thing* that had appeared to her in the parlor yesterday.

She thought of the simple cottage home where papa and mamma and Effie and Max were even now bewailing her loss, perhaps, and her heart swelled with passionate longing and regret. Ah, only to be with them again in the safe shelter of home and love!

The key clicked softly in the lock again. This time Mr. Delaney entered. He looked very pale and grave, but he carried a delicate basket of fresh flowers in his hand that filled the room with sweetness and beauty. He drew the silken cover gently away from Aline's face.

"Poor child, are you so frightened?" he said, compassionately. "Look up. The cries are hushed now. There is nothing for you to fear."

CHAPTER VIII.

The terrible, blood curdling cries that had so startled Aline had, indeed, suddenly ceased. The mysterious mansion had returned to its strange, brooding silence.

Forgetful of her anger against Mr. Delaney in her fear and terror, Aline clung nervously to his arm with one trembling little hand.

“Oh! Mr. Delaney, what is it—that terrible creature I saw yesterday?” she cried out fearfully.

His dark face was strangely agitated as he turned it upon her wistful face.

“Then you really *saw* it?” he said, almost as if speaking to himself.

“Yes, I saw it. Did you suppose it struck me that murderous blow *invisibly*?” she questioned, with something like awe.

“I had hoped—” he began, then paused, after his abrupt fashion of leaving sentences unfinished.

“Answer me,” exclaimed Aline, in her sharp, imperious young voice. “What was it that struck me with that blood-stained dagger yesterday? What was it I heard shrieking like a lost soul to-day? Tell me!”

“It was a ghost,” he answered, turning his head away.

“I do not believe you,” cried Aline. “It was not a ghost. It was something warmed by the breath of life. It clutched me with warm, living fingers. It was strong and swift. Oh, Heaven, how terrible it was!” she shuddered. “Was it really a human being?”

“It was a ghost—a mystery! I can tell you no more,” repeated Oran Delaney.

And then, with that strong will, which Aline already began to subtly recognize, he changed the subject of the conversation.

“Have you forgiven me for my rudeness of last night?” he inquired, with a touch of gentleness in his voice.

“No,” Aline answered, tartly.

“I have brought you these beautiful flowers as a peace offering,” he continued, unruffled by her childish resentment. “You cannot refuse them, for I know that you love flowers very dearly.”

“I shall never love them again,” she replied, obstinately. “I shall always remember that my fondness for flowers brought down all this trouble upon my head.”

“I beg your pardon; it was your fondness for peaches,” he retorted, with a slight gleam of mirth. “If you had not come into my house to take luncheon with me, nothing would have happened.”

“I should never have come into your garden even but for the flowers,” she replied, offended that he should remind her of her appetite for peaches.

He smiled, and then a subtle sigh drove the evanescent gleam away.

“Well, we will not quarrel over the cause,” he said. “The result is the same. I am sorry you will not have my poor flowers. I hoped they would beguile some of the tedium of your illness.”

He put the basket on a stand near her and sat down.

“Mrs. Griffin has sent me to take care of you during her absence,” he said. “But if my presence is disagreeable, Miss Rodney, you can send me away at any moment.”

Aline inwardly wished that she was brave enough to do so, but she was too nervous and frightened to take him at his word. There was a sense of protection in his presence that she could not forego even to gratify her spite at him.

So she lay silently gazing at his dark, stern profile under her long lashes until he turned suddenly and caught the curious gaze of the large liquid blue eyes. He smiled slightly as they fell before his.

“You have not said whether I am to stay or go,” he said.

Aline hesitated a moment, then answered in a low, half-angry voice:

“Stay.”

“Thanks. I was afraid you would send me away,” he said.

“I would, but—but I am afraid to stay here alone,” she replied with spirit.

Something like anger flashed into his dark face a moment, but was quickly dispelled by the thought, “Why be angry with a willful child whom I have unavoidably offended?”

“You are very frank. I quite understand that I am retained in your presence merely in the character of a watch-dog,” he replied, with some *hauteur*. “But while I *am* here, pray make me of service if possible. Can I do anything for you—talk to you—read to you?”

She caught eagerly at the last suggestion.

“Yes, you may read to me. I do not like to talk to you. You make me angry when I talk to you,” she said.

“You are very flattering, Miss Rodney. However, I do not forget that you are sick. We pardon the discourtesies of invalids,” he said, calmly, going over to a little stand littered with volumes bound prettily in blue and gold.

“What is your preference—prose or poetry?” he inquired, carelessly turning them over.

“Poetry,” she replied.

“Naturally—being young,” he muttered, half to himself.

“Do you mean to say that I shall not love poetry when I grow old—like you?” she asked, purposely adding the sting of the last words.

But he faced around toward her with an expression of the most palpable amusement.

“Do I appear very old in your eyes, Miss Rodney?” he inquired.

“‘As old as the hills’—you are, aren’t you, sir?” she replied, with malice prepense.

“I was three-and-thirty yesterday, my frank lady,” he answered, coolly. “As for you, judging from your words and manner, I should guess that you are about ten years old.”

The delicate shaft of sarcasm went home. Aline knew that she deserved it, and that she had been behaving rudely to the courteous gentleman under whose roof she was. But she was by no means prepared to acknowledge her fault. She was bitterly angry with him, because he had refused to communicate with her friends.

“Please go on with the poetry,” she said, assuming an air of dignity, and taking no notice of his last words.

He opened the book he was holding, and commenced to read a poem quite at random:

“How many years will it be, I wonder.
And how will their slow length pass,
Till I shall find rest in silence, under
The trees and the waving grass?

“Many there be in the world who love it,
Who cling to its trifles and toys;
But I could never find aught to covet
Among its vanishing joys.

“But once, indeed, was my heart elated,
And pleased with a dream of its own—
A beautiful dream it was, but fated
Soon to be overthrown.

“Death, like a shadow, fell and darkened
The light that had shone so clear—
How oft since then have I vainly hearkened,
And prayed for his coming near.

“But he cometh not, and I vainly wonder,
How will the long years pass,
Till I shall find rest in silence, under
The trees and waving grass.”

He paused and Aline, impressed against her will, but determined not to show it, cried out, almost peevishly:

“Why did you read such a doleful thing? I do not like sad poetry.”

“That is the fault of your youth again,” he quietly answered. “Now I, on the contrary, rather admire the pathetic style. The time may come, perhaps, when that very poem will please your fancy. Nay, you may even subscribe to the sad sentiment it embodies.”

“I should never do that if I lived to be as old as Methuselah!” cried Aline, with the rash confidence of youth, and Oran Delaney smiled—that slow, pensive smile whose latent sarcasm she already began to understand with the swift intuition of woman.

“Why do you despise youth, Mr. Delaney?” she cried out, hotly.

“I do not despise it, I only pity it,” he answered.

“I can fancy age deserving pity, but not youth,” she answered, resentfully. “Why do you pity it?”

“For its illusions,” he answered, and this time the sarcasm had faded from his voice and face. Both were genuinely sad.

“Its illusions—what are they?” queried the girl, and again he smiled, sadly.

“Do not ask me. They will come home to you soon enough, as they have done to me. Youth is the happiest period of life. I pity it because it comes to an end. I do not despise it, and I fully subscribe to the poet’s plaint:

“‘The loss of youth is sadness
To all who think or feel—
A wound no after-gladness
Can ever wholly heal.’”

Aline lay very still for a moment, gazing silently at him with a feeling of vexation that she had permitted herself to listen to him with interest and even with an unconscious latent sympathy. She was about to make some careless answer to show her utter indifference, and to provoke him again, when she suddenly observed that he had turned deathly pale, and that a stream of blood was pouring from inside his coat sleeve down upon his hand.

“You are wounded, too!” she cried out in dismay, and feeling a deathly faintness stealing over her at sight of the trickling blood.

“It is nothing—a mere flesh wound—a scratch,” he muttered, tearing off his coat, hastily, and then Aline saw that his shirt-sleeve had been torn open and his arm bandaged above the elbow, but the linen had become loosened in some way, and the gaping wound was bleeding profusely.

He tried clumsily to draw the crimson bandage tighter about the wound, but he was very awkward with his left hand, and he did not succeed. Aline could not help being sorry for him.

CHAPTER IX.

She had a very tender heart, this little willful heroine of ours, and although she thought that she hated Oran Delaney she would not willingly have seen him suffer. She saw that he was growing pale and faint from loss of blood, and she could not keep from pitying him.

She cried out, hastily:

“Come here, Mr. Delaney. I will fasten the bandage for you.”

He looked surprised, but he came to the bed and held down his arm within the reach of her little white hands. She drew the band tighter and bound her handkerchief tightly around it. The blood ceased to flow, but her own hands were stained with blood when she had finished.

“Does it frighten you much?” he asked. “You look very pale.”

“No, I am not frightened,” bravely. “Tell me—how did you come by your wounds?”

“In much the same manner as you came by yours,” he replied, reservedly.

“Through that horrible—*something*?” she inquired, with a shudder.

“Yes.”

A gleam of intelligence flashed from Aline’s eyes.

“Ah, now I begin to understand,” she said. “You met it first. It was your blood I saw upon the knife and the hands and the dress?”

“Yes.”

“And you did not run away from me to—to save yourself? I thought—thought—” She paused and looked at him, half inquiringly.

“Well, what was it you thought?” he inquired.

“When you left me in the hall, you know,” she said, with some embarrassment, “I believed that you had deserted me and fled like a

coward, leaving me to the mercies of that terrible creature. I was mistaken, perhaps.”

He looked at her with a slow flush rising through the pallor of his face.

“Every moment I am with you, Miss Rodney, I learn more and more how contemptible I am in your eyes,” he said, with irrepressible chagrin.

“But I told you I was mistaken,” said the girl, with unconscious repentance in her voice. “Was I right?”

“I met the danger first,” he answered, simply.

“Yes, I understand, and I am sorry I thought you a coward. I beg your pardon,” she said, gently.

“You are freely forgiven,” Mr. Delaney replied, quietly, as he brought a damp sponge and carefully removed the blood-stains from her delicate, dimpled white hands.

She submitted quietly to the operation, though he had half expected that she would snatch her hands away in petulant anger.

“I am a great deal better to-day, am I not, Mr. Delaney?” she inquired, as he resumed his seat.

“I think so,” he replied. “Your wound was not serious. It was struck too hastily. I hope you will soon recover now. You are bearing it very bravely.”

“Thank you! And when are you going to let me go home?”

The wistful tone of the young voice struck him like a reproach. He turned away his head as he answered:

“As soon as your wound is healed. That will be in a few weeks, I hope.”

“Can I say or do nothing that will induce you to let me go now?” she entreated.

“That would be impossible. You are not able to be moved yet. The result of such an imprudence might be most serious.”

“And you will not communicate with my friends?” she went on.

“I am sorry to be compelled to deny you that gratification,” he replied, with decision.

“And in the meantime they must suffer all the pangs of doubt and suspense. Oh, Mr. Delaney, is that right, is it just?” cried the wounded captive.

“There are many things in this world, Miss Rodney, that are neither right nor just,” he replied. “This may be one of them; but circumstances will not admit of my acting otherwise. I am compelled to keep you hidden here, unknown to any one, until you are well enough to be returned to your home.”

“You have no pity for them, nor for me!” she cried, almost wildly.

“I cannot follow the bent of my feelings. I am compelled to pursue this course,” replied the mysterious recluse.

“Do you not know,” she said, “that my friends will be very angry with you for keeping me hidden away from them? What if I should die here in this dreadful house?”

“They would never know what fate had overtaken their darling,” he answered, gloomily.

Aline stared at him with wide, terrified blue eyes. Indignation was rising within her again—indignation added to something like fear.

CHAPTER X.

“Mr. Delaney, I cannot understand you,” she said. “You talk strangely. I am tempted to believe that you cannot be sane, that you are not in your right mind.”

He looked at her steadily with his grave, dark eyes.

“Do I look like a lunatic, Miss Rodney?” he inquired.

“No, but you talk like one,” she cried out, petulantly. “Do you really imagine that you can keep my presence here a secret from my own people? Do you not know that they will search for me until they find me?”

“They are already searching for you, but I am quite sure they will never find you,” he replied. “The last place where Mr. Rodney would think of looking for you would be here in his neighbor’s house.”

She knew that it was true. Her heart sunk heavily, but she cried out, spiritedly:

“But when I go home and tell him—what then? Are you not afraid of his anger when he knows the truth?”

“He will never know,” Oran Delaney replied, strangely.

The pale face on the snowy, lace-fringed pillow grew paler still, the blue eyes darkened with agitation.

“Not know?” she cried out, passionately. “Why, what can you mean?”

“You will not tell him,” he replied.

“Now I am quite, quite sure that you are mad,” said Aline. “Do you think I shall not tell them all when I go home?”

“I am quite sure you will not!”

Aline could not speak for a moment. She was mystified by Mr. Delaney’s words and manner. She almost began to believe him mad indeed. To what did his strange talk tend?

While she puzzled within herself he drew his chair nearer to the bedside—near enough indeed to touch her pulse with his cool fingers.

“Pray do not excite yourself unduly,” he said. “There is really no necessity for it. Cannot we discuss this matter coolly and dispassionately, and come to an understanding?”

She drew her hand away with a heavy sigh.

“I do not believe I can discuss it coolly,” she said. “I am frightened at the mysteries of this house, and the mysteries with which you choose to surround me. I am here within a stone’s throw of my own home, wounded, helpless, a prey to grief and anxiety, while my friends are seeking me everywhere in sorrow and distress. I cannot be calm and cool. I am perfectly wretched. How can you explain away these things?”

“Will you listen to me while I try to do so?” asked Oran Delaney.

“Yes,” she answered, impatiently.

“It will not take long,” he said. “In the first place, Miss Rodney, I take some blame upon myself for this. I should not have brought you into my house—I should not even have admitted you into my garden. But I thought you a lonely child, and was carelessly willing to gratify your penchant for my beautiful flowers.”

“Those dearly bought flowers!” sighed Aline.

“Through your own thoughtlessness and mine,” he continued, “you have stumbled upon the mystery of Delaney House—a mystery too terrible to be given to the world—a secret I will guard with my very life, if need be. Therefore—” He paused, after his odd fashion, and gazed gravely into her face.

“Therefore,” she repeated, wonderingly.

“The Delaneys have been a proud race from the beginning—I am the proudest one yet,” he said. “That which you know of Delaney House, Miss Rodney, you shall never be permitted to carry across its portals to blazon to a curious, mocking world!”

“Do you mean to kill me?” shuddered the girl, shrinking in terror from the dark, stern, agitated face.

He started and looked at her.

“Poor child! Have I indeed frightened you so much?” he asked. “I must indeed be an ogre in your eyes! No, Aline—you are such a child, let me call you so—no; I do not mean to kill you. I am not a murderer. I shall simply bind you by an oath of silence when you leave this place.”

“An oath of silence?” she repeated, vaguely.

“Yes,” he answered, steadily. “I shall swear you to silence regarding your whereabouts during the time you have been away—silence regarding the wound you have received—silence regarding me—silence, in short, as to everything that can throw the least light on your strange disappearance from your home.”

“And if I refuse to swear?” Aline exclaimed, gazing at him almost defiantly.

“If you refuse, you will never be permitted to leave Delaney House,” he answered, firmly.

“Never?” she echoed.

“Never!” he reiterated.

CHAPTER XI.

The strange and perfectly unaccountable manner of Aline Rodney's disappearance from her home had excited a great sensation in the town of Chester. Such a harrowing mystery had never before agitated the pretty little country town. Mr. Rodney, Aline's father, was the only lawyer the town could boast, and although not wealthy, was a prominent member of society in Chester. His two pretty daughters had been educated as carefully as his means would allow, and were the boast of the town for their beauty.

Effie Rodney was a hazel-eyed beauty, with soft waving tresses of chestnut brown and a complexion of the loveliest red and white, combined with features of the purest Grecian type. She was twenty-three years old, and so stately, quiet, and dignified, that her more volatile sister, Aline, audaciously dubbed her an old maid.

Mrs. Rodney was a pretty woman of the same type of beauty as Effie. Mother and daughter were remarkably alike, both being tall, extremely graceful in appearance, and very dignified in manner. To both of them the wild and willful ways of blue eyed Aline were a perpetual wonder and annoyance. They loved her, but she was a sore trial to their patience, and their understanding. She was so gay, so willful, so thoughtless, that, as Mrs. Rodney expressed it, she kept her family "in hot water all the while." They could never tell what mischievous prank their pretty Aline would be into next. Never were two sisters more unlike than Aline and Effie, both in mind and looks, although they were really fond of each other. Both were beautiful, but one was like a stately, bright-plumaged bird-of-paradise, the other like a brilliant humming-bird, always on the wing, never at rest in its aerial flight.

Neither Mrs. Rodney nor Effie could understand Aline's complex character. She was wild and willful, but she was also warm-hearted and loving. She was always getting herself into some kind of mischief, always being blamed by mamma, and lectured by Effie. If papa had not petted her and Max adored her she could not have stood it. But the forces for and against being

very equally divided she was enabled to hold her own with tolerable equanimity. Sometimes, mamma, acting upon a mistaken sense of duty, allotted to Aline some quite severe punishments, as in the case of the imprisonment the day of the picnic; but there was always papa to pet and soothe his injured little girl, Max to load her with sugar-plums, and even stately Effie to lament that her darling little sister had to be punished. So Aline, with all the faults of her head and heart, was dearly beloved and bitterly missed and mourned in the home from which she had so strangely dropped out like a link from a golden chain.

The incredulous horror on returning from Walnut Grove and finding her gone was something better imagined than described. They examined the empty room, they peered beneath the bed, behind the curtains, within the wardrobe, while little Max, in a fit of absent-mindedness, pulled out the bureau drawers, and even lifted the tray of her Saratoga trunk in a vain search for the lost one.

Beautiful Aline had flown from the dreary room like a swift-winged bird from the prison bars of its cage. They called her name, but she answered not. They sought her in her dearest haunts, but they found her not. They were face to face with a mystery.

Cook had not anticipated such alarm on the part of the family. She had missed the young lady several hours ago when she had taken up luncheon to her, but being used to the mischievous pranks of her young mistress, had believed that she was hiding herself somewhere within the room. She had set down the tray on a stand and gone away, locking the door behind her.

It was locked still when they came home from the picnic rather earlier than they would have done, but that they were anxious over Aline—poor Aline who had missed all the delights of the picnic because she had been a naughty girl yesterday and left undone those things which she ought to have done, and done those things which she ought not to have done.

Aline had deserted the sewing-machine and the ruffles mamma had set her to hem yesterday and gone a-fishing with ten-year-old Max and his comrade Harry Jones. She had coaxed away from cook the sponge cake that was destined to accompany the cream at dinner, and she had triumphantly packed it into her lunch basket and shared it with the two boys that day on the river bank where they cast their lines into the waves. And she had come

home with the end of her nose and the back of her neck blistered red, her dress-skirt soiled and “brier-torn,” like Maud Muller’s, and her pretty bare hands turned brown, while Max came trailing behind her with his pantaloons rolled up to his knees, his feet and limbs all yellowed with river mud, and a string of ridiculous little shining minnows in his hands. It was bad for Max—it was utterly disgraceful for that great girl, Aline, decided mamma and Effie. It was a case that called for punishment, more especially as Aline could not even be induced to repentance for her fault. She insisted that she had not meant any harm and that she had done nothing wrong. She could not be brought to see her error in the light that her mamma wished her to see it in. So Mrs. Rodney, deeming this an extreme case, resorted to extreme measures. She knew that Aline had set her heart on the picnic in Walnut Grove—therefore she kept her away to meditate on her misdeeds, and, if possible, to win her to repentance. She even dared hope that under the stress of such punishment Aline might be brought to promise “never to do so any more.”

But, after all, she had been sorry to punish her bright Aline so hardly. She thought about it at the picnic. It rather damped her pleasure in the gay and festive scene. She told herself that if Aline was brought to a proper state of submission she would make it up to her. She had kept the girl back somewhat, deeming her childish and unformed. She would lengthen her dresses now, put up her careless, girlish ringlets, and let her take her place in Chester society as a grown-up young lady. Perhaps the importance of the change might thrust dignity, as it were, upon the willful girl.

She confided her plans to Effie when she could get her away for a moment from the knot of admirers who always surrounded the pretty Miss Rodney. Effie coincided with her mother. She was too secure in the consciousness of her own beauty to be jealous of her younger sister’s charms, and she thought that it was quite time for Aline to give over childish ways.

So they went home sorry for Aline’s long day of confinement, and full of kindly intentions toward her, eager to hear of her repentance, and to give her the kiss of pardon; and they found her place vacant, her chair empty. They were full of incredulous dismay at first. They thought it must be one of her practical jokes, and that she would return to them presently full of glee over the fright she had given them, and eager to hear how they had passed the day from whose pleasures she had been ruthlessly debarred.

In the meantime, they were full of wonder over the way in which the runaway had escaped from her room. The little chamber formed a small wing of itself on the left side of the cottage. It had three windows, one of which looked down upon the front of the street, another into the small, brick-paved back yard, and the third into the beautiful, neglected garden of Delaney House. It was quite impossible, they thought, that Aline could have escaped through either of these second-story windows unless she had made a rope from the sheets of her bed. But the downy little nest where Aline rested her fair form nightly was undisturbed in its snowy order. She had certainly not escaped that way, but had gone through the door, and the Rodneys were fain at first to accuse the woman whom they had left in charge of connivance at her freedom.

Cook denied the accusation sturdily, and, having a good reputation for veracity, no one presumed to doubt her vehement asseverations.

The mystery thickened. They discussed the possibility of Aline having a skeleton-key to the door, and inclined to that belief. In no other way could they account for her absence.

Night fell; and now, indeed, they began to grow alarmed. Aline was known to be an arrant little coward in the dark. Her little feet would have carried her flying homeward long before night overtook her.

“She has gone to some of the neighbors,” Mrs. Rodney suggested, and her husband and little Max set out to see.

She was not found at any of the neighbors. She did not come home that night, nor for many another succeeding night. It grew into a most absorbing mystery, the strange disappearance of a young girl from her home. It was not a matter of local interest merely, but of general. From the local papers the item was copied into the papers all the country over. It excited a great interest and sympathy. It became one of the sensations of the day. Search was made far and near. Personals appeared in the newspapers; the largest rewards Mr. Rodney could afford were offered for his daughter’s return. He was half mad with cruel anxiety; he hurried hither and thither in search of the lost one. But, in all his grief and anxiety, in all his suspicions, no warning instinct ever prompted him to look into his neighbor’s house.

It was the strangest thing that had ever happened in Chester. In the pretty quiet town no such sensation had ever been heard of before. A young girl locked into her room in the safe sanctuary of home had disappeared in the strangest manner, and not the slightest clew could be found to the mystery. Add to this that the missing girl had been a general favorite, loved for her winning ways, and admired for her beauty, and you may form some idea of how Aline Rodney was missed and mourned.

The panic only became greater as days went by, and there came no tidings of her fate. People were frightened. Young girls shivered in their rooms by day and by night. What if a like fate should befall them?

Mrs. Rodney's grief and remorse were extreme. The thin crust of pride and dignity melted around her heart, and she realized that she had been hard and stern to the lost one. She blamed herself as the cause of Aline's flitting, and her self-reproach was most bitter. When proud, hard natures melt, no one can calculate the effect. Mrs. Rodney's sorrow and remorse completely prostrated her. She became seriously ill, and her physician declared that there was no telling how her low, nervous fever would end, unless her terrible suspense could be broken by news of her lost daughter.

Those were weary days for the Rodneys. Effie was wretched, her mother ill, Mr. Rodney worn to a shadow, and little Max's grief unceasing. They began to realize what a sunbeam in the house had been the bright-eyed girl whom they had blamed so often. Now, when she was worse than dead to them, mamma and Effie began to realize her worth. Papa and Max had known it all the while.

Two weeks had elapsed, and Effie was sitting by the bedside of her sick mother one evening, when a stranger's card was brought to her. She looked at it in some surprise. "Dr. Anthony," she read, slowly. "Why, mamma, have you called a new physician?"

"No, I have not," said Mrs. Rodney. "It is a stranger, dear. Go to him quickly, please. Perhaps he brings us news."

Her eyes grew bright with hope and excitement, and Effie's heart beat a trifle quicker, too. What if her mother's surmise were true, and they were about to hear news of Aline? She did not even stop for the customary

womanly peep into the mirror, but hastened down to the parlor to meet the stranger.

CHAPTER XII.

A tall, decidedly handsome man rose to meet Effie as she glided into the pretty little parlor with that stately grace that her admirers called so queenly. He waited with a courteously bowed head for her to address him.

She did so in a silvery-sweet voice, and with a slight blush.

“I am Miss Rodney, Dr. Anthony,” she said, glancing at the card which she still held in her hand. “Papa is away from home, and mamma is quite sick. Can I serve you in any way?”

His dark eyes rested on the beautiful, gentle face in uncontrollable admiration a moment, then he said, in a clear manly voice:

“I have called in the vague hope of serving this afflicted family, Miss Rodney.”

“In what way, sir?” inquired Effie, as she waved him back to his seat, and sunk into one herself.

“In that calamity which has excited the sympathy and sorrow of the whole country,” he answered, respectfully.

Effie’s heart gave a muffled throb of joy at the suggestive words.

“God bless you, sir, if you bring us any tidings of our dear Aline!” she exclaimed. He saw that he had excited extravagant hope within her, and said, hastily:

“Do not build too much upon my words, Miss Rodney. I do not wish to deceive you. It may be but a vain quest upon which I am come, but some facts in my possession I have thought best to lay before your father in the vague hope that they might somehow lead to news of your lost one.”

Seeing how much he had damped the springing hopes in her breast, he said, anxiously:

“Miss Rodney, is there in your possession a photograph of your missing sister?”

She could not understand why such a deep shadow fell over his frank, manly face, as she answered:

“No, Dr. Anthony, my sister’s picture was never taken in her life.”

“That is most unfortunate,” he said. “I had counted so much upon her picture.”

“I do not believe papa would like to have Aline’s picture published in the papers. He shrinks from publicity,” said Effie, reservedly.

“You misunderstand me. I have no such intention,” said the young physician. “Nothing is further from my thoughts, Miss Rodney. I quite agree with your father that any unnecessary publicity is most distressing. In the absence of Mr. Rodney, may I state my reasons to you?”

“You may,” Effie answered.

“Thank you. I will try to do so,” he said. “In the first place, I will say that I have lately seen a girl, under very distressing circumstances, who answers to the published descriptions of your missing sister.”

“When? Where?” exclaimed Effie, agitatedly. The young physician’s face grew grave and perplexed.

“I can readily tell you when,” he answered; “but the strangest part of the mystery is that I cannot tell you *where*.”

Miss Rodney’s fair face reflected the perplexity on his.

“Dr. Anthony, I do not understand you,” she said. “How can such a thing be? You have seen her; but you cannot tell where. Pray, explain yourself.”

“I am about to do so,” he answered. “Then you will readily understand the seeming discrepancy in my statements.”

Effie bowed silently, and settled herself to listen. His frank, handsome face, and quiet, earnest manner inspired her with confidence in him, although he was a stranger whom, ten minutes ago, she had never beheld. She was most anxious to hear what he could tell her of that girl whose description answered to that of Aline.

She fixed her bright hazel-brown eyes upon his face with an earnestness that Dr. Anthony found very fascinating.

“In order to be quite sure of dates,” he said, “I will ask you to tell me that of Miss Aline’s disappearance.”

She named it quickly, and he exclaimed, with a sudden brightening of his dark eyes:

“The dates correspond! Oh, how much I would give at this moment for the counterfeit presentment of Miss Aline Rodney!”

In a moment he continued:

“I live at the little town of Maywood, some five miles distant from this, Miss Rodney. I have practiced medicine there for several years, and may say, without vanity, that I have built up quite a creditable practice there and in the surrounding country—at least. I am always busy.”

Effie bowed silently, and he went on:

“Some strange things happen to a physician in the course of his practice, Miss Rodney. A mysterious thing happened to me on the night of the date you mentioned just now.”

CHAPTER XIII.

Miss Rodney's face was pale with emotion and anxiety. She hung eagerly upon Dr. Anthony's words.

"A mysterious thing," he repeated. "I was closing my office at eleven o'clock that night, preparatory to going home, when, in the darkness, a stranger touched me upon the shoulder and said, in a muffled voice:

"Come with me at once, doctor. A lady needs your professional services."

"I am so used to being called out at night, Miss Rodney, that at first I thought nothing of the request. I have ridden miles and miles on the darkest nights through the peaceful country neighborhood hereabouts without fear or molestation. So I said, carelessly to the man, whose face I did not see clearly by reason of the extreme darkness: 'Is it a long distance? If not, I will walk, as my horse has been put away for the night.'

"A matter of two miles or more,' he answered, in the same low, muffled voice in which he had first addressed me. 'But my buggy is here at the corner. Come with me and I will send you back. We have no time to lose.'

"So careless and fearless had I become in my career as a physician, that I felt no alarm at his proposition. I carelessly assented, and accompanied him to the corner, where I found a fine horse and buggy waiting for us as he had said. He sprung in and he drove rapidly to the outskirts of the town, when I, being weary of the silence maintained by my companion, inquired the name of the person I was called to attend.

"To my surprise, the man replied in a cool, quiet voice, as if there were nothing strange in what he was saying:

"That is a secret, Dr. Anthony, and must remain so."

"Nothing like this had ever occurred to me in my professional experience. I was indignant at this answer. I did not choose to bestow my medical skill upon a patient who thus withheld confidence from me. I told him so rather hotly.

“My companion, who was evidently a gentleman, laughed easily.

“‘Tut, tut,’ he said, ‘all physicians can relate instances of mysterious cases.’ This was one of them. My services were needed, and no harm would befall me, while at the same time I should be most liberally rewarded, but the lady’s name must remain unknown to me, as also the place of her residence. ‘For which reason, doctor,’ he continued, in the same cool, quiet, gentlemanly voice, and producing a large handkerchief, ‘I shall be compelled to blindfold you for the balance of the distance.’

“His cool masterful tone irritated me exceedingly. I answered quickly that I would not submit to such terms—that he must employ other advice for the case; I would not attend.

“‘I will have nothing to do with a mystery,’ I said. ‘All must be fair and open, or I will not attend.’

“He laughed at first, and tried to persuade me; but, finding that I was resolute, and insisted on being let out of the buggy, he became angry.

“‘Your unreasonable mood forces me to a rash alternative,’ he said. ‘I am obliged to compel your obedience.’

“I felt the cold muzzle of a pistol pressed against my cheek. I was myself unarmed and powerless.

“‘Attempt to get out, and you are a dead man!’ he said. ‘You have no resource but to obey me. If you are a wise man, you will permit me to tie this bandage over your eyes, and to go on without further parley.’

“I am not a coward, Miss Rodney—I hope you will not form that opinion of me,” continued the handsome young physician, “but I flatter myself that I possess a modicum of common-sense. I found myself in the power of a desperate man, and I considered that my best plan would be to yield to his will; besides, there was a spice of romance in the affair that appealed to the imaginative part of me. I made a virtue of necessity, and accompanied my stern companion, though I must confess that my anger rose when he bound the handkerchief about my unwilling eyes. The darkness of the night was so dense that he might have spared me that inconvenience.”

Effie listened, with her heart upon her lips, for him to come to the story of the mysterious patient. It was Aline, of course—Aline, ill or dying! How

terrible it seemed! It cast a strange, new light upon the mystery of her disappearance.

“I went with him; but I am quite sure that he deceived me regarding the distance,” said Dr. Anthony. “Instead of being two miles, I am certain that we drove five, at least, before his fleet-footed horse came to a stop. Then I was helped from the buggy, and led up a flight of what seemed, from the sound of my feet upon them, to be wide, marble steps.”

CHAPTER XIV.

The speaker paused to take breath a minute, and then resumed:

“A heavy door opened to admit us into the wide, dimly lighted hallway of what must have been a large, aristocratic mansion. Here the eccentric stranger removed the handkerchief from my eyes and coolly clapped a mask upon my face instead, with the odd remark:

“‘You will have need for your eyes here, but none for your features, Dr. Anthony, as I do not wish my patient ever to recognize you abroad. Therefore, I request that you wear this mask.’

“I acceded to this polite request of course, you know, Miss Rodney, not being in a condition to refuse,” said the young man, with a sly sense of the humorous, “and then I saw beside us a neat-looking elderly woman with a lamp in her hand, evidently a nurse. She led up a wide, beautiful stairway of polished walnut, along another hall, and so into a lady’s room—the most beautiful room I ever saw!” said Dr. Anthony, with enthusiasm.

“It was large and airy, and hung with rich blue silk and white lace. The furniture was rosewood, upholstered in blue silk, and on the marble mantel and the ivory brackets against the wall were vases of flowers, statuettes, and expensive *bric-à-brac*. You see, I made good use of my eyes when I was given leave, Miss Rodney,” said the physician, with a smile.

“Yes, doctor, but now about your mysterious patient?” breathed Effie, anxiously.

“Yes, now I am coming to that, for I am afraid the preliminaries have sadly wearied your patience,” he said. “There was a rosewood bed in the center of the room, Miss Rodney, draped in rich blue silk and canopied with snowy lace in the richest pattern, and among the lace-trimmed pillows lay a girl—a corpse, I thought at first, for she was deathly white and still, her eyes were closed, and the white garments about her breast were all dabbled with blood.”

Miss Rodney shuddered and grew very pale.

“Oh, poor little Aline!” she sighed. “Tell me how she looked, Dr. Anthony.”

“She was very young. She looked almost child-like,” said Dr. Anthony. “She had a fair round face with a dimpled chin and beautiful features. Her hair was dark and curling, her brows and lashes were jetty black and of wonderful beauty. Her eyes, much to my surprise when she recovered from her swoon, were dark, rich blue, like wet violets. I had thought they would be black, before she opened them.”

“It was my sister!” cried Effie, in tones of conviction. “You have described her very accurately.”

“I went up to her side, and looked down at the beautiful, silent face,” he went on; “and the stranger, who, I have forgotten to say before, wore a thick, heavy mask upon his face, followed me. In a moment he turned to the nurse, angrily:

“‘How is this?’ he said. ‘I told you to put a mask upon her face!’

“‘And so I did, sir, but her protracted swoon so frightened me, that I removed it to give her air, and forgot to replace it. I hope there is no harm done, sir.’

“He muttered something angrily, then stepped quickly back, for at that moment the wounded girl opened her eyes and flashed them around the room. They fell on the face of the nurse, and she cried out, in a startled tone:

“‘Who are you, and where am I?’

“She spoke no more, for my strange guide bent over her and whispered something in her ear, and she relapsed into silence. He then directed me to examine her wound, and I obeyed him.”

“Was—was it fatal?” asked poor Effie.

“No, although it had been meant for that,” he replied. “It was a knife-wound, and had been meant for the heart, but glanced aside and inflicted a flesh wound instead. I bathed and dressed the wound, but before I finished, she had again relapsed into unconsciousness.”

“And you learned nothing?” sighed Effie.

“Nothing,” he answered. “Before I came away, the unknown stranger drew off his coat and showed me a deep, jagged cut on his own arm. I bathed and dressed his wound also, was rewarded for my services by a twenty-dollar gold piece, and after submitting to the blindfold again, was driven to my home by my mysterious employer. That is the end of my story, Miss Rodney. Does it throw any light on the mystery of your sister’s disappearance?”

“None, Dr. Anthony. It only deepens the mystery,” she answered, mournfully.

“And yet it is in some sort a clew,” he said, thoughtfully. “If the young girl I saw is your sister it proves that she is confined somewhere within a radius of five miles from Maywood. Have you thought of that, Miss Rodney?”

“If the girl you saw is really my sister, it proves also that she is a prisoner somewhere,” Effie said, musingly. “It places the mystery in a new aspect altogether. We had thought that Aline, offended by her punishment that day, had run away merely to annoy us, and that, when a sufficient time had elapsed, she would return to us again. Can it be that she was abducted and imprisoned?”

“It looks that way,” said Dr. Anthony. “At any rate, I have thought it best to come here and tell my story. You understand now why I wished to see a picture of the missing girl. I could then have told most certainly whether the girl whose strange wound I dressed was your sister.”

“It is most unfortunate that we have never had a picture of Aline; but your description corresponds exactly with her appearance,” declared Effie.

“She was very beautiful. Even if I never see her again, I shall never forget her charming face,” said Dr. Anthony.

He rose to go as he spoke, and the look of respectful admiration he bent on Effie’s sweet, sad face seemed to mutely declare that he would never forget her, either. Her long lashes drooped, and a delicate blush rose to her cheek, reminding him that his thoughts were too plainly expressed in his eyes. She thanked him in sweet, courteous phrases for his information, and half timidly requested him to call again, and recount his strange story to her father.

Dr. Anthony very willingly promised to do so. He was very sorry for the afflicted family, and very much interested in the hazel-eyed Effie. She, on her part, was vaguely interested in him.

“The most interesting young man I ever met,” she mentally decided, recalling the handsome face and clear, frank voice, after he had gone away.

She went back to her mother’s bedside, and related Dr. Anthony’s story. Mrs. Rodney was greatly excited. Aline’s mysterious absence assumed a new phase. She was full of wonder and dismay and grief.

“My dear little Aline! She may be dead ere this!” was the burden of her grief, and it became so hysterical and violent during the long hours of the night that Effie regretted she had told her the strange story. She was relieved when her father came home next morning from another fruitless quest. She felt that the charge of her grief-stricken mother was becoming too heavy for her. No one could soothe Mrs. Rodney’s bitter grief but her patient, though almost distracted husband.

CHAPTER XV.

Mr. Rodney did not wait for Dr. Anthony to return to Chester. His anxiety was too great. He drove over to Maywood in the early morning to see the young physician.

He heard the whole story over again. It impressed him strangely. He believed with the doctor that the mysterious wounded girl was Aline herself.

“I have been haunted by that belief ever since I heard the story of your daughter’s disappearance,” he said. “I feared you might think me foolish or presuming, but I could not rest until I had gone over to Chester and told you my story.”

“For which kindness I am most grateful to you,” said Mr. Rodney, grasping his hand cordially. “Who knows but that this information will lead to my daughter’s recovery?”

He found the young doctor most intelligent and agreeable. He consulted with him as to the best method of following up this strange discovery. Both agreed that it would be well to confide the matter to a skillful detective. Mr. Rodney sent to New York at once for the most noted one in the service.

They agreed that they would keep the strange story of the doctor’s experience a profound secret from the public. If once it became publicly known, it might put the villain on his guard. He might hustle Aline off to another place.

When Mr. Rodney went home, he gave Dr. Anthony a most cordial invitation to come over to Chester and visit him. The doctor was not slow to avail himself of the courtesy. It was the beginning of a most pleasant friendship.

Perhaps hazel-eyed Effie had something to do with it. It is certain that she enjoyed the non-professional visits of the Maywood physician as much as was consistent with the trouble and anxiety she was enduring. And Dr.

Anthony certainly found the fair, dignified young lady very fascinating. He came often to the dainty little cottage home that nestled in the shadow of the tall trees and pretentious towers of Delaney House. He was so gay and cheerful, so determinately hopeful, that he sometimes wiled Effie to a momentary forgetfulness of their loss and sorrow. He made little Max fond of him. He pleased the nervous, fretful, invalid mother still prostrated by her grief and remorse. His even, sunny temper and handsome face always brightened the cottage parlor when they shone in it. All claimed him as a friend and comforter.

The New York detective came down promptly to Chester. He was quite willing to undertake the case. He flattered himself that he should unravel the mystery.

They showed him the little end room from whence Aline had been so strangely spirited away. He examined it with a great interest. He stood at each of the three windows in turn, and gazed curiously out. The front one gave him a perspective of a quiet little village street. The back one looked out on a brick-paved yard, and a tiny kitchen. The end one presented a more inviting prospect. It showed him the green and flowery garden of Delaney House. The quiet, rustic seats, the cool spray of the fountains, the deep shade of the trees, the delicate fragrance of the flowers, all inspired one with a sense of peace and rest; and the master of all this wealth of summer sweetness, as he walked among the quiet graveled paths, did not inspire one with any suspicion. One envied him, rather, he looked so calm and peaceful, as though the cares and sorrows of the weary world touched him not, hidden as it were, behind his high stone walls and grim, forbidding towers, with their close-shut windows.

Yes, here he still walked daily, as on that day when willful Aline had gone to her fate along a path as rosy and flower-strewn as ever delighted the eyes of heedless youth. His dark, grave face gave no hint of the secret he held, and expressed no sympathy nor sorrow for the shadow that had fallen on his neighbor's house. He appeared calm, grave, indifferent to all things but himself.

The New York detective studied the house and the man with a good deal of interest. He asked questions about them, but he stood well back from the

window, and did not permit Mr. Delaney, by any chance, to observe his curious glances. He was very cautious.

Mr. Rodney was a man of quite acute perceptions. He quickly saw where Mr. Lane's suspicions were insensibly drifting.

"Your suspicions are tending in quite the wrong direction," he said: "Dr. Anthony is quite sure that the house where he saw the wounded girl is quite five miles distant from here."

It was a curious yet so natural mistake that all had drifted insensibly into it. Dr. Anthony had said that he was carried at least five miles from Maywood to the mysterious mansion. No one had reflected that Maywood was five miles distant from Chester, or if they had it did not connect itself at all with the mystery of Aline's disappearance. No one except the keen-witted detective dreamed for an instant of connecting Delaney House with the mystery, and his suspicions were at once diverted by his employer's confident remark. He turned his attention at once to another subject, and gave up the vague idea. Delaney House was destined to hold its secret yet.

"With one black shadow at its feet,
The house thro' all the level shines,
Close-latticed to the brooding heat,
And silent in its dusty vines;
And 'Ave, Mary,' was her moan,
'Madonna, sad is night and morn;'
And 'Ah,' she sung, 'to be all alone,
To live forgotten and love forlorn.'"

Mr. Lane gave his closest attention and best talents to the solution of the mystery, and he felt perfectly confident of success. When had he, the most able detective in the great city of New York, failed in any undertaking? It was not likely he should be foiled here in this little country town.

He settled himself at the pretentious hotel as an invalid gentleman in search of health. He had his own private buggy sent down from the city, and he made solitary excursions into the surrounding country in quest of the Goddess of Health, as he pretended. Sometimes he varied the monotony of these trips by going afoot. No one suspected his real reasons for being in the town. He passed everywhere for that which he represented himself to be.

Weeks came and went, and he was no nearer the solution of the mystery, no nearer the finding of Aline than when he first came to Chester. A baffled feeling began to grow upon him, but still he would not own himself defeated, would not give up the quest.

It was quite impossible that he should fail, he told himself, inspired by the natural self confidence of one who has always succeeded. Some day he would be sure to find the aristocratic mansion with the beautiful blue room where the wounded girl was hidden away from the yearning hearts of those who loved and mourned her.

CHAPTER XVI.

Aline Rodney possessed a very quick and passionate temper. She had been very injudiciously spoiled by her father, and very injudiciously punished by her mother. The result showed itself in a willful capricious temper that could not bear contradiction and restraint.

When Mr. Delaney firmly reiterated his assertion, that she should never be permitted to leave Delaney House unless she solemnly pledged herself to silence regarding her sojourn there, Aline's young heart was filled with the bitterest anger and rebellion. She was unaccustomed to absolute control. Her mother's efforts in that direction were weak and fitful, her father's love made him blind to the inherent obstinacy of her nature. When Oran Delaney, strong and masterful as he was by nature, undertook to dictate to this spoiled, petted child, he found that he incurred a serious risk.

I am ashamed to record this of my heroine—such characters are expected to realize our ideal of perfection—but she flew into a passion. She scolded Mr. Delaney in the bitterest terms her sharp little tongue could devise. She reproached him angrily, laying all the blame of her presence in the house upon his broad shoulders, and utterly ignoring her share in it. She was half-maddened by her sense of wrong and injury, and when she found that all her remonstrances broke against his strong, firm will, like water against a rock, she relapsed into violent hysterics.

She was not your ideal of a heroine, reader, nor mine, nor Oran Delaney's! His proud lip curled, half in pity, half in scorn, at her passionate ravings. He was not at all frightened by her anger. He said to himself that it was the impotent, unreasonable anger of a child, and that she had a decidedly shrewish temper; but at the same time he could not help seeing how beautiful she was in her anger and spite. Her blue eyes sparkled through the tears that filled them, a crimson color glowed upon her cheeks. Her voice, even at its sharpest, trembled with her sense of injury, and had a certain pathos that made it sound musical. Her whole proud spirit was aroused. She defied him to carry out his assertion, and then, in unreasoning contradiction

of herself, she declared that she would remain at Delaney House until her bright eyes were dim, and her dark hair gray, before she would take the oath of silence he demanded of her. She would never submit to such tyranny and injustice.

If Aline had been well and strong, Mr. Delaney would have laughed at her anger; but he grew apprehensive now. It was not well for her to excite herself. He regretted his precipitancy in acquainting her with his intentions. He wished that he had temporized with her.

“But how was I to know that she would take it so hardly?” he muttered to himself.

He was greatly relieved when Mrs. Griffin suddenly put in an appearance. She was honestly aghast at the state of the patient, and, while hurriedly mixing a composing draught, she gave loud utterance to her anxiety.

“This will be the death of her! A fever will be sure to set in. I cannot imagine what you have said to excite her so much, Mr. Delaney. It was very imprudent.”

“I did not know she would take it so hard,” he muttered, glancing uneasily at Aline, whose angry reproaches had subsided into low, smothered sobs and heart-broken wails.

“You had better leave her to me, now,” she said. “I can coax her to take this medicine, perhaps, when you are gone.”

He went up to Aline, and held out his hand.

“I am sorry you think so hardly of me,” he said. “Try to forgive me, won’t you, Aline?”

“I will never forgive you,” Aline, cried out, resentfully, as she pushed the offered hand away. And Mr. Delaney went away, then, without another word or look.

But Mrs. Griffin gave her a glance of lively reproach.

“For shame, Miss Rodney!” she cried. “You might treat Mr. Delaney civilly, at least, considering that he saved your life.”

“When?” demanded Aline, desisting from her sobs in sheer surprise.

“There, now! I always said I had a long tongue. Mr. Delaney told me not to tell,” muttered the nurse.

“When did he save my life?” demanded the girl, in her pretty, peremptory way.

“Don’t worry, Miss Rodney, that was a mere slip of the tongue, just now,” said Mrs. Griffin, as she approached with the wine-glass of medicine.

“I shall not take the medicine unless you tell me what you meant by saying that Mr. Delaney saved my life,” declared Aline, coolly.

“Won’t you? Then I shall have to call him back to pour it down your throat, as he did last night,” threatened the nurse, vexed at the willfulness of her patient.

“You will do no such thing, for I shall immediately tell him what you said, and ask him if it is true,” declared the perverse girl; “but, if you tell me the truth, I shall not tell him that you betrayed his confidence.”

Mrs. Griffin looked thoroughly vexed, but seeing what a headstrong nature she had to deal with, she meekly capitulated.

“If excitement weren’t so hurtful to you, I’d let you do your worst, my spoiled young lady,” she said; “but, for your own sake, and to save you from another fit of temper, I’ll tell you the truth. Mr. Delaney saved you from that *creature* that assaulted you yesterday. She had already wounded him upstairs, but he pursued her, and reached the parlor just in time to prevent her from giving you a second stab with her dagger; and if she had succeeded in that second attempt, you would have bidden good-by to this world, my pretty one!”

Aline shuddered at the emphatic tone. Mrs. Griffin held out the medicine to her, and she swallowed it meekly, without a word of remonstrance. Her pretty face, still flushed from her anger and tears, looked very grave.

“I am very glad he saved my life,” she said, after a minute, thoughtfully. “I should not like to die yet. I am too young, and the world is too lovely.”

“As well die young as old,” growled the grim nurse. “One is saved a deal of pain by it.”

“You are an old croaker, like Mr. Delaney,” Aline exclaimed, impatiently. “I dare say I shall be as hopeful and happy and as much in love with life when I am old as I am now!”

“Let us hope so,” said the old woman, dryly; then she added, with some spirit, “As for Mr. Delaney being an old croaker, Miss Rodney, he is not old, let me tell you. He is only a little past thirty. I nursed him when he was a baby.”

“Did you, really, Mrs. Griffin? How strange!” cried Aline, trying to realize the fact that Mr. Delaney had ever been a baby. She looked at Mrs. Griffin meditatively a moment, and, as a vision of the tall, handsome man in bibs and long skirts came before her mind’s eye, she burst out laughing.

“Well, I never saw such a child—crying one moment, laughing the next!” cried Mrs. Griffin, offended at her levity.

“Don’t be angry, nurse. I was only laughing at the idea of that stern, dark man ever being a baby. Tell me, did you really nurse him? And was he a pretty baby? And was his mamma very fond of him?” cried volatile Aline.

“His mamma died when he was born, Miss Rodney. She was as young as you are, I believe, but she had a vast deal more dignity than you have,” Mrs. Griffin said, reprovingly.

“I have no dignity at all. I have heard that every day of my life, and I am eighteen years old,” said Aline, rather soberly; “and this poor young mother who died so sadly, Mrs. Griffin, was she a pretty girl?”

“How you do fly from one subject to another, miss!” cried Mrs. Griffin. “Yes, she was very beautiful. But, my dear, I don’t think that Mr. Delaney would like for me to discuss his family affairs with a stranger. Suppose you shut your eyes and go to sleep. You have had too much excitement already.”

Aline could be a very sweet, obedient child when it pleased her to be so. She relapsed into one of those gracious moods now. She nestled her dark head down upon the pillow and obediently closed her eyes.

But she was not asleep, although the grim nurse “laid that flattering unction to her soul.” She was busily thinking. “So Mr. Delaney saved my life,” she was saying to herself. “Why did he not tell me? I might not have been quite so abominable to him then. What a little wretch he must think me! I am

sorry his mother died when he was a baby! I don't think I should have had a very pleasant life if my mamma had died like that, even though she scolds me and punishes me sometimes."

She was unconsciously penitent for all her rudeness and anger toward Mr. Delaney. He had saved her life. That was a great boon in Aline's eyes. She was young and fair, and life was very sweet.

"I should not have been quite so bad if only I had known," she repeated to herself. "I will be kinder to him after this. I do not want him to think me a little heathen. But he should not keep me here against my will. He must know that I want to go home!"

While she lay thus apparently sleeping, but in reality busily thinking, the nurse watched her anxiously. She believed that the girl was asleep, but she did not like to see the bright, warm color that began to burn fitfully on the fair cheek beneath the long, dark fringe of the lashes.

"I do not like the look of it," she muttered, shaking her gray head, ominously. "'Twill be a mercy if fever doesn't set in after all that passion she was in. And if it does, he daren't bring the physician again. The risk will be too great."

She started when the blue eyes unclosed presently and looked up into her face. They were unnaturally dark and bright.

"Send Mr. Delaney to me," she said, "I am not going to tell him what you said, nurse, oh, no! Only send him here." He came, and when he saw the hot flush on her cheeks, and the brilliant light in her eyes he was frightened. They were unnatural.

Aline put out her dainty, dimpled hand to him.

"I was very rude to you," she said, simply. "Will you pardon me, Mr. Delaney?"

He clasped the small hand gently and assured her that he was not offended in the least. He knew that he had given her great cause to be angry with him.

"Still I need not have been such a little wretch," she said, "and—and—I punished myself when I would not take the flowers. I wanted them very much! Will you give them to me now?"

He brought the little basket to her, and she buried her hot face among the cool, dewy leaves of the roses. She began to talk to them in a childish whisper, that suddenly grew into a loud, meaningless, vacant babble. Oran Delaney looked anxiously at Mrs. Griffin.

“Great Heaven!” he said, “what ails her? What does it mean?”

She shook her gray head gloomily.

“It is fever! I feared as much,” she said. “The excitement was too great in her weak, wounded condition. Heaven only knows how it will end.”

It was fever indeed. Aline’s reckless indulgence of her wrath had wrought the worst possible results. Fever and delirium had set in. The wound which they had thought so lightly of at first now threatened to terminate fatally.

“If she dies, it will be I who have killed her. I was a fool; I was mad surely when I told her all I did,” said Oran Delaney to himself.

The fever set in high, and strong, and violent. It was pitiful to hear the sweet, high-pitched voice raving of the dear ones from whom she was cruelly separated. As she fought the hard battle between the opposing forces of life and death she called upon them all to help her—mamma, papa, Max and Effie, all those dearly beloved ones who were so near and yet so cruelly far.

CHAPTER XVII.

The long, sweet summer days glided past into September. Already the parti-colored leaves of autumn began to be whirled through the air by the cool sweet breeze. There were hints of autumn coolness in the breeze as it sighed among the trees in the little country town of Chester.

Those summer days from July until September had been full of suspense and sorrow to the Rodneys. Each day had been full of disappointment and harrowing suspense. Each day had only added to the impenetrable mystery that hung around the fate of the lost daughter. The New York detective, baffled for once in his life, had given up the case and returned to New York. In all his expeditions, in all his search, he had failed to find the house with the marble steps, the house that held the mysterious blue-and-white room where the beautiful wounded girl was hidden away. Mr. Lane was moody and irritable over his failure. He had conscientiously tried to succeed in finding Aline, and he could not understand why he had failed. After the fashion of many other unsuccessful people he sought some one else to lay the blame upon, and Dr. Anthony's broad shoulders were selected for that purpose. Mr. Lane sarcastically denied the existence of the blue room, the masked villain, and the wounded girl. He did not hesitate to declare that Dr. Anthony had dreamed the whole thing.

Dr. Anthony was not shaken in his convictions by the great detective's incredulity. But he was very good-natured. He admitted that he had told a startling tale. He gave any one who chose full liberty to disbelieve it. For himself he was puzzled, vexed, chagrined at his own self, for he had made some private excursions on his own account and he had failed as ignominiously as Mr. Lane in finding the mysterious house and the mysterious maiden. It chagrined him to think that he had been so cleverly blinded, but he never once subscribed to the detective's theory that he had been fooled by an hallucination of the brain.

"My imagination is not so brilliant as you would give me credit for," he said, laughing. "A poet's brain might produce such a vision of peerless

beauty off-hand, but not that of a prosaic physician. It was not a dream, it was not an hallucination, it was a strange reality. I shall assert that always, the whole world to the contrary notwithstanding.”

But although the great detective had grown incredulous over the story, the Rodneys had not. They placed the most implicit faith in the doctor. He remained their valued friend, and Chester saw more of him in those days than Maywood. All his spare time, which did not really amount to much, since he had a large and steadily increasing practice, was spent at the little cottage home that nestled under the towers of Delaney House—the great house of the town. Through those troublesome days and nights he and Effie were learning the first tenses of that old, old lesson ever new—to love.

Greatly to the surprise and joy of all, Mrs. Rodney had rallied from her illness and was slowly convalescing. She was strong enough now to be brought down into the pretty parlor every evening and rest upon a reclining-chair while the ebb of talk flowed on around her, to which she listened with languid interest. The town folks were very sympathetic and social, deeming it a sort of duty to visit and comfort the afflicted family. Some one or other dropped in every evening, so that the Rodneys, whatever other sorrow they labored under, could not complain of loneliness. But with the cool, short autumn evenings, and as the loss of Aline Rodney grew an old, old story, other interests began to usurp the place of the great sensation. Visitors grew less frequent at the cottage. They preferred to linger at their own firesides. It was only Dr. Anthony now who came every evening, if he only had time to look in for ten minutes. Every face brightened at his coming, every heart felt lighter for his words of cheer.

But once he had quite a whole evening at his disposal. He had been visiting a patient near Chester, and as soon as he could he went to the cottage, and putting his horse into the stable announced that he had several hours to spend with his friends. All were pleased at the prospect, for a dull drizzling rain had set in, and the evening had promised to be lonely. More than once, as the wind sighed in the trees and the rain pattered down upon the roof, had been recalled Bryant’s appropriate lines:

“The melancholy days are come,
The saddest of the year.”

Dr. Anthony's coming put quite a new face upon the evening. They indulged in some little cheerfulness. They did not forget Aline, but they tried to take some little comfort in their lives. It is impossible to grieve always.

“We bear the blows that sever,
We cannot weep forever.”

Papa sat by the shaded reading lamp with a new book. Mamma was resting in her low, reclining-chair, looking pale but pretty in her soft garnet cashmere and the little lace cap on her wavy brown hair that began to show some lines of gray since Aline had gone. Her idle white hands were folded in her lap. They were mostly idle now. She had no heart to work, but a gentle, pensive smile illumined her fair face this evening.

Effie had opened the long-disused piano and was singing softly, while Dr. Anthony turned the leaves of her music. She wore a blue dress and a late September rose in her soft braids of hair. Max had fallen asleep on the sofa. The quiet repose of each figure, the pretty, simple parlor, the autumn flowers in the vases, the low fire that burned upon the hearth to dispel the chill of the rain, all made up a pretty picture of home-comfort that had a very alluring appearance to the passers-by, who chanced to glance through the unshuttered windows at the scene. Effie's song, too, as floated out upon the night air, was very sweet and sad:

“Mother, now sing me to rest,
For the long, long day is done;
Fold me to sleep on thy breast
As the night folds up the sun.

“For my heart is heavy with fears.
And my feet are weary with play;
Hide me from life's lengthened years—
Fold me from weeping away.

“These flowers, so blessed and sweet,
I've gathered from far and from near;
I lay them all down at thy feet—

They are wet with many a tear.

“But, mother, now sing me to rest,
Take back the lone child, tired with playing;
Fold me to sleep on thy breast—
All the day long vainly straying.”

The soft hush of silence that fell as Effie’s voice died away was broken by a shrill and piercing scream. Mrs. Rodney had sprung to her feet with a strength no one had believed her possessed of. She stood erect in the center of the floor, her slim forefinger pointed at the window, her eyes wildly dilating, her face pale and agitated, while shriek after shriek burst from her writhing lips:

“Aline! Aline! Aline!”

Every one turned to the spot indicated by that quivering forefinger. Every eye beheld a wild white face with dark dilated eyes and streaming hair, pressed for a moment against the window-pane. Then, while they yet gazed, it was swiftly withdrawn and vanished in the darkness and the falling rain like a phantom of the night.

Effie’s voice rang out wild and horror-stricken above her mother’s piercing wails:

“A ghost! A ghost! Ah, now I know that our poor Aline is dead!”

Dr. Anthony stood for a moment like one rooted to the spot. He had recognized on the instant the beautiful pale face of the mysteriously wounded girl in the blue room. It was true, then, as he had believed. She was no other than Aline Rodney.

He stood still a moment like one stupefied, then, turning suddenly, rushed to the door, flung it open, and disappeared in the rain and darkness of the wild autumn night.

Mr. Rodney, after one moment of dazed indecision, flung down his book and rushed after him.

Effie flew to her mother’s arms.

“Oh, mamma, she is dead, Aline is dead—our dear, dear little Aline!” she sobbed, in a passion of despair.

Little Max, awakened by the sound of their anguished voices, ran to them and added his frightened voice to the tumult of the scene. Mrs. Rodney continued to wail heart-brokenly.

“Aline! Aline! Aline! Oh, I am justly punished for my harshness to you! It was your ghost looking in at the window just as you looked down at me that day from the window of the room where I had locked you! Oh, my child, my poor dead darling, forgive, forgive, forgive! Come back to me, Aline, and tell me you will forgive me!” As if in answer to her passionate appeals, the door was flung suddenly open again, and Mr. Rodney and Dr. Anthony re-entered the room. They walked slowly, for they carried a wet and dripping burden between them, which they laid upon the floor at Mrs. Rodney’s feet.

CHAPTER XVIII.

It was the figure of a girl wrapped in a long black water-proof cloak, whose concealing hood, fallen back from her features, showed them pale as death, with a pallor more remarkable by contrast with her night-black brows and lashes, and wet and dripping dark hair. It was Aline Rodney's face, but the eyes were closed, and the trance of deep unconsciousness was upon her.

They knelt down beside her and loosened the dripping wet cloak from her lissom, slender form. It was their own Aline, indeed. The slight pretty figure was clothed in the simple blue gingham dress she had worn the day they last beheld her. The same neat buttoned boots were on the small pretty feet. They did not seem to have been worn or damaged in all the time she had been away from home.

Mr. Rodney lifted her helpless figure in his arms and carried her to the fire. He wrung the water from her dripping tresses and bathed her face with restoratives that Effie hurriedly brought. In a very few moments she revived. The dark-blue eyes fluttered open, she looked up into her father's face, she saw them all kneeling around her—mamma, Effie, Max, all her dearly beloved ones, and a smile beamed on her face and a cry of thankfulness broke from her lips.

“Oh, papa, oh, mamma, am I really home again? I am so glad, so glad! I can scarcely realize it!”

They half smothered her with kisses and caresses. They quite forgot Dr. Anthony standing apart, a happy, sympathizing, though silent spectator. Mrs. Rodney took her restored daughter in her arms, her tears rained on the beautiful white face.

“Oh, Aline, Aline,” she cried, “you must forgive me for punishing you so! I thought it was for the best. I did not dream that anything would go wrong. You are not angry now, are you, my dear? I have suffered so much, my love. I have been ill. I have almost died of grief since you went away; you must never leave me again.”

Aline returned the kisses and caresses with interest. She was quite ready to forgive and forget.

“I will try to be a good girl hereafter, mamma dear, so that you need never punish me again,” she said, wistfully and earnestly, and so differently from the former willful, perverse girl, that Mrs. Rodney was moved to sudden tears.

“Oh, my darling, where have you been?” she cried. “We have been looking for you everywhere. We have even had a great detective down here from New York trying to find you.”

Aline gazed silently into her mother’s face as she propounded these eager questions. Her lips moved, but no sound came from them.

“We heard all about the mysterious blue room, and—and your dreadful wound, and the man in the mask—and everything!” continued Mrs. Rodney, frantically, “but look where we would, we could not find you, and we were afraid you had been cruelly murdered. Oh, my darling, tell me where you have been?”

“Where have you been, Aline?” echoed her father, with unconscious sternness.

“Where?” cried Effie, with painful anxiety.

“Where?” asked Max, with boyish curiosity.

But to all of these anxious questions, and the more anxious look that accompanied them, Aline Rodney answered not a word.

Her dark head still rested against her father’s breast, and one arm was drawn lovingly around his neck. There was a smile of ineffable joy and peace on her face, but at Mrs. Rodney’s reference to the little room and her wound a look of wonder came into the dark-blue eyes.

“Mamma, who has told you all that?” she exclaimed.

“We have heard it all from Dr. Anthony, who dressed your wound that night,” cried Mrs. Rodney. “Oh, Aline, who was it that wounded you so cruelly, my dear? and where were you, and why did you not send for me?”

A look of sorrow and regret flashed over the sweet white face.

“Mamma, I cannot tell you,” answered Aline.

CHAPTER XIX.

They gazed at her in amazement. What was this? Aline not to tell where she had been these three months! What could she possibly mean?

“Aline, darling, you do not perhaps understand your mother. She is asking you where you have been. You must tell her, my child,” said Mr. Rodney, gently.

Aline answered him in the same words:

“Papa, I cannot tell her.”

Something very like anger came momentarily into Mr. Rodney’s kind eyes as he looked down into the sweet young face that lay nestled lovingly against his arm.

“No more willfulness, Aline,” he said, almost sternly. “You have run away from us and caused us a great deal of anxiety and sorrow. You have almost broken my heart, and your mother has been near to death’s door. You do not deserve that we should receive you back with so much love and forgiveness. But now that we have done so, you must be frank and explicit with us. You must tell us where you have hidden yourself so securely from us while we have been seeking you everywhere at so great an expense and trouble, to say nothing of our sorrow and anxiety.”

“Papa, it does not matter where I have been so that you have me back again safe and secure,” cried simple Aline.

She could not understand the dark frown that clouded his brow.

“It matters everything,” he declared. “What new whim possesses you, Aline, that you should deny us thus? Do you not suppose that we should be anxious over your whereabouts after hearing all that we have done?”

“I cannot understand who has told you so much, papa,” said the girl in wonder.

Mr. Rodney made a sign to Dr. Anthony. He came forward into the range of Aline's vision.

"Doctor," said Mr. Rodney, "do you recognize my daughter as the wounded girl whom you attended in the mysterious blue room?"

Aline gazed in wonder at the strange face as it looked down upon her. She rather liked its expression, it was so cheery and handsome, with its brown eyes, brown mustache, regular features, and expression of good nature.

He looked steadily and admiringly at the beautiful young face.

"I could swear to her identity," he said, firmly. "It is the face of the wounded girl in the mysterious blue room."

"I have never seen you before," cried Aline. "How do you know these things which you assert?"

He smiled. Aline could find no fault with that smile. It was so kind and reassuring. He answered, pleasantly:

"You have never seen me, Miss Aline, because I wore a mask when I dressed your wound that night. But I remember your face distinctly." He turned to Mr. Rodney. "May I tell her the story of that night?" he asked.

Mr. Rodney answered, "Yes."

Aline lay listening silently, with dilated eyes, to his strange story.

"I was full of sympathy for you," he said. "I felt quite sure that there was something wrong. I did not like the strangeness of it all. I have tried again and again to find your strange prison, that I might rescue you from your bondage. I have been your friend ever since that night. If any one has maltreated you, Miss Aline—if you have been detained in that strange house against your will, tell me where to find the wretch, and I will punish him for you."

"You are very kind, but I have nothing to say," Aline answered, in a low voice of unconscious regret.

He looked at her in surprise.

"Do you mean to make a secret of it?" he asked her, in his clear, frank way.

“Yes,” she answered, calmly, and looking straight into his face with her blue, resolute eyes.

“But, my dear young lady, why should you do that?” he said, perplexed.

“That is my own affair,” she answered, with something of her old imperious temper ringing in her voice. “My business cannot concern you—a stranger. I consider that you are talking to me in a very impertinent fashion.”

Mr. Rodney put his hand hastily over the willful red lips.

“Your temper is not improved by your sojourn away from us,” he said, in a tone of marked displeasure. “Listen, Aline; this gentleman is not to be treated as a stranger by you. He is a valued friend, and, moreover, he is engaged to your sister Effie. He will be your brother, but I hope you will never cause him as much anxiety as you have done the rest of us.”

Aline put out her white hand frankly to the doctor.

“I congratulate you,” she said. “Effie is the dearest girl in the world!”

“So I think,” said Dr. Anthony, frankly; adding, gayly, “I think a great deal of you, too, Miss Aline, since but for you I might never have seen your sister!”

They all laughed. Aline made up her mind that he would be a charming brother-in-law.

“I should say that my running away has proved quite advantageous to the family,” said she archly, as she kissed the blushing Effie.

She thought that every one would agree with her. She could not understand why they all looked so grave. She had been brought up so simply and innocently in this quiet country town she had no knowledge of evil.

“Why do you all look so grave?” said she, pettishly. “If you aren’t glad to see me, perhaps I had better go back where I came from.”

“Where *did* you come from, Aline?” exclaimed her father.

“You dear, curious old papa, I shan’t tell you!” replied Aline, with her merry laugh that sounded like music.

“You are jesting, Aline, but it is not an appropriate subject for a joke,” said her father. “Come, dear, I do not like to be kept in suspense. I am waiting to

hear why you ran away from us, and where you went.”

She lifted her head from his arm, and looked up into his face with her bright, wide-open eyes. She saw that he was not jesting, that he was in intense earnest. She was inclined to resent his curiosity, as she termed it to herself.

“Really, papa, I cannot imagine why you make such a fuss over it,” she cried, with all the freedom of a spoiled child. “I should think you already knew why I went away. It was because I didn’t wish to stay in that hot, stuffy little chamber all day while you were enjoying yourselves at the picnic. So I went out for a little while, I meant to return directly, but—” she stopped short, and a sudden flush mounted up to her white forehead.

“And why did you not return, Aline?” her mother cried out, quickly. “What reasons did you have for staying?”

“I had the very strongest of reasons, mamma,” said the girl, and now they saw that she was half laughing, half crying. “The very strongest reasons, for I could not return.”

“But why, dear?” asked Effie, leaning on her lover’s arm, and looking deeply interested.

“Ah, ‘why, why’!—how you all do ring the changes on that one word,” cried Aline, in pretty petulance. “When I say that I do not mean to tell you, why cannot you leave me alone?”

She was in the most palpable earnest. They all saw that. They did not know what to say to her. She was so childlike, so innocent, she could not understand why it was really so necessary that she should explain her absence to them.

“Tell me one thing, Aline, my darling,” said her father, coaxingly. “How did you get out of your locked room?”

She locked her white hands around his arm and looked up into his face. There was a deep, warm color on her face, and her eyes were misty as if with tears that she bravely held back.

“Papa, darling,” she said, with a sudden quiver in her fresh young voice, “do not be angry with me, dear. Indeed, indeed, I do not want to be naughty

or willful or unkind to you. But I cannot tell you how I left my room that day any more than I can tell you how I came back to you to-night.”

There was a dead silence. Aline did not know how strangely her words sounded to them all. She did not know that there was anything so strange and reprehensible in her silence. She did not realize that she was no longer a child, but a woman, every day of whose life should lie fair and open like a spotless page to every eye.

Her father put her suddenly out of his arms into a chair by his side.

“Aline, you are tired to-night. Perhaps you will tell us your story to-morrow?” he said, half inquiringly.

“Neither to-night nor to-morrow, papa,” she replied, in a vaguely troubled tone, for she began to feel alarmed at their persistency. “No, nor ever!”

“Do you realize what you are saying, Aline?” Mr. Rodney inquired, in a strange, measured tone, and gazing deliberately into her grave, sweet, perfectly frank blue eyes.

“Yes, papa, I realize it,” she replied, innocently.

“You will stain the whiteness of your life, of your young womanhood, with a secret at whose nature no one can guess—you will deliberately place yourself under a ban. You will not reveal this strange secret even to your parents—do you mean all this, Aline?” he asked, agitatedly.

“Yes, papa dear,” answered Aline.

CHAPTER XX.

Mr. Rodney gazed at his daughter for a few moments in blank silence. It had suddenly dawned upon him that, with all her childish ways and innocent young beauty, Aline was a woman in years.

“Standing with reluctant feet,
Where the brook and river meet,
Womanhood and childhood fleet.”

She was eighteen years old, but until to-night she had seemed like a child. She had the frank heart of a child, and her mother had never put her forward in society as a woman. The bloom had never been brushed from her heart by a lover. She had never had a secret from her parents in her life. She had been open, frank, and guileless, and singularly confiding.

Her course now was utterly unlike Aline’s former ways—it was strange, unfilial, and incomprehensible.

As he gazed at her silently now, the subtle change in her struck him most forcibly. It existed not only in her mind, but her face.

Now that he looked at her more closely, he saw that Aline’s pretty oval face had grown thin and pale; her eyes, always large and bright, were more so than ever now. They were not the happy, careless eyes of the child Aline. They had a brooding shadow in them—a new expression, almost of pain. The red, smiling lips had acquired a certain gravity. There was a soul looking out of the beautiful pale face now, illumining its ethereal loveliness like the light behind a crystal vase.

“Some new experience of life has come to the child since she left us. Her mind is expanded and developed into that of a woman,” he said to himself.

With that thought came trouble, sorrow, and vague regret, mixed with a certain horror of the mystery she persisted in throwing around the months of her absence. Tremblingly he asked himself what did that strange reserve mean? Was it the impenetrable veil thrown around a disgraceful secret?

Disgraceful! He started and chided himself. Was he linking the thought of disgrace with her, the child of his heart, his bright, beautiful darling, who had always been his favorite child? No, no, sin could never touch her, she was too pure, too true, too innocent. He gazed anxiously into her sweet, blue eyes, and in spite of the vague shadow he saw there, they were still frank, and open, and honest; she was still as innocent as a child, although as lovely as a woman. Whatever had come to her in those months of absence, deepening her experience of life, it had not brought her any worldly knowledge. The thought that any one could think hardly of her for that secret she was keeping had never dawned upon her inner consciousness.

Mr. Rodney knew the world with all its evil ways, and he was a man of strong intellect and strong impulses. He vaguely scented trouble if Aline persisted in her strange course of conduct.

Her simple air as she answered his last question almost dismayed him. What a child she was still in spite of her years!

“Look at me, Aline,” he said, gravely.

She turned her sweet, flower-like face obediently to his, and met his stern inquiring look with the full gaze of her lovely violet eyes. The full white lids and long, curling black lashes raised fully from them, gave them an air of innocent candor and tender appealing. It was not possible that sin or shame could stain the pure white soul looking out at him from those splendid portals of light.

“Aline,” he said, abruptly, “I can scarcely credit the sincerity of your refusal to speak. Perhaps you have not counted the cost.”

“The cost, papa?”

Honest amazement looked out at him from the dark-blue orbs.

“The cost,” he repeated, with stern brevity.

“But, papa, I do not understand you. I went away because mamma had punished me, and I was vexed and did not mean to stay in all day. And—and—I could not come back when I wished to do so. There were reasons why I could not do so—all my own fault, remember, papa; and so when I come at last—when I come back loving you all more dearly than ever, and quite determined not to be naughty ever again, you look at me so strangely,

you talk to me so sternly. You ask me, have I counted the cost? I do not understand you in the least, papa. What do you mean by the cost?"

"The cost of your silence," he said. "Do you not know that it is strange, unnatural? Do you not know that I have a right to know where you have been, my child?"

"Of course I know that, papa. And I have always told you everything, haven't I, papa?—haven't I, mamma? I have never kept a secret from you in all my life; but I thought that if I chose to keep this one, you would not care—that it would not matter greatly. I do not see how it could matter to any one! But you are angry, papa. Was that what you meant by the *cost*? Shall you lock me in my room again if I refuse to tell?"

He stared at her, stupefied. What could he say in the face of such innocence and ignorance?

She rose from her seat impulsively, and threw herself down on her knees before him, folding her white arms across his lap, gazing up into his face earnestly and lovingly.

"Papa"—there was a wistful trouble in her voice, a sound as of unshed tears, a patient humility—"papa, you shall punish me as much as you please! I quite deserve it; I am willing to bear it. I will do anything you say without a murmur. I cannot tell you where I have been; I cannot tell you how I went away; but no one is to blame but myself. You know how wild and willful I have been. I brought all this upon myself, and I will bear the consequences. Punish me as you will, papa, only forgive me and love me again!"

"Aline, this is the most sheer obstinacy," he said, looking down at the lovely tear-stained face, for two great sparkling tears had flashed from under her dark lashes and rolled down upon her cheeks. "I do not wish to punish you—I only wish to forgive you, but you make it too hard for me by your willfulness. Tell me the truth, my darling." He bent down suddenly and clasped her in his arms with inexpressible love and earnestness. "Tell me, Aline, where you have been; and if you have suffered wrong at the hands of any one, I will find means to punish that wrong in the most terrible fashion!"

She slipped from his arms to the floor, and crouched there, with a strange trouble written all over her face.

“Papa, I can tell you nothing—nothing!” she murmured, in hoarse, strained accents.

All the tenderness in his face was displaced by sudden anger.

“Aline, I no longer plead to you for your obedience,” he exclaimed, sharply—“I *command* you to tell me the truth!”

CHAPTER XXI.

Aline sprung to her feet and regarded her father in consternation.

His tenderness and love had given place to fierce anger and authority. His face was pale and stern, his lips set in a rigid line, his dark-blue eyes, so like her own, blazed ominously.

“I *command* you,” he repeated, hoarsely. “Do not continue to trifle with me any longer, Aline. Tell me where you have been.”

“Papa, I would tell you it I could, but I cannot do so,” she answered, gently, almost humbly, and retreating a pace from him toward her sister.

But he waved her away from Effie’s side with sharp authority.

“Stand back,” he said, “you have no right by your sister’s side until this mystery is explained away. Now, will you tell me the truth?”

“I cannot,” she still repeated, and her lips began to quiver. She turned a piteous, pleading gaze upon her mother’s face. It touched a responsive chord in Mrs. Rodney’s heart. She who had always been harshest to Aline was tenderest now.

She came forward and laid a soft, pleading hand on her husband’s arm.

“Oh, Mr. Rodney, do not tease the child,” she said. “See how white and ill she looks! leave her alone now. She will tell us some time when she is better—will you not, my darling?”

Aline flew to her mother’s arms and hid her face on her breast, but she did not answer her pleading question, she only broke into low, hysterical sobs. She was frightened at her father’s anger, her heart and brain were in a whirl. How different was this homecoming from what she had expected! The dear father who had always loved her best, who had always defended her girlish escapades, had turned against her now.

She did not understand that in the very fact of the idolizing love he had borne her lay the secret of her father’s anger. Because he had loved her the

best of all he felt her defection the worst of all. To him she had always been loving and obedient. He could not understand her strange disobedience now. It filled him with mingled fear and anger. He was wounded in his love and his pride.

He looked coldly at his wife as she stood with her daughter clasped in her maternal arms mingling her tears with those that flowed from the girl's blue eyes.

"Mrs. Rodney, I hope you will not interfere in this matter," he said, with distinct coldness. "I alone must deal with Aline now; I alone dictate her punishment."

"Punishment! I thought there was to be no more talk of that. We have punished the child too much already!" cried the remorseful mother.

"God bless you, mamma!" whispered the girl, gratefully.

"Be silent. I will have no interference in my management of Aline," he repeated, angrily.

They all looked at him in wonder. No one had ever seen Mr. Rodney really angry before. His favorite daughter quailed before the white heat of wrath that distorted his proud, handsome face. He advanced and drew her deliberately from Mrs. Rodney's arms and placed her in a chair. At his authoritative manner Aline's fair face flushed, and something of his own high spirit flashed into her eyes.

"Papa, you have no right to treat me thus!" she cried. "Why do you humiliate me before this stranger?" and she glanced at Dr. Anthony, who was regarding her with gravely sympathetic eyes.

"I have already told you that Dr. Anthony is not to be regarded as a stranger —" began Mr. Rodney. But the doctor himself interrupted him by stepping forward and addressing him.

"She is right," he said. "Although Miss Aline has not a better friend on earth than myself, we are actually strangers to each other. I should have remembered the fact before, but that my deep sympathy and interest in her caused me to forget. I crave her pardon for my seeming rudeness, and I will now take my leave."

He bowed himself out, and left the beautiful culprit alone with her family. They stood around her silently—the weeping mother, the compassionate sister and brother, the father, who had made himself her judge, who was repressing every instinct of tenderness in his anger at what he deemed a girl's waywardness.

“Aline, you think me harsh and cold,” he said. “God knows no man ever had a harder task than mine. I do not think you understand what will follow upon this rash act of folly and this culpable silence of yours. Shall I tell you?”

“If you please, papa,” answered Aline.

CHAPTER XXII.

She was regarding him with some little curiosity. It was quite plain to be seen that she had not the faintest idea of the nature of that cost at which he vaguely hinted. There was nothing but a perfectly blank wonder on the beautiful, girlish face.

In the face of her utter innocence and ignorance it was all the harder to tell her the truth. He looked at her almost despairingly.

“Aline, I almost wish now that we had not brought you up in such simplicity and innocence,” he said. “Perhaps, if you had known the world better, you might not have erred like this.”

She looked at him attentively.

“Papa, I cannot see that the world has anything to do with me, simple Aline Rodney,” she said. “It seems to me that nobody was harmed by my absence except mamma and the rest of you, to whom I belong!”

He fairly groaned.

“There is some one else who was harmed more than all the rest of us,” he answered.

“Who was that, papa?” innocently.

“Was ever such ignorance?” he asked himself, even while he answered, aloud: “You, Aline!”

Her face brightened, comprehensively.

“That is quite true,” she said, “I was harmed the most of all, for I not only had to bear the pain of my absence from you, but was tortured with remorse and anxiety. I was never away from home in all my life before, you know, papa, and when I was so ill, oh, how I longed for mamma and the rest of you. And then, I was so angry and so sorry because I could not send for you, and—and—” she paused, with a shocked exclamation, and put her hand over her lips.

“So you really were ill—poor darling!” cried Effie.

“I did not mean to say that,” cried Aline. “Oh, I am so thoughtless, I shall tell everything yet,” she sighed in dismay, and again the expression of anger clouded her father’s face.

“Aline, you have quite misunderstood me,” he said. “I did not at all refer to your own sensations in your absence, but to a more serious matter. I will be plain with you, Aline. I meant solely what other people would think and say of your absence, and your refusal to explain it.”

“*Other* people, papa?”

“Aline, why will you repeat my words in such a parrot-like and exasperating fashion?” he cried, sharply.

Her lips quivered sensitively.

“I beg your pardon,” she said, simply. “I cannot think what makes me so stupid.” She put her hand wearily to her brow for an instant. “My head aches. Perhaps that is the reason. Please bear with me, papa. I am sure I shall understand you presently.”

He was touched inexpressibly by her childish humility. Something like softness and regret quivered in his voice, as he answered:

“I do not wish to be hard upon you, child. It is my fatherly regard for your welfare that urges me to sternness. It seems as if you have not the faintest idea of my meaning.”

“I am ashamed to confess that I have not, papa. It is all owing to my own stupidity that I fail to understand you,” she said, with wondrous gentleness.

He made a despairing gesture.

“I am sure I do not know how to make you understand,” he said, “I am sure I wish I did not need to try. Unfortunately, it becomes my duty. Remember that, Aline.”

“Yes, papa.”

He stroked his rippling brown beard nervously with his long, white fingers. How hard it was to show the evil nature of the world to this simple-hearted

child! He said to himself, passionately, that he would almost rather cut off his right hand than be obliged to do it.

“When I said other people, Aline, I meant the world in general, and the people of Chester—the people among whom you live in particular,” he began.

She bowed her dark head gravely. She did not in the least know what to say. His remarks appeared quite irrelevant in her eyes.

“You have some friends among them. You like them, they like you,” he said.

“Oh, yes,” she answered with a smile, and he continued, desperately:

“When they hear that you have come home, Aline, and that you refuse to reveal where and with whom you have been, they will suspect that your strange silence hides some disgraceful mystery. They will refuse to associate with you; they will point the finger of scorn at you.”

CHAPTER XXIII.

Mr. Rodney paused when he had uttered those words and looked gravely at his daughter. She had not quite taken in his meaning yet. She was looking at him with an air of blended surprise and incredulity.

“Papa, you must please excuse me for repeating your words over this time,” she said, anxiously. “You see I want to be sure that I understand you. Do you say that people will suspect *me* of something disgraceful?—that they will have nothing to do with *me*?—that they will point the finger of scorn at *me*?”

“That was what I said, Aline,” he replied.

The blue eyes turned inquiringly to her mother’s face.

“Is it really true, mamma, or is papa only teasing me?” she asked, slowly.

“I am afraid it is only too true, my dear,” Mrs. Rodney answered, with a great, strangling sob.

A look of horror came into the great blue eyes.

“But, mamma”—she unconsciously turned from her father’s pale, stern face to her mother’s gentler one—“I have done nothing wrong. Why should my friends treat me so?”

Mrs. Rodney could not answer her. She looked at her husband.

“Aline,” he said, “do you remember when you were a little girl at school, the first line you used to write in your copy-book?”

“Yes, papa,” she replied, with a half-smile on her red lips. “It was this, ‘Avoid the appearance of evil.’”

“Exactly. Well, it is a maxim that goes with us through life. We should not only avoid evil, but even the appearance of it. Do you understand me, Aline?”

She bowed in silence.

“The world, society, people in general, my child, judge almost wholly by appearances. When there is a mystery, where there is secrecy, where every day of a young girl’s life does not lie fair and open to the public view, they suspect guilt, and they visit their suspicions on the offender in unstinted measure.”

A great change had come over Aline’s face. It was white and startled, the lips were drawn in a line of pain. He had made her understand at last. There was no need to ask as he did, half sorrowfully:

“Can you make the application, Aline?”

A long, deep, heavy sigh quivered over the girl’s lips. She raised her eyes to his as if deprecating his words. Her voice was full of sorrowful anxiety.

“Papa, is the world really so hard?”

“I do not call it hard, Aline—only just,” he answered.

She sighed and remained silent.

“Only just,” he repeated. “It asks that a woman’s life be kept fair and pure and spotless, open to the eyes of all beholders. It does not tolerate secrets or mysteries. But it is not hard, it is only just. All pure men and women concur in its decision.”

She did not speak, only gazed into his face with her large, clear eyes, as if waiting to hear more.

“Aline, you are young, you are beautiful, you love life, you are of a most social disposition,” he said. “Can you afford to shroud your absence during those three months in a veil of mystery? Can you afford to have your whole life blighted and ruined as it will be if you persist in your silence? Can you do without hope and pleasure, without love and lovers, without friends and without respect?”

Every word fell clearly and coldly. When he ceased there was a deep silence in the little parlor. They could hear the wild autumn winds sighing outside, hear the steady downpour of the rain, ceaseless as though “the heart of heaven were breaking in tears o’er the fallen earth.”

Aline was sitting motionless, her dark lashes drooped against her cheeks, one small hand pressed unconsciously against her beating heart.

“Of what are you thinking, Aline?” he asked, impatient of her strange silence.

She raised her eyes slowly, and looked at him with a mute misery that pierced his heart.

“Only of what you said, papa,” she answered. “Need it really be so bad as that?”

“No, it *need not be* if you choose to save yourself,” he answered, almost savagely. “You have only to speak, Aline, only to clear yourself from the appearance of evil. You will surely do so now when I have so patiently explained to you the terrible cost of your silence. You will not persist in your suicidal willfulness.”

She sprung from her chair and stood leaning against the back of it, gazing at him with burning cheeks and heaving breast.

“Papa, you are only trying to frighten me,” she cried out, hoarsely. “It cannot be so bad as you say! You exaggerate it all! I have done nothing wrong, I am guilty of nothing but the willfulness and disobedience you have pardoned in me a thousand times! Why should any one be angry, why should any one blame me when I have done nothing wrong?”

“Nothing wrong? Do you call it then nothing to have stayed away these three months?” he asked her.

“Oh, surely you know I would have come home before if I could, papa!” she cried, clasping her white hands together in her earnestness.

“Who or what has hindered your return to us, Aline?”

“Papa, I must not tell you,” she wailed.

“You mean you will not,” he said, with bitter chagrin, for he had not believed her resolve would be proof against the penalties it entailed.

“I will not, then, since you will have it so,” she broke out, with a sort of desperate despair, while her blue eyes drowned themselves in sudden raining tears.

Then suddenly, before any one could prevent her, she flung herself face downward on the floor, and broke into stormy, tempestuous sobs and tears.

They gazed at her in consternation—no one attempted to soothe her. What could they say to the willful child who was rashly determined to blight her own young life?

At length, just as suddenly as she had thrown herself down, she sprung up again. She went to her father and stood meekly before him, hushing her sobs by a great effort of will.

“Papa, if all be as you say, then is my life indeed ruined,” she said, despairingly; “I must bear my fate, for I cannot change it. Oh, how gladly I would speak if I could! Listen to me, papa, dearest. I am not willful, I am not wayward, I would give one half of my life to have the liberty to tell you all you ask! But, papa, mamma, Effie, Max—my dear ones all, I am the most unhappy, most unfortunate girl in the world, for I have sworn an oath never to speak, never to reveal the secret of those three months. You may do with me as you will; the world may wreak its vengeance on me as it will, but I cannot help myself. I must bear it as best I can. My lips are sealed. I am solemnly sworn to silence!”

While they yet gazed upon her in speechless horror, she gasped, staggered, threw out her hands for some support, and missing it, fell heavily upon the floor. When they lifted her up she appeared like one dead.

CHAPTER XXIV.

They were startled and frightened. This was twice that her senses had yielded to unconsciousness that night. The strong, bright, pretty Aline who had left them three months ago had never fainted in her life.

“What dreadful experience she must have passed through since she left us! How pale and thin she looks!” Mrs. Rodney cried, in anguish.

Effie wept silently. She had never known how dear was her volatile younger sister until now. She knelt beside her, chafing the cold, white hands between her own, warm, rosy palms, while she silently prayed for Aline’s recovery.

They wished now that Aline’s hasty words had not driven Dr. Anthony away, for her swoon was a long and deep one. All their efforts failed to rouse her. She remained cold and white, with scarcely any discernible pulse, and the most slow and muffled heart-beats. Her limbs seemed to grow more rigid and deathly every minute.

They removed her to her own little chamber, and laid her on her little white bed. No one guessed that, from the tower window of Delaney House, a pair of eyes had been watching anxiously for hours to see the light flashing from the little end window so long darkened by its owner’s absence.

When it appeared, shedding a glow of light upon the dying foliage of the garden, and Oran Delaney saw the moving figures behind the white curtain, he experienced a sensation of relief. The child was at home again, surrounded by those dear ones for whom she had pined. She would soon forget the brief shadow he had thrown over her life for a little while. They had taken her home and forgiven her, and all would go on as before in his neighbor’s house. The thought lifted a burden from his heart. He gave a sigh of relief, and threw himself down upon his couch to seek refuge from his haunting thoughts in uneasy slumbers.

Meanwhile, Aline lay locked in that deep trance of unconsciousness.

They tried every method of rousing her, but their efforts did not meet with the least success.

She lay mute and pale before them like one dead. The dark lashes lay all stirless upon the marble-white cheeks; her lips did not uncloset to repeat those sorrowful words whose bitterness seemed to have broken her heart. She seemed to have passed away without a regret from that world in which henceforth she had no part save sorrow: and her father, as he gazed upon the pale and rigid face almost wished that it were so.

She was so sweet and beautiful and he had had such great hopes for her. How could he bear to see her live with this great shadow of silence and mystery upon her life? How could he bear that the cold, carping eyes of her little world should rest upon her in suspicion and distrust? And for himself; he was very proud; how could he endure to be pointed at as the father of a girl whose willful silence most probably concealed terrible disgrace.

“I wish that she had never been born!” he cried out, in the bitterness of his heart, and then when his own heart reproached him, he made excuses to it. “She can have no happiness in life, no respect, no confiding love, no domestic bliss, no peace. There will always be a shadow on her life. She had better be dead, or never have been born.”

He remembered those wild words of the Spanish student:

“Yet I fain would die!
To go through life unloving and unloved;
To feel that thirst and hunger of the soul
We cannot still; that longing, that wild impulse,
And struggle after something we have not,
And cannot have; the effort to be strong;
And, like the Spartan boy, to smile and smile,
While secret wounds do bleed beneath our cloaks:
All this the dead feel not—the dead alone!
Would I were with them!”

“The girl is like me. She is proud, although she is so loving. I believe she would sooner be dead than live the life that lies before her,” he said to himself.

And he was right. The cold, gray, rainy dawn peeped in at the windows and saw Aline struggling slowly back to life and consciousness. She put out her hands and pushed them away from her with their restoratives. She would have none of them. She flung out her hands in despair.

“You should have let me die!” she cried out, wildly. “How could any one wish for me to live?”

“Oh, my darling, do not talk so!” cried her mother, forgetting everything save the passionate mother-love that filled her heart. “You must live to be my comfort when Effie is taken from me. You know she will be married soon to Dr. Anthony, and I should be so lonely, when she went were it not for you, my love!”

“Oh, mamma, how can I be any comfort to you?” cried poor Aline, in despair. “You will be ashamed of me—you will never—never forget all that my willfulness has brought on me—perhaps you will hate me after awhile. If you did, mamma, I could not blame you. I quite deserve it, I know!”

“Hush, my darling! How could a mother hate her child?” cried poor Mrs. Rodney, tearfully, and forgetting all her dignity in genuine mother-love. “I do not believe you are guilty, Aline! How could my little white-souled girl be a sinner? Live for me, Aline, and we will not care for the world. We will let it go by. We will not heed its smiles or its frowns.”

But Aline sighed in heaviness of heart. Her trouble was too fresh, her wound was too deep for her to find comfort anywhere.

“Oh, mamma, you are so good to me,” she cried. “I never knew how good before. I do not wish to live. I am proud, though you might not have thought so in the old, willful days. I cannot live such a life as my father has painted for me. I shall die like a flower that has no rain and no sunshine. And that will be best. I do not care to live!”

And this was the girl who had dreamed of finding life all fair and desirable at fourscore—who had laughed at Oran Delaney’s croakings such a little, little while ago.

She lay there among the snowy pillows, in the little room for which she had sighed so often, and vainly thinking that she would be so glad and happy when she returned to it once again, and she wished in her heart that she might die.

She was quite a different girl at dawn from the one on whom yesterday's sun had set. Then her life lay before her, all bright and fair, like a landscape in the morning sun. Now it was like the same scene at twilight, with the sad rain falling and dimming all in its somber veil.

"I am done with my life, if all is like they tell me," she said, soberly, to herself. "What shall I do with all the years that lie before me yet till I die?"

Like a flash, her thoughts went back to Delaney House and the beautiful blue room that had held her a captive those three months. Before her mind's eye came a dark, grave, handsome face; in her ears rang a deep and musical voice, with a tone of subtle melancholy. He was reading the poem she had not cared to hear, but which seemed at this moment to have burned itself in on her memory:

"How many years will it be, I wonder
And how will their slow length pass,
Till I shall find rest in silence under
The trees and the waving grass?"

"Perhaps you may even subscribe to its sad sentiments some day," Oran Delaney had said to her, and how scornfully she had derided the idea.

Was she the same girl? Scarcely. She had a vague fancy that she would wake up presently and find that she had been sleeping and dreaming some horrid dream.

She furtively pinched herself, and found that she was not dreaming at all. She was broad awake, and the new day was shining in at her windows, chill and murky and sunless, like the life that lay before her.

"And all for such a little, little act of folly," she said to herself, with a terrible sinking at the heart.

Mr. Rodney suddenly came over to her. He took Aline's cold white hands and smoothed them gently between his strong warm ones.

"Aline," he said, "do you think it quite right to hold yourself bound by the oath you spoke of? Do not the dreadful consequences it entails on you justify you in breaking it?"

She shook her head slowly.

“I do not care,” she replied.

“It must be a very solemn oath that can bind you under such circumstances,” he said, slowly. “Is your decision quite unalterable, my dear?”

“Yes, papa,” she replied, with a deep sigh.

He was silent for a moment, and an echo of her own sad sigh drifted over his lips. When he looked back at her again there was a new light in his eyes.

“Aline, I have been thinking of a new plan,” he said.

“A new plan?” she echoed.

“Yes; I cannot bear to see your life blighted, all your chances of happiness destroyed. We will go away from here and make our home in some distant spot, where this strange story can never follow you. You may yet be happy.”

Her young heart thrilled with sudden joy. She looked at him with grateful affection.

“Papa, would you, indeed, do so much for me?” she inquired.

He bowed silently, and gently pressed her hand. Aline forgot his harshness and anger of a little while ago, and remembered only the patient, unalterable love that was ready to make such a sacrifice for her sake.

“And you, mamma?” she inquired, turning her wistful eyes upon Mrs. Rodney’s pale and altered face.

“I am quite willing, dear,” she replied.

“You are too good and kind to me, papa and mamma; I do not deserve it. I must not let you make such a sacrifice for my sake!” she cried.

“There is too much at stake to call it a sacrifice,” Mr. Rodney answered.

“At least we need not make it yet,” Aline cried, musingly. “Oh, papa, I can hardly believe yet that my friends will be unkind to me, that they will believe evil of me because I am fettered by a mysterious vow. Let us make the trial. Let us give them the chance to trust me if they will. Do not let us go away just yet. Let us stay and be convinced. Perhaps the world is not so hard as you think. How could it be so unjust and cruel?”

CHAPTER XXV.

Mr. Rodney gazed sadly at his daughter. He saw that she could scarcely bring herself to believe that which he had told her.

“I see how it is, Aline,” he said to her, gravely. “You are inclined to doubt my assertions. You do not altogether believe what I have told you.”

She was shocked when he put the truth before her in so plain a fashion. She did not know herself how strong a vein of incredulity ran through her painful thoughts.

“Oh, papa, forgive me,” she said, penitently. “I did not mean to doubt you. It was only my unfortunate manner of expressing myself. I was hoping against hope. Will you forgive me for my implied doubt? It is so hard to give up hope.”

He only pressed her hand in silence, and she continued:

“Even if they thought hardly of me, might they not in time relent? Might I not live down the scandal even if they were cruel enough to make a scandal out of nothing?”

“You might in time,” he answered, “but it would be a long while first, so long that your youth and beauty would be faded, and they would forgive you because they could no longer envy you.”

“So long as that?” she asked, with a heavy sigh.

“Yes, dear, nothing but time will heal that wound,” he answered.

She lay silently musing.

She could not bear to give up the beautiful, bright world which she loved so well, and in which she had such unbounded faith and hope.

It was a great temptation to her to accept the sacrifice her father proposed making. She had the innate selfishness of youth which thinks that the world was made for itself. She did not understand how great a sacrifice it was that her family would make. In her ignorance of the world, she could not know.

But while she dallied with the temptation to accept it, she found herself restrained from leaving Chester by a vague, yet subtle, feeling she could not understand. It was stronger than her will, it was some influence outside of herself that she could not analyze, but it was most powerful. It drew her one way, while her reason and her will seemed both to point in a contrary direction. She yielded to it blindly, not knowing that it was fate, that "Divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them as we will."

She looked gravely at her father, who had been watching her face, anxiously noting the changing emotions of its expressive features.

"Papa, my mind is made up," she said, with almost womanly calmness. "I shall not go away. I will remain in Chester."

"Remain!" he echoed, surprised at her decision.

"Yes, I will remain. I will not act a cowardly part, and run away from my trouble. I will stay here and live it down if my hair grows gray and my eyes dim in the effort."

"You will have to be very brave if you do so, Aline," he answered, not without a certain admiration of her high spirit.

"I intend to be," she answered, with a sigh.

He could not help feeling relieved at her decision. He was not a rich man. All his income was derived from his legal practice. To begin life anew in another place meant a hard struggle, although he would not have shirked it in the interest of the child he loved so fondly. But now that her own decision made it unnecessary, a burden was lifted from his mind.

He bent down and pressed his lips to her fair, white brow.

"God bless you, and help you, my daughter," he said.

Her lips quivered, the quick tears rushed into her eyes. She let the lids drop over them hastily, and the bright drops rolled like crushed pearls down her cheeks.

"Aline, you are exhausted. I have been too thoughtless," he said, remorsefully.

"Yes, I am tired," she answered, wearily. "I should like to go to sleep."

They kissed her, and went away softly, but Aline did not go to sleep. She lay, broad awake, in the chilly, rainy dawn of the new day, looking drearily into the future.

“I have lost my life,” she said, mournfully, to herself. “For, if I live it down, I shall be old by then, and nothing but the grave will lie before me.”

She recalled some verses she had read in a book at Delaney House.

“Rudderless, we drift athwart a tempest,
And when once the storm of youth is past,
Without lyre, without lute, or chorus,
Death, a silent pilot, comes at last.”

Death! She gave a shudder in spite of herself. She had always had the keenest love of life, the greatest enjoyment of its pleasures. She was sanguine, ardent, impetuous. Even now, when she looked at Death across a bridge of sorrow, she felt a little afraid of it. She bewailed her blighted life, her irrevocable folly. She would have to pay the cost of her girlish willfulness by the sacrifice of all that was best in life. Bitterly she bewailed her fault and Oran Delaney’s hard heart, that had brought this doom upon her.

“If I had known the cruel price I must pay for my silence, I would have died before I would have pledged myself to it. But Mr. Delaney must have known. He is older than I am—he knows the world. How cruel, how wicked he must be to doom me to such a fate!” she said to herself, indignantly.

Moved by a sudden impulse, she slipped from the bed, threw a light shawl about her shoulders, and went over to the window. She peered down through a crevice in the curtain at the wonderful garden whose blooming beauties had lured her so innocently to her fate.

Oh, how changed was the scene as she gazed upon it now!

The roses all were dead, the leaves were blown from the trees, and lay in sodden drifts across the path. Some late autumn flowers, chrysanthemums, asters, and others of their kind, were breaking into lavish bloom in their neglected beds, but the rain and storm had beaten them prostrate to the ground, with broken stalks, and faces prostrate on the earth. All was

dreariness and desolation, and the gray stone towers of grim Delaney House seemed to frown more darkly than ever now that she knew what influence potent for evil pervaded its gloomy interior.

She gazed wistfully at it through the fine impalpable mist of rain that obscured all things. She saw a figure emerge from the gloomy portals into the deeper gloom of the rainy dawn. It was Mr. Delaney. He walked slowly with downcast head and his hands behind him, smoking a cigar as was his usual morning habit. Its fiery spark gleamed fitfully in the dull light, and the fine blue smoke curled upward and lost itself in the mist.

Drawing the curtain closer Aline watched him, herself unseen. She found a singular fascination in doing so, and when she saw his glance turn musingly once or twice up to her window her heart beat strangely—with anger she thought.

“He has spoiled all my life, but does he realize that he has done so?” she asked herself, musingly. “Could he be so deliberately cruel?”

It almost seemed to her that he would not have done so could he have known.

“Could any one be so hard, so cruel, as to willfully blight a young girl’s life?” she asked herself, with a sort of wonder, as her eyes followed Oran Delaney in his dreary saunter along the wet, graveled paths. “He saved my life once. Why should he make it valueless to me?”

As she gazed at the dark, grave face under the brim of the wide slouch hat, it seemed to her that it was not hard nor cruel, only profoundly grave and sad. A longing came over her that he should know all that had transpired that night since she came home.

“If he knew, he might perhaps relent and release me from my vow of silence,” she thought, eagerly.

She remained at the window watching him thoughtfully until he disappeared from view in a turn of the path, then she turned aside to her writing-desk and drew out pens and ink and paper. She wrote hastily, and almost incoherently:

“MR. DELANEY,—They are all very angry and surprised because I would not tell them where I have been. Papa says that people

will think strangely of me if I do not tell. He says they will think I am guilty of something—I do not know what—and that they will not associate with me, and that I shall never have any more peace or pleasure in my life. You did not know these things when you bound me to silence and secrecy. Did you, Mr. Delaney? I feel quite sure you did not. You could not have been so heartless as to ruin all my life like that! But now that I have told you, will you not have pity on me? Release me from my promise and let me speak, I pray you.

“ALINE RODNEY.”

She put the poor little appeal into an envelope, and when night came she tied a little weight to it and threw it far out into the garden, hoping that Mr. Delaney would find it there the next morning.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Aline's return to her home created quite a little stir of pleasant excitement in the town of Chester.

The friends of the Rodneys vied with one another in the speediness of their calls upon the young lady.

They found her pale, calm, and more beautiful than ever, for she had gained a certain quietness and repose of manner that became her to a charm. There was a softer tone in her voice, a gentler light in her eyes. She seemed eager to please and divert all who came.

The good townspeople came all agog with curiosity. They expected to hear all manner of romantic stories from the returned girl. They plied her with all sorts of curious, not to say impertinent, questions.

They were astonished and indignant when they heard that they were not to learn anything. To each and all Aline returned the same reply:

"I prefer not to discuss the subject with any one."

This refusal, spoken so gently yet firmly, and not without a certain wistfulness, silenced further curiosity with her. Indeed, it would have been the height of rudeness to have persisted.

But, baffled with Aline, they turned to Aline's family. Every one felt that her strange story belonged most naturally to the public. They were astounded when they found the Rodneys uncommunicative on the subject. No one could understand such strange reserve. Every question, every hint was met by a quiet evasion that effectually silenced curiosity. The social world of Chester woke up gradually to the fact that the Rodneys meant to keep the cause of Aline's absence a dead secret.

Popular indignation was roused to fury. Mr. Rodney's prophecy did not prove itself a dead letter by any means, for the loud tongue of scandal was not lacking to add its quota to the tumult. The worst things possible were hinted and then spoken outright in the circles of Mme. Rumor.

The whole family were socially ostracized in less than a month. Each member came in for a share of the obloquy that had fallen on Aline's head. The silence each was compelled to maintain was held in the light of crime. From being prominent members of the most select circles in Chester they were coolly dropped by all. No one left cards, no one sent invitations.

Every one turned the cold shoulder.

There was only one friend who remained faithful to the Rodneys in their troublous time.

This was Effie's noble and handsome lover, Dr. Anthony.

While the town gossiped and sneered, his neat buggy was seen before the Rodneys' door more frequently than ever. Effie, Aline, or Mrs. Rodney were often seen driving with him through the wide, pretty streets, and people were fain to acknowledge that "that girl," as they contemptuously called her, was prettier than ever in spite of the cloud of mysterious disgrace that clung about her. She and Dr. Anthony had become great friends. He could not help admiring his betrothed's young sister even while he deprecated the silence she maintained at so bitter a cost to herself and her friends.

And while the weary days waned and faded, Aline was waiting with a breaking heart for some sign or token from Oran Delaney.

It was many days now since the little white-winged prayer for mercy had fluttered from her hands down into the garden of Delaney House.

She had watched and waited, she had hoped and prayed, but no answer had come to her frantic appeal. Yet she knew that he had found it and read it.

She had been watching through a tiny rent in her curtain which she had made expressly for that purpose. She saw him tear it open and read it, then slowly walk away without even glancing up at her window.

Days went and came. There was no day in which Aline did not watch that tall form pacing up and down, though sensitively shrinking from observation herself. She spent many hours alone in her room, and it became insensibly a fascinating occupation to watch for his appearance as he came out for his daily walk, which he did whether it was gloomy or bright.

There was one thing which inspired her with a feeling of pique. It was that he never turned his eyes up to her window, never by any chance gave a sign

or token that he was conscious of the wistful blue eyes watching him behind the white lace-bordered curtain.

Of what was he thinking? Why did he so persistently ignore her prayer? Had he really forgotten her? She asked herself these questions over and over, but no answer came from the silent lips of Oran Delaney as he walked up and down his lonely garden.

Aline grew half frantic sometimes watching him thus. A bitter rebellion grew up within her heart. Why did he not speak—why did he treat her with such silent contempt, for she interpreted his silence to mean nothing less!

One day her father came home to dinner with a rather excited look upon his face.

He glanced across at the beloved daughter whose willfulness had brought such sorrow upon them all. She sat in her place as usual, but she scarcely tasted her food, only toyed with it while her thoughts seemed far away, and her long lashes drooped against her pale cheeks.

“Aline!” he said, abruptly.

She started like one in a dream, and dropped her fork. The blue eyes looked quickly at him with a startled expression.

“Yes, papa,” she answered, in the low, sad voice that had grown habitual with her since her return.

“Mr. Linton called upon me to-day,” he said.

“Mr. Linton?” she repeated, blankly.

Mr. Linton was a banker, and quite an important personage in the social element of Chester.

“He brought me something for you,” continued Mr. Rodney, and he reached across the table and laid a small folded package by Aline’s plate.

She looked at it in wonder, without touching it.

“What is it, my dear?” inquired Mrs. Rodney, with womanly curiosity.

“Open it, Aline!” said her father.

“Is it a letter, papa?” she asked, and the note of keen eagerness in her voice did not escape his alert hearing.

“Were you expecting a letter from any one, my dear?” he asked, pointedly.

“Yes—no,” she answered, dejectedly, and a scarlet flame leaped up into her cheeks, then faded out into deathly white.

“Why don’t you open your package, Aline?” said her sister.

“Yes, why don’t you?” echoed Max, in a voice of lively curiosity.

She did not touch it still—only looked at her father.

“Do you say it is not a letter, papa?” she asked.

“It is not a letter,” he replied.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Aline could not keep the expression of bitter disappointment out of her face. Her lips quivered sensitively, and a mist of tears dimmed her eyes.

A wild hope had sprung into her mind that Mr. Delaney had sent her an answer at last, although she could not understand why he had done so through the medium of Mr. Linton.

But her father's negative reply at once dispelled the springing hope. She was bitterly disappointed, and she could not keep her emotion from showing in her face. Every one could see it plainly.

"She did expect a letter, and she is disappointed at not receiving it," said her keen-witted father to himself. "It is something better than a letter, Aline," he said, aloud. "Shall I tell you what it is, since you show no disposition to look at it?"

"If you please, sir," she replied, indifferently.

"It is a check-book and a certificate of deposit in the Chester Bank of the sum of ten thousand dollars," he replied, with sparkling eyes, and watching her closely to see how she received the news.

She showed nothing but a blank surprise.

"Ten thousand dollars? But what has that to do with me, papa?"

"Everything, Aline, for it is all yours," he replied.

"Mine!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, yours!" he replied.

"But, papa, I do not understand it at all," she said, when some of the expressions of amazement had ceased around the table. "I have no money at all, you know, and I do not think you have ten thousand dollars of your own. So how can it be mine?"

“It is yours by the free gift of some person unknown, Aline, who has placed it at your disposal in the bank.”

“Oh, dear, who could it have been?” cried Mrs. Rodney, while Effie and Max looked the image of silent amazement.

“I am sure I do not know,” Mr. Rodney replied. “Can you guess who it was, Aline?”

“No, papa,” she replied.

He was watching her closely, as he had fallen into a habit of doing since she had come home. There had been a look of wonder on her face at first, but she had scarcely spoken before it was replaced by a sudden look of comprehension. A deep, betraying blush overspread her face, and showed him that she *knew*.

“Aline, are you quite, quite sure?” he asked.

“Of what, papa?”

“That you have no knowledge of the person who placed the money in bank to your account?” he replied.

The hot blush burned deeper in her face. She put up her fair, cool hands to hide it. She was silent a moment, and then she lifted her dewy, violet eyes frankly to his grave face.

“Papa, I will not speak falsely to you,” she said. “I think—I could guess who the person—might be?”

“Well, dear?” he said, interrogatively.

She understood the stifled pleading in his voice. The blue eyes fell sensitively.

“You see, papa, I am only guessing—I am not sure,” she explained, tremulously.

“Am I to have the benefit of your surmise, my child?” he asked.

“Papa, forgive me,” she pleaded; “I cannot tell you.”

“Tell me this,” he said: “Was it the person who bound you to silence?”

“Perhaps so—I cannot tell,” she answered, reluctantly.

She was very guarded. He saw that it was useless to press her.

“Shall you accept this munificent gift, Aline?” he asked.

A sudden flash of scorn and anger leaped into the blue eyes, her lip curled. She took up the unopened package, reached across the table, and laid it beside him.

“I shall not accept it!” she replied, with bitter brevity.

He was disappointed. Ten thousand dollars would have been so much to her and to them all. They might have taken it and gone away from this place, where the finger of scorn was pointed at them for her fault. They might have made themselves a new home far away from the tongues of scandal that were busily wagging against them here. But he did not press her.

“You know best, my dear,” he said, simply.

“Yes, I know best,” she answered, with a sort of passionate anger in her clear, young voice, “I know best, and I tell you I despise that money, so given! I despise the donor! I will never touch one cent of it! I trample upon it! Base money, were it piled as high as the stars, could never recompense me for my blighted life and lost hopes! Tell Mr. Linton he may tell his generous patron to take back his sordid wealth! Tell him that honor is dearer than gold!”

Mr. Rodney replaced the package carefully in his breast-pocket.

“Very well, dear, I will return these to Mr. Linton, if you are quite sure you are acting for the best?” he said.

“You may be quite sure, papa, that your daughter could not act otherwise than I have done in this matter,” she replied, with decision.

And she arose and left the room hurriedly, leaving her untasted dinner upon the plate. Then they discussed the affair in all its phases. They concluded that Aline was enveloped in a most baffling mystery.

“Could Mr. Linton tell you nothing?” inquired Mrs. Rodney.

“Nothing at all. He said the transaction was a *bona fide* one. All legal matters were carefully observed. He received the money in genuine bank bills of a large denomination, but of the mysterious investor he could tell

me nothing. He shrouded himself in a thick veil of mystery. Linton was himself most curious over the matter.”

“It is very strange,” said Mrs. Rodney, and they all echoed her thought. It was very strange, all of it. This new development only added interest to Aline’s secret. An air of romance was thrown around it by the offer of that large sum of money. What terrible wrong had Aline sustained, and why was she offered this as a recompense?

Of one thing the Rodneys had become convinced. Dr. Anthony’s story of the wounded girl in the blue room was not a fiction. Mrs. Rodney had furtively examined her daughter’s breast while she slept, and she had found the scar of a wound upon it. Her heart had swelled with bitter anger toward the merciless wretch who had hurt Aline. She longed for vengeance, but she was powerless to do anything in the face of this tormenting mystery.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Aline ran away to hide herself in her room in a flurry of mingled emotions.

This was the way in which Oran Delaney had answered her pleading letter.

Not a line, not a word, only a shower of gold flung at her feet, as if this could make up to her for all she had lost, for the pleasures that belonged to her youth, for the love that ought to bless her womanhood, for the worldly respect and applause that she had forfeited so innocently and rashly.

She threw herself down into a chair and buried her face in her hands. Stifled sobs shook her frame, and bright crystal drops fell through her fingers.

She felt as if she hated Oran Delaney. He was cruel and heartless, she said to herself, indignantly. What did she care for money? She had her youth and beauty, her tender heart, her desire for the pleasures of life. With all this heritage of youth she could have had happiness enough if only—if only she had not lost that fair fame, that open record of life without which all else availed her nothing.

She wept bitterly for this terrible misfortune that had fallen upon her. She was young and beautiful and pure, but a great, horrible, inky blot had fallen on the whiteness of her life, and she could never wipe it out by the words of explanation that would have cleared away the hideous stain. People believed ill of her. Women, especially young and fair ones like herself, passed by her with sneers and averted faces. She was as innocent and as spotless as they were, but no one would believe it. Because she would not satisfy their curiosity they believed she was a sinner. There was one text that every one took and preached from. It was this: “Where there is secrecy there is guilt.”

By this standard Aline was judged and condemned. The fierce rebellion of her heart against this unjust sentence availed her nothing. The world’s code was many hundreds of years older than she was. It said in so many words: “A woman’s life must be like an open book, that every eye may read. If

there is even one leaf folded down, one page the world may not scan, then there is a shameful secret written on it.”

There was one leaf folded down in the book of her life. It was as pure a record as any other; it only recorded the punishment that had come to her for her girlish willfulness and folly. But no one would believe it. She cried out against the hardness and wickedness of the world that could so misjudge her!

“The world must be full of wickedness, or people would not be so ready to believe evil,” she said.

The hardest part of her trouble was that her family were compelled to be sharers in her disgrace. Because they had taken her home again, because they would tell nothing of her absence, people were angry with them, too. They were all under ban alike.

“My beautiful Effie, it is too bad that this shadow should rest upon her life—she who was always so much admired and beloved!” she sighed over and over. “Ah, me, if only I could speak!”

But the iron fetters of her vow chafed and hurt her. There was no going back on that solemn pledge of silence. She might beat her wings as she would against the bars that held her, but there was no escape for her, no release from her sorrow. She could have exclaimed with the poet:

“Oh, Life, is all thy song
Endure and die?”

It seemed to her little less than an insult to offer her money to console her for the cureless wound that had laid desolate her life. She said to herself that she would have to be reduced to beggary—ay, that she would starve on a crust in the street before she would touch a cent of Oran Delaney’s money. He had refused her even a word—he had thrown her his gold like a bone to a dog. Well, she would let him see that she would never touch it. She would die first, she said to herself, in her passionate pride and resentment.

So the days passed by. It was little more than a week before the news of the money in the bank for Aline became disseminated far and wide, thanks to the gossiping tongue of the genial Banker Linton. The busy tongue of scandal wagged afresh over this delicious tid-bit.

Opinions were divided over Aline's course. There were some who said that she should have accepted the money, that was doubtless offered to her in reparation for wrong that had been done her. This class thought that she was very quixotic in refusing, and even very foolish. The money would have done her a vast deal of good. She might have gone away somewhere with it, and made herself a new home where the story of her mysterious absence was not known. Decidedly, she had acted foolishly in refusing, said these wiseacres.

There was another class who found Aline's action rather admirable. They argued that if the girl had suffered wrong at the hands of any one, mere money could not repair the injury done. They applauded her spirit in declining such atonement. This new element of romance added fresh fuel to the flame of scandal. It was considered that the case against Aline was quite proven now, for who would give her ten thousand dollars unless to condone an irreparable wrong?

Aline was none the wiser for their praise or blame. Neither penetrated to her quiet cottage home. Day after day dragged itself wearily along, and a dreary, apathetic calm began to settle down on the girl. She had lost heart and hope and given herself up to despair.

She rose from her sleepless bed one morning, and went to the window and drew back the curtain, and looked at the dreary morning sky stretching chill and cold over all the land. It was gray and sunless like her life, she thought, wearily, and dropped her eyes and sighed heavily.

The down-dropped eyes suddenly fell on a bit of paper lying outside the window on the narrow sill and held down by a piece of gravel. It was addressed to herself in a strong masculine hand, and Aline's heart beat quickly as she lifted the sash and drew it in.

"At last," she said, as she hurriedly tore it open and ran her eager eyes over the clear, bold chirography.

Only a few lines, hurried and incoherent as her own had been, but strong and earnest like the writer:

"Aline, you refused the money because you guessed that I had sent it," ran the brief note. "Oh, for God's sake, take it, child, and believe that it is your own as the gift of a heart that bleeds

because it has wronged you, and because it can make no other atonement than what lies in sordid gold. Let your father take the money and make a new home for you all in some distant city where this unmerited persecution may not follow you, and where you may have all the social pleasures due to your youth and beauty and innocence. Take the money and use it. It is only due, and I shall never forgive you if you continue to willfully refuse it.

D.”

She ran her eyes slowly over the brief note twice. It only excited her anger and contempt. She said to herself that he was a coward, strong man as he was, to make a weak girl suffer for the sake of that hidden secret he guarded so jealously. Oh, that she had never taken that oath of silence upon her girlish lips!

How grim and gray and frowning the towers of Delaney House appeared in the dull, cold light. All the years of her girlhood it had been a pleasure to her to watch the mysterious mansion, with the picturesque ivy creeping about and covering the grim, hard angles and small-paned windows with beauty. She had watched the sunset lighting its windows with splendor every evening; she had gazed upon the beautiful garden with rapturous delight; she had speculated often, with girlish curiosity, over the motives that made Oran Delaney an alien from his kind, shut up in that gloomy house, and but seldom seen in the streets of the town. It had not always been thus. Ten years ago, before Oran Delaney went abroad, and before the Rodneys came to live in Chester, he had been friendly, genial, social, mixing freely with the best society of the town on his annual visits from college, and was liked and admired by all. After his father's death he had shut up the old family mansion and gone abroad. He had remained away several years, and returned to his home a strange and altered man. He no longer sought society, he did not visit nor receive visits, he gave no invitations, and accepted none. He seemed to have become an inveterate recluse, and remained isolated in the lonely mansion, haunted by the ghosts of his dead-and-gone ancestors, perhaps, for there were rumors of strange sounds and blood-curdling shrieks heard by day and by night by those who passed his home. Aline had heard all these tales from the townsfolk, and her girlish interest had been strongly roused. Yet how little she had dreamed of

the subtle influence Delaney House and its strange master would exert upon her life!

She held the note in her fingers, and gazed dreamily at Delaney House, thinking, with a shudder, of the strange, horrible, unearthly creature hidden within its walls, and of the long days of illness and sorrow she had suffered from the creature's rude assault.

"*He* thinks that gold can pay me for all that I have suffered—for all I suffer now!" she breathed, with bitter sarcasm.

As she stood there in her long white dressing-gown, with her loose dark hair falling heavily over her shoulders, Mr. Delaney came out with his cigar.

It was the first time that Aline had been visible at the window since she had returned. Usually she sprung back from sight at the moment of his appearance.

A new mood came to her now. She stood there calmly, holding the paper in her hand, and fixing her gaze steadily upon the darkly handsome, brooding face visible under the wide-brimmed hat. He did not see her at first, but at length the angry intensity of her gaze seemed to draw his eyes upward by some subtle fascination. In a moment he saw her standing there, pale, proud, angry, holding his letter in her clinched white hand.

Even at the distance at which he stood, he could see the angry flash of the deep violet eyes as they steadily regarded him. Her gaze held his a moment as if trying to pour all the wrath that filled her being into his inner consciousness, then—

Even while he still regarded her with his dark, soulful eyes in mute inquiry, she lifted her hands and tore the pleading letter into fragments, that fluttered swiftly from her hands and fell down into the garden among the winding paths. It was her only answer to his prayer. When the last white strip had fluttered from her disdainful fingers, she removed her magnetic gaze from his, stepped backward, without word or sign, and dropped the white curtain between them.

CHAPTER XXIX.

Mr. Lane, the New York detective, who had so ignobly failed in the search for Aline Rodney, did not easily recover from that unprecedented defeat.

He was acute, wary, and intelligent, with a boundless stock of patience and persistence, and these qualities had always insured him success in all his undertakings. Failure was a new experience with him. He chafed under it. He could not understand it.

If pressing business matters had not recalled him to New York, he would have persevered indefatigably for months in the effort to find the missing girl. It was not in his nature to give up a quest easily. Only the stress of circumstances had induced him to give up this one. When he had thrown it over and returned to New York, it weighed on his mind. He hated to own himself conquered. Amid the stress of other pursuits, he often recalled the case in which he had been defeated. He would shut his eyes amid the din and noise of the city, and recall the quiet country town that had been the scene of such an unfathomable mystery. He did not like to think that he, who had worked up the most difficult cases in the great cities, had been completely baffled by a simple slip of a girl in a country town that, with all its pretentiousness and its exclusive society, was scarcely better than a village.

Although he had ridiculed Dr. Anthony's story of his beautiful, mysterious patient, it had made an impression on him that was not easily shaken off. He often asked himself in the easy, slangy language of the day, whether there could be anything in it.

He thought sometimes that he had been too hasty and incredulous in condemning the story because all his efforts to find the mysterious, hidden maiden had failed. Dr. Anthony was certainly a man to be trusted, being frank, reliable, and most intelligent. And he had not taken umbrage at Mr. Lane's credulity. He had been frankly amused at it. When Mr. Lane had quoted, for his benefit,

“Keep probability in view,
Lest folks believe your tale untrue.”

He frankly admitted that his story had an air of romance.

“Notwithstanding which,” he gravely added, “it’s an o’er true tale.”

Spite of this little chaffing, the two men having been frequently thrown together grew to like each other. There were attractive qualities in each one that pleased the other. They became quite social and friendly. When the detective returned to his city home he found it a pleasure sometimes to pause in the whirl of this strange life and drop a few genial lines to the Maywood physician. Dr. Anthony, in his turn, found it pleasant to reply.

So that even before the gossiping newspapers chronicled the fact of Aline Rodney’s return to her home, Mr. Lane was made cognizant of it through the medium of the young physician’s letters.

He was amazed and rather indignant. It was bad enough that she had so cleverly covered up her traces and stayed away as long as it pleased her, but that she should come home and keep her secret still was far worse. He had no vulgar curiosity over the girl, but he had a strong professional interest. She had baffled him and damaged his reputation as an invariably successful man. He was distinctly conscious of an inward pique.

“I should like to shake the naughty little runaway! What business has she to outwit me?” he said to himself.

Sometimes he almost made up his mind to run down to Chester and have a look at this girl who could keep a secret so well. She would be well worth looking at, he fancied, from Dr. Anthony’s enthusiastic description of her beauty. Then, too, she must have brains and will besides her beauty, or she could not have kept her secret against the odds that had been brought to bear against her. Decidedly he meant to see her.

But steady business kept him rather against his will in New York. He put off his trip from time to time waiting for a convenient season. So the autumn months waned and winter was upon him before he had given himself the promised visit. At Christmas he received one of Dr. Anthony’s pleasant, friendly letters. It contained among its closing messages an invitation to Mr.

Lane to be present at his friend's marriage on the 1st of January in the pretty little Gothic church the Rodneys attended in Chester.

CHAPTER XXX.

Marriages were not much in Mr. Lane's line. He was forty and a confirmed old bachelor—at least that was what his friends said and what he said himself. He had never put his neck under the galling yoke of matrimony. He rather pitied Dr. Anthony's weak-mindedness in that respect, but he considered that if there was any excuse for him it was Effie Rodney's grace and beauty. These were certainly tempting enough to an ordinary, susceptible man.

But Mr. Lane did not feel sufficient romantic interest in the union of the lovers to make a point of witnessing the marriage. He was about to decline, on the plea of urgent business, when a sudden thought arrested him with the ink yet wet on the pen. Why not make an opportunity for seeing Aline Rodney by accepting Dr. Anthony's cordial invitation?

He changed the contemplated No to Yes, adding a single proviso: he would come if Dr. Anthony would guarantee that Aline should not know that he was a detective, and that he had vainly tried to trace her in her mysterious absence. He fancied that the young lady might conceive an antipathy to him, and vaguely suspect ulterior designs from his presence at Chester.

Dr. Anthony replied on the part of himself and the Rodneys, that Aline should be kept in entire ignorance of Mr. Lane's profession, and look on him merely as the friend of the physician.

Receiving this assurance, the detective decided to attend the nuptials of his friend, arriving in Chester on the day previous to the happy event.

Dr. Anthony took him that evening to call on the Rodneys.

"I have told Aline that I expect a friend from New York," he said. "She is prepared to meet you and suspects nothing."

Mr. Lane thanked his friend for respecting his scruples.

"I have a fancy to study the young lady, with the advantage on my side. Perhaps I may get at the bottom of the mystery yet. It has become more

incomprehensible than ever since the story of the little fortune offered and refused."

"It is most romantic," answered Dr. Anthony, "and the strangest part of it all is that I believe Aline would be glad to confess the whole truth were she not restrained by her vow of silence."

"How does she bear the suspicion and scorn of those who were once her friends?"

"She is crushed by it. One can see that she is almost heart-broken. She is pale and sad. She shrinks sensitively from observation. She can scarcely be persuaded to go outside the door."

"Will she be present at the marriage ceremony in the church?"

"Yes, by Effie's earnest wish and prayer. My darling has very solemn ideas connected with marriage. She believes that the sacred rite should always be celebrated in church wherever possible. Aline, by Effie's earnest wish, will accompany her to the altar."

"I am most curious to meet the young lady," said the detective.

"You will be quite sure to admire her," said Aline's prospective brother-in-law. "She is very beautiful."

Mr. Lane had heard this so often that he only smiled. It occurred to him, however, that if she were prettier than Effie she would have to be very pretty indeed.

"I shall take you to call at the cottage this evening," said Dr. Anthony. "You will then have an opportunity of meeting Aline. The rest of the family you have met already."

They went, and although Mr. Lane had expected to meet a very pretty girl indeed, he was surprised and amazed when he saw Aline Rodney.

He saw a tall, graceful figure, exquisitely molded in the delicate, symmetrical curves of early womanhood. She wore a simple dark-blue cashmere dress, and the round, white throat rose from it with a certain stately grace and pride that was very excusable, seeing what a beautiful face shone above it like a peerless flower upon its stem. She was pale, but her skin was like the cream-white petals of a tea-rose. Her hair was darkest

brown and loosely curling; her features were exquisite; her eyes were large and of the rare violet tinge so much admired, so seldom met; her brows were slender and black, and the long, fringed lashes were black, too, and made her eyes appear black in their shadow.

Mr. Lane was as much struck by Aline's bearing and manner as he was by her beauty. She had no ungraceful self-consciousness or awkwardness. Her bearing was easy, graceful, and even distinguished. It was natural, not acquired, for she had never mingled in society, and had had but few advantages of travel and culture. He wondered at that even more than at her beauty. It did not occur to him that the heavy cross that had fallen on her life had had the effect to intensify her natural grace into a grave, proud dignity, that in its silent way seemed like a mute protest against the wrongs she had sustained. The girl had budded into the woman, forced into untimely maturity and gravity by the refining power of sorrow.

She was very quiet. She did not speak to Mr. Lane unless he pointedly addressed her. She rarely met any strangers, and when she did, she supposed that they knew her strange story, and despised her. She remembered always that

“One venomed word,
That struck its coward, poisoned blow,
In craven whispers, hushed and low —
And yet the wide world heard.”

Mr. Lane could talk very well when he would. It pleased him to converse with Aline Rodney. He was very gracious and affable with her, giving her no smallest hint or sign that he knew her strange story. While Effie touched the piano-keys with soft, lingering chords of music, and her lover hung enraptured over her, the detective sat apart and bent himself to the task of amusing Aline.

He did not find it very easy at first. She was shy and cold; she seemed to take no interest in his words. She kept thinking, morbidly, to herself:

“He knows my story, and he accordingly despises me.”

But, as he continued to talk to her pleasantly, unmindful of her quiet reserve, a new thought came to her.

“This good-looking, agreeable friend of Dr. Anthony is from New York. It is not possible that the story of my trouble has reached the great city. Perhaps he does not *know*.”

There was inexpressible comfort and relief in the thought. Unconsciously the tense bands about her heart began to loosen. It was pleasant to meet any one, even a stranger, who did not distrust and suspect her. She ventured to lift her frank, blue eyes to his face, and when she saw how kindly he was regarding her with his attentive gray eyes, she took heart of grace to talk to him, because she believed that he did not know. Some of her old impulsiveness returned to her. She began to take an interest in his conversation.

He on his part began to see what a charming girl she might have been if this shadow of some unknown sin had not fallen on the whiteness of her life. Once or twice she even laughed aloud, and he said to himself, even though he was intensely practical and not in the least romantic, that her laughter was as sweet as a chime of music.

He talked to her of the world, of the gay cities, of the people he had met, of the places he had visited, and she listened with delight. She had never met any one like Mr. Lane before—any one who had seen the world and knew it thoroughly in both its good and bad phases. She became so interested that she forgot momentarily the brooding shadow of trouble that hung always over her. Her old love of life and the world returned to her. A soft color glowed on her cheeks, her eyes beamed as she cried out, vivaciously:

“Oh, how I envy you, Mr. Lane! You have traveled, you have seen the world, you have enjoyed life! There is nothing I should like better!”

He looked at her with a smile. Her beautiful face was momentarily radiant. She was full of eager anticipation and desire.

“You would like to travel?” he said.

“Oh, so much!” she cried, clasping her shapely white hands together in the earnestness of her feelings, and carried out of herself by excitement.

“Have you ever been in New York, Miss Rodney?” he inquired, with apparent carelessness.

A little laugh that was half pity and half self-scorn rippled sweetly over her lips. She was evidently amused at his entire ignorance of her traveling record.

“New York!” she exclaimed. “Why, Mr. Lane, would you believe that I have never been away from Chester in my life?”

CHAPTER XXXI.

The sweet, high pitched voice reached every ear in the room distinctly. Every one was surprised at the assertion; but they saw that Aline had forgotten herself, and all were wise enough not to take any apparent notice of the admission. She continued, confidentially.

“You see, Mr. Lane, we lived on a farm in the country, about two miles from Chester, while I was a child. Before I was grown up papa sold the farm, and came to live at the cottage here, and here we have been ever since, and I have never been five miles from Chester in my life.”

She saw some sort of a wonder on his face, and added, gayly:

“I see that you are wondering at me, Mr. Lane. Perhaps I should not have confessed to such lamentable ignorance of the world around me?”

“On the contrary, I am charmed to have you confess it.

“Where ignorance is bliss,
'Tis folly to be wise.”

She looked at him in some little wonder. The tone of his voice was peculiar; but when she looked at his face, it appeared perfectly calm and frank. After a moment's silence, he continued:

“To one versed in the lore of the world as I am, it is refreshing to meet with one so guileless and so innocent of the evil of the world. I am not so enviable as you think me, Miss Rodney. A knowledge of the world is not conducive to love of life.”

She had been slowly gathering her thoughts together while he talked. Quite suddenly the memory of her own knowledge of the world rushed over her—the knowledge that had come too late to save her from the evil.

Her face grew suddenly pale. She recalled the admission she had made just now, “I have never been away from Chester in my life.”

She grew frightened at the thought that she had almost betrayed the secret she was sworn to keep. Fortunately, this man to whom she was talking knew nothing and could make nothing of what she had said. But Dr. Anthony and the others—had they heard?

She glanced furtively around her. No one was observing her. Effie's fingers were still straying over the piano, waking low, soft chords, and the doctor's head was close to hers, as he whispered love's delicious nothings in her willing ears. Mr. and Mrs. Rodney were looking over the pictures in the new magazine. Max had fallen asleep, as usual, on the convenient sofa. She thought, with a sigh of relief, that no one except Mr. Lane had been paying any attention to her.

"But I must be more careful next time. I shall betray everything some time if I suffer myself to relapse into my old thoughtless self," she thought, and she became so suddenly quiet and *distract* that Mr. Lane began to wonder in his mind if he had unwittingly offended her.

She did not give him a chance to find out, for just as he was on the point of asking her whether he had been so unfortunate, she made some slight excuse for leaving the room and did not return that night.

But Mr. Lane's brief interview with her had given him material for grave reflection.

He had quite decided in his own mind that she was pure, true, and innocent, as she was beautiful.

He said to himself that her trouble, whatever it was, might have come to her through folly or waywardness, but never through deliberate sin.

He was a close reader of human nature, as his profession necessitated he should be. He knew that he had made Aline temporarily forget her trouble, and he believed that every word that she had spoken to him had been the pure, unadulterated truth. Those frank blue eyes were the very well of truth and purity. They had looked at him frankly and guilelessly, and they had no falsehood in them.

Her frank and thoughtless admission had let in such a flood of light upon his mind as would have frightened Aline indeed could she only have known it.

“I have never been away from Chester in my life,” she had said, and the words rung in his hearing long after her fair, bewildering face had vanished from his sight.

If this were true, and Mr. Lane did not in the least doubt the assertion, what became of Dr. Anthony’s romantic story?

The place where Dr. Anthony had been called to attend the mysteriously wounded girl must have been about five miles from Maywood, declared the physician.

“Chester is five miles distant from Maywood.”

Mr. Lane repeated these words to himself, and his face began to burn and his heart to thump against his vest pocket.

He seized his hat and went out into the night air to cool his glowing face. Out under the cold, wintry sky, with its host of gleaming stars, he mentally shook himself.

“I have been a stupid dolt, a stark, staring idiot,” he cried, vehemently. “I shall never pride myself on my skill and acumen again. Only to think that I never reflected on that plain fact that Chester is five miles from Maywood. The girl has never been out of Chester, and oh, what a consummate stupid I have been.”

He was angry with himself, indeed. He accused himself of the most inexcusable stupidity. Only to think how he had scoured the country for miles around Maywood and never thought of Chester. It was the most natural mistake in the world, but he was bitterly angry with himself for having made it.

He walked along the pavement in front of the cottage, so absorbed in thought that he scarcely heeded the cold winter wind that sighed among the leafless trees and around the gables of the cottage. With the sight of Aline’s beautiful, innocent face had come an even deeper desire to fathom the secret of that strange absence.

“I will find it out this time; but will she thank me for it? Will any one thank me?” he asked himself, soberly, and he decided that it could not hurt Aline Rodney to have the truth revealed. He did not believe that any willful guilt could hide behind that smooth, white brow and those clear, true eyes.

“She would undoubtedly reveal it herself but for the vow of silence that binds her,” he said to himself. “I may even be doing her a favor by tracing out the secret and revealing it to her parents. Anyhow, I shall make it convenient to remain down here a week or two, and ‘we shall see what we shall see.’”

Absorbed in his thoughts he walked on past the strip of fence in front of the cottage a few paces down the street, without observing that he was directly before the tall, imposing gray stone mansion known as Delaney House. It stood well back among its leafless trees and ghost-like evergreen shrubberies and cedars that showed like sober-suited sentinels in the cold, white light of the moon. The house looked gloomy enough with its closed doors and heavily shuttered windows from whence no friendly light streamed forth to cheer the weary passer-by, but Mr. Lane did not notice it as he walked slowly past absorbed in his own vexing thoughts.

Absorbing as they were they were doomed to have a sudden and startling interruption.

The night had been intensely still save for the low whisperings of the winter wind as it swept past in restless sighs, but suddenly its calm was broken by a long, low wail that broke shudderingly upon the silence and repose of the hour, and swelled high and still higher until it became a fearful shriek of mad rage and impotent anger most terrible to hear:

“Ah—h—h! Ah—h—h!”

That loud, terrible, prolonged shriek fell suddenly and startlingly upon the ears of the detective. He sprung backward with a smothered cry and stared upward to where the sound seemed to issue forth.

His eyes fell upon the dark, silent façade of Delaney House.

“Ah!” he breathed, and like a horrible echo came that fearful shriek again.

“Ah—h—h! Ah—h—h! Ah—h—h!”

It seemed to float over his head and die away in the wandering breeze. Again he glanced up at the dark lowering front of Delaney House. This time its darkness was illumined by a line of light that glanced momentarily through the shutters, then abruptly disappeared.

CHAPTER XXXII.

He stood silently gazing at the windows where the light had so strangely flickered and disappeared with almost the swiftness of a flash of lightning. He was full of wonder over what he had heard and seen.

“What a horrible voice!” he said to himself. “It was neither that of a man nor woman, and yet it sounded distinctly human. What was it? I have heard such shrieks within the walls of madhouses, nowhere else. Can it be that some unfortunate lunatic is confined in Delaney House?”

He stood still, listening and watching some time, but he neither saw nor heard anything more. The mansion had returned to its usual gloom and silence. It almost seemed to him as if those fearful shrieks and that swift flash of light had been the figment of his own disordered imagination.

He went up to the front gate, which, like the fence, was of tall ornate ironwork, surmounted by bristling spear-heads, and softly tried the latch. It was unlocked and yielded readily to his touch. He entered the lovely neglected grounds and strolled through the quiet paths, careful to keep in the shadow and well out of the patches of wintery moonlight that gleamed on some of the white, graveled walks. He did not himself understand the strange caprice that had driven him to enter the private grounds of one who was wholly a stranger to him, but it led him blindly on.

“If the owner should catch me trespassing on his grounds I might find myself rather *de trop*,” he thought, grimly, but he did not turn back. He did not think it likely that the master of Delaney House would wander in that dreary, deserted garden on such a night.

Leaving the vicinity of the house, he strolled slowly on and came out at that end of the garden which was simply walled by the gable end of Mr. Rodney’s cottage. Still in the shadow himself he saw a sudden light thrown on the ground by the reflection of the light from a window. He glanced up quickly and saw that it shone from the casement of Aline Rodney’s room.

He drew back further into the convenient shadow cast by a tall, dark evergreen-tree, and looked up. He saw that the curtain at the window had been drawn aside by a small white hand. The next moment he saw a fair young face gazing out wistfully through the pane into the moonlit night whose mystic shadows lay long and dark around Delaney House.

It was Aline Rodney's face. He gazed upon it, eagerly, as it stared out with parted lips and wide, despairing eyes at the dark, gloomy house.

"What is she doing there? What interest can she have in Delaney House?" Mr. Lane asked himself, soberly.

The beautiful grave young face gave no answer to his question. There was upon it an expression of wistful sadness and pathetic sorrow that went to his heart, strong man though he was. She remained for some time gazing sadly out into the wintry darkness, then slowly retired and dropped the heavy curtain between herself and the dreary scene.

Mr. Lane retraced his steps back through the shrubbery toward the house again. He went around to the front entrance and looked curiously at the great carved oaken door.

He was struck by a coincidence with Dr. Anthony's story.

The front door was reached by a flight of wide, marble steps.

"Strange!" he muttered to himself. "What if this should prove to be the house!"

He gazed longingly at the dark stone walls. He would have given anything could his gaze have pierced through them in quest of the hidden blue room of Dr. Anthony's story. A dozen vague suspicions were floating formlessly through his mind, but each thought hovered like a dark-winged bird of omen around Delaney House.

"Can it be that the secret is hidden here?" he asked himself. "Have we all been searching far and wide for Aline Rodney while she lay wounded and hidden at her father's very door?"

The suspicion took hold upon his mind with startling pertinacity. It grew into a settled belief even while he stood there gazing fixedly at the close shut, forbidding looking door.

“Well, if it be so or not, I shall find it out before I leave Chester again,” he said to himself, with a certain resolution in his tone, as he let himself out of the gate into the street again.

He went back to the cottage and met Dr. Anthony coming out to look for him.

“I thought you had run away, Lane. Where have you been?” asked the doctor.

“I came out to smoke a cigar. You know my old bachelor habits,” Mr. Lane answered indifferently.

“You must be half frozen. It is a very cold night. Come in and warm your fingers before we go,” said his friend.

They went in, and though they rallied Mr. Lane on his long absence in the cold night air, he did not say one word on what he had seen and heard. The time had not come yet.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

The next night was the wedding-night. It was the first day of January. Dr. Anthony and Effie had chosen to begin their new life with the new year.

No invitations had been issued for the marriage, but the church doors had been thrown open for the accommodation of those who cared to attend. When the bridal party entered the church, they were surprised to find that it was closely packed by the population of Chester. Curiosity had drawn thither all those among whom Effie had formerly moved, and who had scornfully dropped her because of the mysterious secret that had darkened her sister's life.

Effie had always been considered very beautiful and graceful. She had never looked more so than when she glided up the aisle on the arm of her handsome, noble-looking lover. She was so proud to have been chosen by him that she carried her fair head undauntedly, in quiet indifference to the whispers and glances on every side.

They could not withhold the meed of praise that her beauty claimed. After all, she had done nothing herself to merit blame. It was only the shadow of Aline's dishonor that was reflected upon her. Every one knew how wild and willful Aline had always been, and how her mother and sister had tried to curb her in her mischievous pranks and thoughtless way. Seeing the constancy and devotion of the handsome young physician, some were moved to repentance for the slights they had put upon the beautiful bride who looked queenly in her simply made robe of white satin and the long flowing veil fastened to her dark-brown hair with snowy orange blossoms. The bridegroom's gift, a lovely pearl locket containing the fac-simile of his own handsome face, rested against her heart, suspended by a slender golden chain. It was an amulet of happiness to Effie. In spite of the world's scorn, an ineffable joy had come to her through her sister's adventure, since but for it she might never have become acquainted with the doctor.

But curiously as the crowd gazed upon Effie, they regarded Aline with even more interest.

She entered the church in advance of the bride, and leaning lightly on the arm of Mr. Lane, having been preceded by her parents, who entered first of all.

Every eye turned on the tall, slight young figure in its graceful drapery of white silk and cashmere. The long, childish curls had been put up in womanly fashion on the small head in loose waves and puffs, and as if in mute protest or defiance of their censure, Aline had fastened a pure white lily in their silken darkness. She carried her head high as if in conscious rectitude, and her air was that of one whose thoughts were turned wholly inward upon herself with no jarring consciousness of the hostile eyes that followed her with scorn and suspicion in their cold and curious gaze.

Pausing before the chancel rail, Aline and her companion silently separated and permitted the bridal pair to pass between them to where the white-robed rector waited, book in hand, to pronounce the solemn words of an irrevocable union.

The loud triumphant peal of the wedding-march died away into silent echoes. The rustle and murmur of the perfumed throng grew still. All waited in thrilling silence while the beautiful words of the marriage-service fell slowly on the air.

Aline had never been present at a marriage before. She was deeply impressed by the solemn, beautiful service. She listened with down-dropped eyes and a grave, sweet look on her fair face.

“What solemn words, and yet how sweet!” she said to herself. “Doctor Anthony and my sister will have to love each other very dearly to live up to those heavenly words!”

She had never given one serious thought to the subject of marriage before; but now, as she gazed at the happy faces of the two, and listened to the beautiful, thrilling vows that bound them, some idea of the bliss of a true marriage came into her mind.

“It must be like a heaven upon earth,” she said to herself, and then quite suddenly she recalled some words her mother had said to her one day:

“No one will ever wish to marry you, my poor Aline. No man would take you with such a stain upon your life as that hideous mystery you guard so jealously.”

Was it true? Would no one ever love her as Dr. Anthony loved her sister Effie? Would nothing so beautiful as love ever come into her life? She sighed unconsciously, and with the sigh she lifted her eyes—she never could have told you why—lifted them, and at a little distance met a pair of eyes gazing straight into her own with a strange, magnetic fire—Oran Delaney's!

She did not know what had caused her to look up at that moment, and she knew just as little why she blushed when she met that intent gaze—a blush that burned her pure face like fire.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Mr. Lane felt rather proud than otherwise as he walked up the aisle of the church with Aline Rodney by his side. Her exquisite beauty filled him with admiration, and he had already decided in his mind that she was as pure and innocent as she was fair.

He did not care in the least for the opinion of censorious Chester. If Aline had been a princess, he could not have shown her more deferential respect than that which he now accorded her. He had the greatest admiration for her, mingled with pity and sympathy. He said to himself that he would help her out of her trouble if he could, and he honestly believed, that the surest way to do that would be to find out the secret she held and make it public. He had been vexed with her before he saw her—vexed because she had so baffled investigation and curiosity. He had determined then, out of pure vexation, to track her down. Since they had met, his feeling had changed. He was none the less determined to ferret out her secret, but now he was actuated by pity and sympathy combined with a belief in her innocence. He decided that he would say nothing to Dr. Anthony or the Rodneys. He would pursue his investigations alone. They should hear and know nothing until success had crowned his efforts.

He studied the fair face keenly whenever he had an opportunity of doing so. Its varying expression, the lights and shadows that shone in the dark-blue eyes, had an actual fascination for him. He watched her as closely as if he expected to find on her lovely, mobile face the key to the mystery that shadowed her life.

Standing a little apart from her while the marriage ceremony progressed between her sister and Dr. Anthony, he kept his eyes fixed on her face and saw the new softness that came upon it as she listened to the beautiful words of the service. He saw the dark, curling lashes flutter upward a moment and remain fixed, he saw the blush stealing over her face, dyeing even the whiteness of her low brow in its radiant glow. He followed the direction of her eyes, and saw the apparent cause.

At a little distance from the bridal party stood a tall distinguished looking man leaning lightly against the chancel rail. He was a man to be looked at twice, for his dress and bearing betokened both wealth and refinement. It was a handsome face, too, dark and proud and reserved, with a latent fire in the eyes that had a dark, southern splendor, all their own.

It was this man at whom Aline Rodney was looking with startled pathetic blue eyes while the beautiful color rose in burning waves over her fair young face. Mr. Lane saw the dark eyes and the blue ones hold each other one moment with a glance he could in nowise fathom, and then, without a sign of recognition, the gentleman turned his head away. Aline's dark lashes fell and the color slowly faded from her face.

Mr. Lane was puzzled.

"Does she know the man? It is not likely that she would blush so at the glance of a stranger. And yet they gave no sign of recognition," he said to himself.

He watched Aline more closely than ever, but he made no discovery. She did not look at the handsome stranger again; neither did he look at her; and when the brief service was over he hurriedly left the church and disappeared in the moving throng.

The Rodneys with Mr. Lane and the newly married pair went back to the cottage. They were to have tea together, simply and sociably, and then the doctor and his bride were going off on a little tour before they settled down to housekeeping in the pretty little village of Maywood.

Aline was very silent and *distracted*. She was overwhelmed by the parting from her sister. Heavy tears hung on her thick, dark lashes as she looked at Effie and realized that their pleasant and loving home-life together was forever ended. Henceforth another home would claim her sweet sister as its priestess, and she would be the central sun around which the lesser planets of another household revolved.

"Sitting by the fireside of the hearth,
Feeding its flame."

CHAPTER XXXV.

Mr. Lane was anxious to find out if Aline was acquainted with the stranger who had made her blush in the church. He watched his chance, and when the family were discussing the crowd that had filled the church, he said, carelessly:

“I saw one person who was so handsome and distinguished looking that my curiosity was awakened. One but seldom sees such a fine-looking man. He stood on the left of the chancel rail. Perhaps you noticed him, Mr. Rodney?”

“Yes, I did; and the more particularly because I was surprised to see him there,” Mr. Rodney answered. “It was our unsocial neighbor, Mr. Delaney.”

“Mr. Delaney!” The detective started and glanced furtively at Aline. He saw that she had turned her head away abruptly, but the side of her cheek that was visible was crimson, like a rose. She was holding her satin fan against her breast, and its plumed edge fluttered with the quick beat of her heart.

“I have not seen Mr. Delaney at any public gathering or church for several years before,” continued Mr. Rodney. “He is one of the most inveterate recluses I ever heard of. His presence in the church must have been intended as a special mark of respect and compliment to Effie.”

“But, papa, we have none of us the least acquaintance with him,” said the bride.

“No matter. He is our next door neighbor. I have no doubt but he attended the wedding out of respect to us,” insisted Mr. Rodney.

“For my part, I cannot imagine how he ever found out about the marriage,” said Mrs. Rodney. “He never goes out, and no one is ever seen going in. It is quite too bad that Mr. Delaney does not marry, and give his grand old house a mistress. She would lead society in Chester—that is, if she would condescend so far, which is not likely, the Delaneys being proverbially proud.”

Mr. Lane having adroitly turned the conversation into the channel he wished, listened eagerly, just throwing in a word here and there until he had elicited all that there was to tell, or, at least, all that was known of the taciturn master of Delaney House. To that part which related to the alleged ghosts that haunted Delaney House, he listened with a great deal of interest.

“Since you have named it, I will relate my own experience,” he said. “Last night I supposed you would laugh at it. Now I see that you will not even be surprised.”

“What is it?” they asked him in surprise.

“It is only that I heard the ghost of Delaney House last night,” he replied.

“You heard it!” they echoed, and Dr. Anthony asked, gravely:

“When?”

“It was last night when I went out on the pavement to smoke my cigar. I strolled down the street a little way, and was suddenly brought to a dead stop by the sound of a loud ringing shriek fearful enough to have proceeded from one of the denizens of Hades. I paused and looked up, for the sound had seemed to float in the air above me, and I found myself in front of Delaney House.”

Every one was deeply interested—every one uttered some exclamation or another except Aline. She alone took no part in the conversation. She had not even looked around. She sat by the reading-lamp and was looking into a book, but Mr. Lane saw that she was turning its leaves quite at random and with strangely nervous hands.

“Is her indifference real or feigned?” he asked himself. “The most of people would be interested in my story—why not Miss Rodney? Her sex are not usually deficient in curiosity.”

“And you really heard the ghost, Mr. Lane?” cried Effie, with awe struck eyes. “Well, you have been more highly favored than we have! In all the years since we came to Chester we have never heard the reputed ghost.”

“That is because you are so widely separated from the house by the beautiful grounds,” said Mr. Lane. “Now, I heard it twice, for when I looked up at the first sound it was repeated in a louder and even more blood-

curdling voice than before, and a flash of light gleamed through the shutters for an instant, then faded into Cimmerian darkness and gloom again.”

“Do you hear that, Aline?” cried little Max. “Oh, don’t you wish that you had heard it? Do you remember how we used to talk about the Delaney ghost before you went away?”

“Yes, dear,” she answered in a constrained voice, without turning toward the little social group gathered around the fire.

“I was puzzled and alarmed when I heard that sound last night. I thought perhaps Delaney had a crazy wife or sister. I had not heard about the ghost then,” said Mr. Lane.

“Mr. Delaney is not married,” said Mrs. Rodney.

“No? And are there no females resident in his house?” inquired the detective.

“I have heard that there is a solitary housekeeper, but I have never seen her,” she replied.

“It was, then, really a ghost that I heard,” said Mr. Lane. “I am surprised. I did not really believe in the existence of spirits in this practical nineteenth century.”

No one made him any direct answer. It is true that a vein of superstition runs through most people even in this enlightened age. The Rodneys had heard so much about the Delaney ghost that they hardly questioned the veracity of the story. And yet they did not care about confessing it to Mr. Lane. It was just possible that he might turn the story into ridicule. He appeared to be very hard and practical, without any romantic weaknesses.

So the conversation drifted into other channels, and Mr. Lane made no effort to prevent it, having learned all that there was to be told on the subject. He quietly stored away all that he had heard in his mind, and no one had any idea that he was specially interested in Delaney House and its strange master.

In a little while the time for the parting came. Dr. Anthony and his bride were to have a little bridal tour South. They went away, followed by tears and regrets and a score of good wishes, symbolized by lavish shower of old slippers that Max threw after the departing bride.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

“Aline, will you come down to the river and skate this morning? The ice is ten inches thick, and as smooth as glass,” said Max Rodney to his sister the morning after Effie’s marriage.

She shook her head with a slight, wintery smile.

“Do not tempt me, Max,” she said, “you have got me into too many scrapes in the past, and now I have promised mamma that I will never do so any more.”

The handsome, rosy-cheeked boy, with the skates slung carelessly over his shoulder, regarded her with palpable disappointment.

“Oh, Allie, do come,” he said. “Do you remember last winter what glorious fun we had on the river? And now it is smoother and better than it was then. I know you would like it, and I’m sure mamma would not care.”

“I cannot go, Max,” Aline answered, sadly. “Please do not tease me, there’s a good boy.”

The light-hearted boy went up to her and pulled away the white hands that half shielded the pale, pretty face. He was too young and thoughtless to know much of the sorrow that had come to Aline.

“Aline, what has come over you?” he said. “It used to be that I would rather you came out with me for a lark than any fellow I know. But ever since you were lost and came back, you have been changed. Why is it?”

“It is nothing, Max, only that mamma thinks I am getting too old to be your childish playmate any longer,” Aline answered with a forced smile.

“Bosh! Is that all? Why, there’s lots and lots of grown people on the river this morning. You need not be a childish playmate this time. There are lots of older people to keep you company. Say, will you come?”

“I cannot. I would not go among those people for anything,” she answered.

“I don’t see why. You can skate better than any of them—you are just like a bird,” he said. “I say, sister, I shall ask mamma. Will you go if she says yes?”

“Not even then!” she answered, half hesitatingly, for the proposal was not without its charms.

Her old passion for out-of-door sports returned to her. She longed to be skimming the glittering ice with her light swift feet, and feeling the rush of the cold sweet breeze against the cheeks that had grown pale and thin in the months while she had been hiding herself sensitively within doors from the sneers and frowns of those who had traduced her so bitterly.

“You will come if mamma will come too, won’t you?” persisted Max, unwilling to yield the point.

“Mamma will not go,” replied Aline.

The door opened, and Mrs. Rodney came suddenly into the room. She had a lugubrious look on her face and her eyelids were pink from weeping. She had been having a private crying spell over the loss of her elder daughter.

She had caught Aline’s words, and now looked inquiringly into her pale face. But eager Max forestalled the question that trembled on her lips.

“Mamma, I want you and Aline to come down to the river with me for the skating. Will you come?”

Mrs. Rodney looked at Aline’s pale cheeks and heavy eyes, and her first resolve to negative the proposal died on her lips. She saw the girl was fading and drooping in her enforced seclusion.

“Should you like to go, my dear?” she asked.

“With you, mamma,” Aline answered, wistfully.

“Very well. We will go for a little while. Wrap yourself up warmly, dear, and Max shall get your skates ready.”

Aline ran up to her room, full of pleasurable anticipation, for she was an expert skater, and always enjoyed being on the ice. A girlish impulse prompted her to make herself as pretty as possible. She let down her dark, curling hair loosely over her shoulders, and donned a dark-red cashmere trimmed with silvery fur, a warm, wadded jacket of red, and a jaunty fur cap

having a little bird perched on one side. Then she sallied forth with Max and Mrs. Rodney, who was so warmly wrapped up in cloth and fur and thick veils that barely the tip of her aristocratic-looking nose was visible to the beholder.

They had a bracing walk of half a mile in the cool, fresh air of the clear, wintery morning, and then the river burst upon their view like a sheet of silver, dotted about with merry youths and maidens who were sliding merrily about over the crystal expanse, without a thought of danger.

Many of them were Aline's old friends and companions with whom she had been a prime favorite until that mysterious trouble fell upon her. Her heart warmed to them as she saw the smiling, familiar faces and heard their merry voices. A longing came over her to be friends with them again, to touch their hands, to hear their voices talking to her in the old friendly, familiar way. Everything was so gay, so merry, so unceremonious, she half hoped they would relent and welcome her to her old place among them.

Poor Aline! The light came into her violet eyes, the rich color flushed her cheeks at the thought. She looked wistfully at the groups that dotted the shore and the river as she came up. Her heart beat with anxiety and expectation. Would any one speak to her? Would any one of all these, her old friends, give her one friendly clasp of the hand?

Vain thought, vain hope! As they saw her coming among them with her eager, expectant face and her winning beauty, every one turned aside with cold, averted looks, and scarcely restrained sneers. In a moment she stood solitary, with her mother and Max, in a spot where only a moment ago more than a score of people had been. They had tacitly deserted and ignored her. That strange sense of loneliness in crowds so often felt by the sensitive heart came over her now. Something like a strangling gasp came from her lips, and then she shut them tightly together, and held her small head high, with a proud, stag-like movement that was almost defiance. In her heart she was saying, bitterly: "They may scorn me as they will, but they shall not crush me! I have done no wrong, and in time I shall live down their cruel slanders!"

"Do not mind them, Aline," her mother whispered tenderly; but Aline heard the quiver in her mother's voice, and it sent a fresh pang to her own heart.

“Never mind, Max,” she said to the boy, who was kneeling down to fasten her skates. “Do not put them on, please. I shall not skate. I had rather go home.”

“Oh, no, not yet—” he began; but just at that moment a shabbily dressed old woman pushed him aside and came up in front of Aline. She had a basket of cheap laces on her arm, which she paraded ostentatiously.

“Will the leddies buy some of my pretty things—collerettes, *jabots*, cuffs, scarfs—de finest things in lace,” whimpered she.

Mrs. Rodney shook her head with a smile.

“We want nothing at all, my good woman,” said she.

“Let me tell the young lady’s fortune, then. I am a fortune-teller, and I tell de truest fortunes you ever heard. I have told a many for the young gents and leddies this morning. They say every word is true. This is the sweetest face I have seen yet. Let me tell her what is past and what will be,” cried the old crone, loquaciously.

“No, no, go away! We do not wish to hear anything!” said Mrs. Rodney, impatiently.

But Aline turned her blue eyes wistfully upon her mother’s face.

“Oh, mamma, I should like it so much,” she said, pleadingly.

“Like *what*, my dear?” inquired Mrs. Rodney, uncomprehendingly.

“To have this good woman read my past and future,” Aline answered, with a blush.

“But, my dear, she cannot possibly know anything of the kind. Fortune-tellers are all frauds. They only guess at things,” said Mrs. Rodney.

“I should like to hear what she has to say,” insisted Aline, willfully.

“Oh, very well, my dear, just as you please, but you will only hear a pack of stories,” Mrs. Rodney replied; but she crossed the old fortune-teller’s coarse palm with the traditional silver piece, and Aline drew the warm glove from her delicate hand expectantly.

The old lace-vender set her basket down on the ground and took the little hand into her own large and brown one.

“What is this I see?” she said, squinting her gray eyes at the rosy palm. “The line of life is crossed with sorrows. You have had a great trouble in your life. You are very unhappy, and you are doomed to be even more unhappy—”

“Do not tell her such jargon,” broke in Mrs. Rodney, impatiently.

“I but read what I see, madam,” said the seer. “And I see nothing but blight and sorrow. I cannot understand it, for I see no love in her past—none of that love that makes or mars a woman’s life. The shadows come from other things, from other influences. And yet—” she paused and looked searchingly into Aline’s marble-white face.

“And yet—” repeated the girl in a tone of eager inquiry.

The fortune-teller went on without removing her keen gaze from Aline’s wistful face:

“And yet, although you have never loved, there is a man mixed up in your past and future strangely. He is dark and grand and handsome, but he has cast a shadow on your life, a thick, dark shadow so dense you cannot see beyond it. You blush, yet the man is nothing to you. I cannot understand it.”

It was true that Aline was blushing hotly, and she was gazing in wonder at the strange old woman.

“Go on,” she said, in a low, almost pleading voice “Tell me—will those dark clouds ever be lifted from my life?”

“It is hard to tell. I said I could read your future, but the clouds that overhang it are too dark and heavy. I cannot pierce their gloom. Perhaps the sun may shine for you again, perhaps, never! Let me see!”

She held the little palm close up before her eyes.

“Ah, there is a *secret*! You are young to hold so much hidden in your heart. I may tell you this much. You will never be happy until that secret is openly revealed! It will cost you too much to keep it hid! If there are any who love you they will never rest, they will never cease striving to fathom the secret that has shadowed your life so darkly.”

She dropped the little hand abruptly, caught up her basket, and strode quickly away, leaving Aline and her mother stupefied with surprise.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

“What an old hag! Her hands were coarse like a man’s and her voice too!” cried vivacious Max. “It was no kind of a fortune, either. She did not say anything about your marrying. But I hope you never will; it was bad enough to lose Effie. I hope no one will ever persuade you away, Allie. No one is good enough for you!”

“I am flattered by your extravagant opinion of my perfections. I think you need give yourself no uneasiness as to losing me,” Aline replied, making him a demure little courtesy.

He laughed, and nodded.

“I am glad of that. But come now, let me fasten your skates. You must come on the ice with me. You promised, you know, and I shall not let you go back on your word.”

“I would rather go home, Max,” Aline answered.

“No, dear, you need not be put down so easily. You may go on the ice with your brother a little while, then we will go home,” said Mrs. Rodney. Her pride and resentment had both been roused by the cavalier treatment Aline had received. She knew that her daughter was the most beautiful girl on the spot. No one there could at all compare with her. She was an accomplished skater too. Something like defiance rose in her mind. She would not let them drive Aline away with their scorn. She had as much right here as her severe judges. “Go on the ice with your brother a little while,” she repeated; “then we will go home.”

She stood silently on the shore watching them as hand in hand they skimmed blithely across the icy surface of the beautiful river. Her thoughts were busy while her eyes followed the form of her beautiful girl in the bright costume that accorded so well with the gay scene.

The strange words of the old lace-vender filled her with wonder.

“How did she chance upon the truth so cleverly?” she asked herself. “What did she know of Aline’s troubles and her fatal secret? What did she mean by the dark man who influenced Aline’s life? Was it true—or why did Aline blush at her words? I have a mind to follow the woman and find out what she knows.”

She looked around her, but the old woman had already disappeared from sight.

“As well, perhaps,” Mrs. Rodney, muttered to herself: “she could tell me nothing. I dare say it was all guess-work. It is so easy to prate of dark clouds and secrets and dark men—it is the stock in trade of fortune-tellers.”

But she was very uneasy in her mind. There was a great pain in her heart as she watched Aline.

The girl had forgotten her trouble for a little while in the exhilarating excitement and exercise. Her eyes sparkled, her cheeks glowed with pleasure. She and Max were the best skaters on the river, and the girl thoroughly enjoyed her triumph. She looked like some bright winged bird in her scarlet costume, and many eyes followed her course in unwilling admiration.

“Aline, I will tell you something,” said Max, as they skated sociably along, side by side. “I believe that old woman was a man dressed in woman’s clothes!”

Aline’s heart gave a quick throb.

“Why do you think so, Max?” she said.

“Well, because she had boots on, and her feet were large, and her hands, too, and her voice was coarse and squeaky, as if she tried to alter it to a woman’s. Didn’t you notice it yourself, Aline?”

“She was rather masculine-looking, certainly; but, then, many women are so. I have no doubt she was what she appeared to be,” said Aline, after giving the matter a moment’s grave consideration.

Max was silenced but not convinced, and presently he looked round at her again.

“I will tell you something else,” he said. “There is a man watching you. Perhaps it is the dark man the fortune-teller talked about.”

“Where?” asked Aline, with a start.

“Do you see that great tree down the bank at some distance from the crowd? There is a man round one side of it. He is looking at you. He is tall and dark, and has on a great fur overcoat. I believe—that is, he looks like him—that it is Mr. De—Ah! ah! help! help!”

The revelation of what Max believed was never finished, for, all unknowingly, and in her interest in his words, Aline had gone upon a dangerous place, where the ice was cracked and thin. A little in advance of her brother, although clinging to his hand, she felt the treacherous ice giving way beneath her, and, like a flash, tore her hand from his and threw it far from her. All in an instant there was a loud crash, the treacherous element gave way, and Aline sunk down into the cold waves. Max was left alone upon the ragged edge, screaming aloud for help in the frenzy of his despair.

All in a moment there arose a great hubbub of excitement. All eyes turned upon the spot where Aline had broken through the thin crust of ice and gone down into the cold, dark waves. With the thoughtlessness born of excitement, the crowd made a rush for the spot. Some slipped and fell, and were heedlessly trampled, and deserted in the terrible rush. A panic was imminent. It seemed as if all were bent upon satiating a wild curiosity, and the solid ice, beginning to tremble beneath the burden upon it, might have broken through, and precipitated the crowd, pell-mell, into the same dark waves that had engulfed Aline; but, at that moment, a loud, stern, authoritative voice rang out clearly and sharply:

“Stand back, all of you! Do you not see that you are liable to cause her death as well as your own? Go back before the ice breaks through with your weight!”

The stern voice seemed to put reason into their bewildered minds. There was a moment of flurry and indecision, and then the excited crowd began to veer toward the shore. No one was left in the vicinity of the dangerous ice

except little Max, screaming piteously on the brink of the abyss into which his sister had disappeared.

But, an instant more, and the form of a tall, handsome man was seen crossing the ice, carefully yet fearlessly. As he neared the thin ice, he threw himself carefully down upon it, and crept slowly along to the edge of the precipice. He had thrown off his coat, and was in his shirt sleeves, so that every one knew what was in his mind, and no one was surprised to see him drop cautiously over the ragged edge of the ice, and so down into the deep, running water.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

It was an act of heroic daring that appealed to all, even to hearts less brave. A cry rose up from the shore, a shout of admiration for the hero's bravery, a cheer to give him courage in his daring deed.

Some one drew little Max away from his perilous position, and carried him screaming to the shore, where Mrs. Rodney had fallen down fainting with the shock of Aline's fall. Some men went for a rope, knowing instinctively that it would be needed if Aline Rodney and the adventurous hero were ever rescued from the river.

When they had found one, fortunately near at hand, they returned, and went over the ice cautiously, by lying down flat upon it and creeping slowly along. Then they peered over the icy edge of the opening into the dark, swirling river.

Joy! joy! The icy current had not swept the hero away. He was there, with his head above the waves, and supporting on his arm the drenched form of a girl whose dark head drooped heavily, and whose chill, white face and closed eyelids showed that death or deadly unconsciousness had stolen upon her.

He looked up and saw them peering down at him, and shouted, hoarsely:

"A rope, quick, with a slip knot! I cannot sustain her much longer. I am freezing to death!"

They knotted the rope hurriedly and threw it down. In a moment he threw the rope over the girl's limp body, tightened it, and they drew her up safely. In the same manner they rescued him, and again the loud shouts of joy rose up from the shore.

They carried the girl's limp, wet body to the shore, and her preserver followed after. It was the tall man Max had seen behind the tree—it was Oran Delaney.

People looked at him in wonder. It was so seldom that he appeared in public that it always caused surprise to see him. His sudden appearance in this romantic *rôle* was a nine days' wonder.

But he did not stay to hear their wondering congratulations. Mrs. Rodney had recovered from her faint, and he hurriedly placed her with the frightened Max and the still unconscious girl in a passing conveyance, then wrapped himself in his furred overcoat and hastened home.

Mrs. Griffin was astonished and frightened when her master walked in so wet and cold. She exclaimed loudly upon his plight.

"It is nothing. I have only had a fall into the river," he replied, carelessly.

"But I thought that the river was all frozen over?" she said, perplexed.

"Yes, but I broke through the ice," said Mr. Delaney.

"Oh, dear, dear, then you have got your death of cold!" cried Mrs. Griffin in alarm.

"Pray do not make me out a girl or a baby," he said, impatiently. "When I get some warm, dry clothes, I shall do very well."

She busied herself in laying them out for him, and when she had done this she made some warm drinks for him.

"To drive the cold out of your system," she said, fussily, but kindly.

He drank something just to please her, and then he hurried away from her, disregarding her pathetic entreaty that he would go to bed and wrap up warmly in blankets, that his wetting and freezing might not do him any harm.

"As if there were danger, when my heart and brain are on fire," he said to himself.

He went up to a quiet little chamber in the tower, and peered, with burning eyes, down at a little white-curtained window of his neighbor's house. He could dimly see figures moving about the little room as if they were busy over something.

"Has she revived?" he asked himself, anxiously. "Poor child! she went under the black water twice before I reached her. It was only the strength of

my despair that enabled me to bring her up to the surface again. Oh, how fearful it was! the cold, black water, the jagged ice, the terrible danger! And yet I would risk life and limb again a hundred times to save her life!”

CHAPTER XXXIX.

“Ah, dearie me, but it’s a lonesome life, after all,” sighed Mrs. Griffin.

The good soul was sitting by the comfortable stove in the commodious kitchen of Delaney House, intent upon the concoction of some savory broth that was simmering on the stove. It was on the evening of the day that Mr. Delaney had saved Aline Rodney from drowning.

The bright, sunny morning had ended in a dreary, overcast evening, with hints of snow in the air. The warm, spacious kitchen was very comfortable, but it was intensely quiet and still, even to dreariness. The audible ticking of the clock, and the soft purr of the little gray kitten at Mrs. Griffin’s feet, seemed to make the stillness and quiet even more marked and oppressive to her peculiar mood.

“It’s a lonesome life,” she repeated. “It is hard even for me, and I do not see how Mr. Delaney bears it at all, used as he has been to society and amusement. Sometimes I fairly long for the sight of a friendly face and the sound of a kind voice besides my master’s. I never felt the dreariness of my life as much as I have done since Miss Rodney came and went away. Spoiled child as she was, she brought a bit of life into the house!”

She sighed and mechanically lifted the lid of the stew-pan and stirred the savory broth with a long-handled spoon.

“Tap! Tap! Tap!”

That ghostly sound broke so suddenly upon the silence of the room, that Mrs. Griffin gave a violent start and dropped her long spoon upon the floor with a hideous clatter, disturbing kitty’s peaceful slumbers by a thump upon her little pink nose, accompanied by a few drops of hot broth that sent her pattering into the corner with a spiteful meow. The good woman mechanically reached for the spoon and looked toward the door.

“Tap! Tap!” came the low knocking again, with as ghostly a sound as ever Poe’s fabled raven produced.

Mrs. Griffin stared at the closed door with an air of stupid amazement, and made no move to open it.

“Whoever can it be?” she asked aloud, and a squeaky, peculiar voice from outside, answered immediately:

“Open the door, my good woman, and see!”

“What impudence! There, then, I won’t do it!” replied Mrs. Griffin, who, although dying of curiosity to see her visitor, knew better than to admit any one within the walls of Delaney House.

“You’re the first woman, then, that I ever knew to turn a poor peddler from the door, and it’ll be to your sorrow as you did so,” replied a bantering voice outside. “I have a basketful of notions, and I’m just from New York with the biggest bargains of the season. Come, don’t be churlish, mistress. Open the door, and let me come in and warm my frozen fingers, even if you won’t buy one of my nice lace collars.”

Mrs. Griffin’s eyes had brightened at the mention of the peddler. The majority of women have an unexplainable propensity for buying from peddlers, and Mrs. Griffin was no exception to the rule. Besides, she was dying of loneliness and *ennui*. She intensely desired to speak to some one, and to have better companionship, if only for an hour, than the purring gray kitten.

She hesitated. And we have always heard—have we not, reader?—that the woman who hesitates is lost. She remembered that her stock of pins and needles and tapes and buttons needed replenishing. Why not embrace this excellent opportunity for the purpose? She might easily do so, and Mr. Delaney be none the wiser, and no harm done. She would take care that the harmless peddler did not penetrate beyond the kitchen.

The cheery, seductive voice of the person outside sounded pleasantly in her hearing. She felt that she would be all the better for a little human contact with that world from which she was so closely secluded.

She softly turned the key and opened the door, meaning to have some little colloquy with the peddler before she admitted her; but that worthy frustrated her intention by immediately stepping across the threshold, with the proverbial impudence of the class.

“So you thought better of your first intentions, did you?” she said, genially, to the astonished mistress of the kitchen. “Second thoughts are best, aren’t they? Well, you were wise to let me in. I shall sell you the biggest bargain of the season.”

And then she laughed, and set her basket down upon the floor, and warmed her brown fingers by the stove.

Mrs. Griffin was dumfounded by the ease, not to say impudence, of the female peddler, who already had taken a seat and was gazing about the large apartment with careless curiosity.

“You must please not to laugh so loud,” she said. “If my master hears you he will come down and turn you out. I should not have let you in anyhow, only that I needed some things in your line. Strangers are not allowed in here. You shouldn’t have entered the grounds.”

“I did not know there were any orders against it. You see, I’m a stranger about here, and seeing such a fine large house I naturally thought to myself, ‘Here’s the place to sell my nice goods to the ladies.’ But if there’s any offense, ma’am, I’ll humbly take my leave,” said this artful old woman, beginning to replace the tempting things she had drawn from her heavy basket.

“Well, well, let me have my buttons and things first,” said Mrs. Griffin, who had not expected to be so soon taken at her word. “You may show me your things, only be quiet about it. I shouldn’t care to have my master disturbed.”

“And your mistress, hey? Wouldn’t she like to buy some of my pretty laces?”

“There isn’t any mistress. There’s only my master and me. I’m cook and housekeeper both,” Mrs. Griffin replied, as she poised a black lace cap on her fingers, and mentally wondered if it wouldn’t be becoming to her.

They had the usual haggling, the old woman good-humoredly putting down her goods to Mrs. Griffin’s own prices, remarking as each new purchase was laid on the pile at the housekeeper’s elbow: “I told you I would sell you the biggest bargain of the season. They don’t call me Cheap Jane for nothing!”

“Is that your name? How funny!” said the housekeeper, laughing.

“That’s what they call me,” said the female peddler. “Mrs. Broadcloth is my real name, though.”

Mrs. Griffin had to laugh again. She thought that the name of Broadcloth was even more amusing than that of Cheap Jane. There was a dry humor about the peddler that she rather enjoyed after her forced seclusion from companionship with her kind.

“Perhaps you’d like a cup of hot tea before you start out again, Mrs. Broadcloth,” said she, with reckless hospitality.

“Thank you kindly,” was the reply, and the old woman drew out a short, black pipe from, some recess under her coarse cloak. “While you draw the tea, I suppose you will let me smoke my pipe by your fire,” she said.

“Certainly,” assented Mrs. Griffin, and then her heart suddenly misgave her.

It occurred to her that, under the peculiar circumstances of the case, she was making almost too lavish a show of hospitality.

“Only suppose that Mr. Delaney should happen in! It isn’t likely he will, but then I’ve heard say that the most unlikely things are always happening,” she thought, apprehensively to herself.

“I will step up to his room and see if he wants anything,” was her next thought, with a view to forestalling his possible intrusion on the prohibited guest.

Fortune favored her artful design. At that moment a bell rung from the upper room that Mr. Delaney occupied as a bed-chamber.

Mrs. Griffin turned to Cheap Jane, who was contentedly puffing away at her stubby pipe.

“There is my master’s bell now,” she said. “Will you just set here all quiet while I step up and see what he wants?”

“Yes, go. Don’t mind me,” replied Mrs. Broadcloth, affably.

The housekeeper opened the door into the hall, closed it carefully behind her, and went up to Mr. Delaney’s room.

To her surprise, although it was barely six o’clock, he had retired to bed. There was a feverish flush on his face, and his dark eyes gleamed restlessly.

“Oh, Mr. Delaney, you are ill,” she exclaimed.

“Hardly that,” he replied, with a forced smile; “but I am certainly somewhat the worse for the wetting I received this morning.”

“Oh, sir, you should see a physician!” she exclaimed, alarmed at his feverish looks.

“No; the last one did me harm enough by his long tongue,” Mr. Delaney answered, angrily. “I will have nothing of the kind. I need no one—I shall be all right in the morning.”

She saw that persistence would only irritate him, and dropped the subject.

“Can I do nothing for you?” she inquired, anxiously.

“No; I have myself taken some drops that will soon cool my fever. I shall not take any supper; but, after a while, you may bring me a cup of tea—nothing else.”

She beat a hasty retreat, sorry for his sickness, but reflecting that it stood her in good stead at this particular time, when her loneliness had led her into such imprudence as admitting a human being under the tabooed portals of Delaney House.

“I will go and make the tea, and get her away as soon as I can,” she thought, hurrying down the wide stairway, along the hall, and so into the kitchen again, where she had left Cheap Jane contentedly, puffing at her pipe.

“Well, now, Mistress Broadcloth, I will put the tea to draw,” she began, then stopped and stared, and rubbed her hand across her eyes.

The great kitchen was empty, save for the gray kitten under the stove, purring away in lazy contentment. The old woman and the big basket were vanished from the scene as if they had never been. The door by which she had entered a little while ago, stood wide open, letting in the cold and the gathering darkness.

Mrs. Griffin ran down the steps and into the grounds in search of the missing peddler; but the darkness and a haze of snow were beginning to fall together, and they soon drove her into the house again.

“Ah, well-a-day! the strange old creature has taken herself off without her tea, and just as well, perhaps, for I was on needles and pins for fear of being

caught in her company,” commented the housekeeper.

CHAPTER XL.

Aline Rodney's feelings on plunging through the broken ice into the cold, black waves of the river may be better imagined than described.

A shiver of mortal cold and terror rushed over her as the icy current came in contact with her warm, tender young body. She went down, down, down, with a swift rush and a terrible sensation as of suffocation, into the infinite depths of death, it seemed to her, and then arose to the surface and felt the cold, sweet air in her face again with a sensation of exquisite relief.

Aline had some little knowledge of swimming. She tried to hold herself up in the water until relief should come. And a great horror came over her at the thought of being whirled away under the ice and beyond all hope of rescue. How terrible it would be to perish miserably under that sheet of solid crystal, where but a little while ago she had sported gayly and fearlessly, but which now rose between her and the world like a glittering wall of destruction.

She made an effort to keep from drifting away from the wide, ragged opening in the ice made by the falling through of her body. She knew that if once swept beneath that terrible crust her death would be certain. The sounds from above came to her faintly, deadened by the ringing in her ears, and by the wild shrieks of her brother nearer at hand. She was conscious of a vague anxiety over her mother, faint wonder if any of those people who hated her would try to save her life, and then a numbness induced by the fearful cold overcame her wholly, her arms ceased to beat the waves in frenzied endeavor, and she felt herself sinking again to rise no more.

It was at that awful moment that Oran Delaney sprung boldly into the terrible death-trap, fearless of danger, and only intent on saving that frail, weak girl from imminent danger.

When he first sprung into the river the little dark head was going down beneath the waves. He was compelled to dive twice before he succeeded in retaining a hold upon her. When, after a desperate struggle, he succeeded in

holding her above the water, he was almost exhausted himself. He feared that he would succumb to the dreadful cold himself before assistance could arrive.

The forethought of the man who had so fortunately brought ropes stood him in good stead now. A little longer in the cold waves must have exhausted his remaining strength.

He was frightened when they were drawn out of the water, and he saw Aline's face clearly. It was pinched and blue, and the parted lips and closed eyelids looked like death. Had he been too late? he asked himself, anxiously.

He saw the unconscious form placed in the vehicle, and driven away toward home with a silent, speechless trouble in his heart. His thoughts followed her, in fancy, to that little white chamber where her parents and the old family doctor hung anxiously over her, trying to infuse life into the chill and rigid form, that seemed as if it would never breathe the warm breath of life again.

"Oh, that I had never taken her to that fatal river! She would not have gone if I had not urged it!" cried poor Mrs. Rodney, wringing her white hands in despair.

She remembered the old fortune teller's strange words: "The clouds that overhang your future are so dark and heavy I cannot pierce their gloom. Perhaps the sun may shine for you again, perhaps never!"

"It was a true prognostication! That old crone did, indeed, read the cards of fate truly! It was the shadow of death that hung over my poor darling!" cried the anguished mother in mingled grief and wonder.

But she was wrong. The tangled thread of poor Aline's life was not broken yet. Her little feet were not done wandering yet through the weary mazes of the world.

Insensibly a little warmth began to creep about the poor chilled body, under the stress of their patient endeavors, a faint pulse fluttered about her heart, and at length the black fringe of the lashes trembled feebly against her cheeks. The old physician, standing anxiously over her, with his hand upon the blue-veined wrist, looked up, and said, kindly, to the distracted mother:

“Thank God, she revives! She will live!”

CHAPTER XLI.

“Aline, you have not asked me who saved your life, yet?”

“No, mamma.”

It was the morning after Aline’s almost fatal accident, and she was sitting up in an easy-chair before the fire, in a pretty, bright blue wrapper. She was very pale and quiet. She had been listening to her mother, who had been telling her the details of her rescue, and who now remarked in wonder:

“Aline, you have not asked me who saved your life, yet.”

“No, mamma,” the girl answered, in a tone of visible embarrassment, while a faint color rose to her cheeks.

“I should think you would be curious over it,” said Mrs. Rodney, in a tone of slight disappointment.

“I have not thought about it,” the young girl replied, evasively.

“Then you will be astonished when you learn who the person was—the very last one you or any one else would have thought of,” declared Mrs. Rodney.

“You make me feel quite curious, mamma,” said Aline, with a faint smile, and a tone so listless it belied her assertion of interest.

“I do not suppose, if you guessed all day, that you would come at all near the truth,” pursued Mrs. Rodney.

“I suppose not,” answered Aline, laughingly.

She leaned back wearily, and watched the leaping flames of the fire with a smothered sigh. Oh, if only her mother would but drop the subject.

But Mrs. Rodney had no intention of doing so.

“Indeed you would not,” she went on. “You would sooner think of any one else that you ever knew, though indeed you never knew this gentleman!”

“Then it was a stranger,” said Aline, seeing that an answer of some sort was expected, and feeling a guilty consciousness of deceit, for she had an intuitive knowledge that Mr. Delaney had saved her life. She had caught a glimpse of his darkly handsome face behind the tree Max had pointed out to her just as she crashed through the thin ice into the river.

“Yes, it was a stranger, although you have seen him a thousand times, and although you know his name. Prepare to be surprised, my dear. Only think, it was our unsociable neighbor, Mr. Delaney!”

Aline knew that she was expected to appear greatly surprised, but to have saved her life she could not have enacted such a fraud. She was too frank and honest. She could only falter out, embarrassedly:

“Mr. Delaney!”

“Yes! I knew you would be surprised. Every one was,” said Mrs. Rodney. “I was surprised, and, to tell the truth, Aline, I was proud, too. Just to think, after the mean way the Chester people had treated us, that the richest and grandest man in the place should risk his life to save yours! Oh, how grateful I feel to him for his kindness!”

“Grateful!” murmured Aline, in an indescribable tone.

“Yes, indeed!” cried Mrs. Rodney. “Why, my dear, you might have perished for any help those other men would have given you—that is, they did bring a rope, but that would not have been any good if Mr. Delaney had not gone into the water and brought you up from the bottom.”

“It might have been better had he left me there,” the girl murmured, half to herself.

Mrs. Rodney shuddered at the bare thought.

“Oh, how glad I am that he did not,” she exclaimed. “I feel like going down on my knees to thank him for his bravery!”

“Thank *him*! Thank Oran Delaney? Oh, mamma!” cried Aline, with irrepressible agitation.

“Why, yes, my dear; of course we should thank him,” cried Mrs. Rodney, “and yet, strange as it seems, your papa and I are at a loss to know how to do so. You see, he is so strange. Although he saved your life, he has never

called or sent to inquire how you are. And yet, one would suppose he would take that much interest in you, seeing that he risked his life for you.”

“I dare say he would prefer not being thanked,” murmured Aline.

“Do you think so? And yet, it would look very ungracious in us to neglect doing so. It would appear as if we thought the saving of our daughter’s life not even worthy a word of thanks. I should not like to have him think that we undervalued either your life or his services,” said Mrs. Rodney, with natural pride.

“What can it matter what he thinks? I should not say one word to him,” cried Aline, with sudden peevishness.

Mrs. Rodney gazed at her in surprise.

“Aline, I never did understand your strange nature,” she said, rather coldly. “Do you mean for me to think that you are not grateful to Mr. Delaney for his inestimable service in saving you from such a horrible death?”

Aline flushed under the rebuking glance her mother bent upon her.

“Not exactly that, mamma,” she said. “But Mr. Delaney is so unsocial and retiring, I thought he might not care to be intruded upon, even to receive our thanks for what he has done. Of course I am grateful. I was dreadfully frightened down there in the water. I did not want to die, although I had as well be dead as living, since my life is ruined and blighted. But I dare say Mr. Delaney has almost forgotten the occurrence by now, and I do not think we have any right to intrude upon his privacy even to air our gratitude.”

Mrs. Rodney did not take this view of the case at all.

“I should not think it an intrusion if any one came to thank me for saving life,” she said. “In any case, I shall thank him; but, since he is so reticent and unsocial, perhaps the best way would be to send him a letter—don’t you think so?”

“Yes, I think so,” answered Aline, closing her eyes with a weary sigh.

She thought of the letter she had thrown into the garden to him, begging him to save her good name by allowing her to break the vow of silence he had imposed upon her. He had refused her prayer; he had allowed her hopes

to be ruthlessly blasted, without lifting a finger to prevent it; and yet he had risked his life to save hers. She could not understand it.

“Why was he there? People say he never goes out; yet he was at the church, and he was at the river. Was he watching me?” she asked herself, and the thought only made her wonder the more. What did his interest mean? “Twice I have owed my life to him,” she thought. “And yet he has suffered me to lose that which was dearer than life—my good name! I do not know what to think of him—while I hate him for the one thing, I must needs be grateful to him for the other.”

She closed her eyes and lay musing on those perplexing questions. Her thoughts went back to the days she had spent at Delaney House, and to the horrible mysterious Thing that had so terribly assaulted and wounded her. She wondered, as she had often done before, what that creature was to Oran Delaney. Why did he shut himself up alone in that great gloomy house with such a terrible companion for his solitude? She shuddered at the thought of it—the ghost of Delaney House as he had called it. The remembrance of those awful, maniacal shrieks rung in her hearing often, and often, chilling the bounding life-blood in her young veins.

“Perhaps it will kill Mr. Delaney some day,” she said, to herself, and she shuddered at the thought. Death seemed a terrible thing to this fair young girl in whose veins the tide of life flowed so strong and free. She dreaded the cruel grave, its darkness, its nothingness, its gloom.

The sudden opening of the door roused her from the gloomy musings that began to steal over her.

Mr. Rodney entered abruptly.

Aline turned her head with a smile toward her father, but the gentle beam faded from her lips, and a cry of terror broke from her at sight of his face.

He was pale to ghastliness, his blue eyes seemed to almost emit sparks of fire, so angrily did they blaze upon her. His face was almost contorted with the strong agitation that possessed him.

Aline half started up, filled with a blind terror.

“Papa!” she gasped.

He caught her roughly by the shoulder and shook her so fiercely that she fell back in her chair, hiding her white face fearfully in her hands. He looked as if he were about to kill her as she crouched in her chair, with her face hidden from his wrathful gaze, while she trembled like a leaf in a storm.

Mrs. Rodney sprung up and ran hurriedly to him. She caught his arm in both her delicate white hands.

“Oh, Mr. Rodney, pray do not be so rough with Aline! You will kill her!” she cried.

He shook her off rudely almost as he had shaken his daughter. Indeed, he was so strongly agitated, that he did not seem to know the extent of his violence.

“Better for her if she were dead!” he broke out, bitterly. “Better for us if she never had been born!”

“Oh, papa, what have I done?” Aline wailed out, frightened by his fierce denunciations.

“Done! What have you not done?” he stormed at her, fiercely. “Oh, wretched, shameless girl, whom I have nurtured at my fireside and in my heart! How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have such a child! Would to God you had perished yesterday rather than live for me to tell you your shame to-day!”

“Shame!” the girl broke out with sudden passion and violence, while the deep color flooded her exquisite face with crimson. “Do not apply that word to me, papa! I have done nothing, nothing!”

“What can you mean?” gasped Mrs. Rodney, growing as pale as her daughter.

He glared at them fiercely, his handsome face disfigured by passion.

“I mean,” he said, dropping his voice to a low, tense sound of intense bitterness—“I mean that I have discovered Aline’s shameful secret.”

“Papa, papa, you have discovered it! You know it, and yet I have not had to break my vow! Oh! how glad I am!” cried Aline, and a light of joy broke over the fair face, almost transfiguring its beauty. Such happy roses glowed

on her countenance, such a radiant light shone in the deep blue eyes as struck her father with wonder.

“Aline, I cannot understand what you mean,” he said, sharply. “I have discovered nothing that could make you happy. This, that I have to tell your mother, is enough to strike you dead with shame at her feet, because you have so dishonored her!”

CHAPTER XLII.

A moment of utter silence ensued upon Mr. Rodney's excited declaration.

Mrs. Rodney had fallen into a chair like one stunned at her husband's dreadful words. She stared alternately from his face to Aline's in hopeless bewilderment.

But although she was in a maze of wonder, her bewilderment did not by any means equal that of her daughter.

Aline had attempted to rise from her seat, but her extreme weakness forced her to grasp the back of her chair with both hands. She clung to it tightly, leaning against it while she regarded her father with startled, wide-open eyes, and slightly parted, tremulous lips. As he gazed at the fair, wondering, innocent face, he was suddenly reminded of her childish days. Just so the beautiful face had looked many a time when, as a willful child, she had been reprimanded and blamed innocently for many pranks that she had not done; just so the dew of unshed tears had seemed to glitter on the dark, curling fringe of her lashes. The appealing innocence of that look cut him to the heart for a moment, and then he was angry with himself for his weakness. How dare she look so pure and true when she was such a sinner?

In a moment she spoke—gently, almost appealingly.

“Papa, there must be some mistake. You said you knew my secret?”

“Yes, to my sorrow,” he replied, bitterly.

“But, papa,” she spoke in a slow, grieved tone, “if you know it, as you say, why, then, do you talk of shame to me? If you know that secret you say you know, you must be aware that I have done nothing to blush for. Why should I fall down dead at my mother's feet when I have done no wrong?”

“Aline, why do you try to keep up that wretched farce?” he exclaimed, hoarsely, while his eyes flashed luridly. “My God, you, the child we loved so dearly, the child we thought so innocent and true, you have been the falsest-hearted girl that ever a mother bore! Even while we were searching

for you in anguish of soul, deeming you lost or dead, you were heartlessly hiding yourself away in the house of the rich man yonder. You were living with him in terrible shame. Say, is this not true?"

"As God is my judge, papa, you accuse me falsely!" she answered, lifting her white hand solemnly to heaven, while her beautiful face flushed a vivid burning scarlet.

"You deny that you were at Delaney House?" he asked.

"I cannot answer that question, papa; but I *can* deny, and I do deny, your other accusation."

"Your word does not signify much in this case," he said. "I already have the proofs that you stayed, during the three months of your absence, at Delaney House."

The beautiful blush seemed to burn deeper on the fair young face.

"Papa, who is my accuser?" she inquired, in wonder.

"You shall know by and by," he answered. "I am going to ask you some questions now. Mind that you answer them truly. There is no longer any need to keep back the answer to anything I may ask you. All is known."

"All?" she echoed, faintly, and with palpable wonder.

"Yes, all," he replied. "And first you were at Delaney House, during the whole three months of your absence. It is too late to deny it. You must confess all."

"But my oath," she said, looking at him with wide, questioning eyes.

"Is of no avail, since I have found out the truth without your agency," he replied. "The secret is a secret no longer. You may answer freely all that I ask you."

She looked at him dubiously with those beautiful eyes that seemed to mirror her soul's purity.

"I should be glad to answer you, papa, if I thought it were quite right," she said.

"You can take your papa's word for that," interposed Mrs. Rodney, rather peevishly. "He has never deceived you in anything, has he, Aline?"

“No, mamma,” she replied.

“Then tell him what he asks you,” said her mother.

Aline turned her eyes back to the pale, stern face of her father.

“Papa, I admit that I was at Delaney House those three months,” she said, simply.

“And you were dangerously wounded in the beginning of your stay there,” he said. “Don’t deny that either, Aline. You bear the scar on your bosom in witness of the fact.”

“I admit the wound,” she replied, in the same gentle, obedient way as before.

“I must now require you to tell me how you received it,” said Mr. Rodney, watching her closely.

She started, and looked earnestly at him.

“You said that you knew all, papa,” she replied, with a touch of vague reproach in her tone.

He could not conceal the embarrassment her words caused him. His eyelids fell and he stood silent a moment gazing down at the floor.

“You said that you knew all, papa,” Aline repeated, reproachfully.

“I know the most and worst,” he replied, looking up at her. “There are some trifling details with which I am unacquainted. I depend on you to make me acquainted with them.”

“But, papa—” she said, and paused, tremblingly.

“Well?” he said.

“You know, papa, it would be wrong for me to tell you anything about that fatal absence of mine. It would be breaking my oath of silence,” she replied.

He stifled an impatient exclamation between his mustached lips.

“But, my child,” he said, in a softer tone than he had yet used, “did you not promise just now to answer all of my questions?”

The blue eyes dilated in innocent surprise.

“Oh, no, papa,” she replied. “I thought it could do no harm to admit anything that you already knew; so I did not hesitate to own that I had been at Delaney House, and that I received my wound there. But of the manner in which I received my hurt I cannot tell you since you do not know. I am bound to silence. I cannot break my word of honor.”

CHAPTER XLIII.

Mr. Rodney regarded his daughter with a disappointed and baffled air. He had set a trap to surprise all the details of her secret from her, deeming it no harm to do so. But she had been too quick-witted for him. He saw that he was to learn nothing from her that he did not already know.

He was bitterly angry with her. His outraged pride prompted him to denounce her in the bitterest terms, and to drive her forth from his roof as one unworthy to dwell in the home she had dishonored. Something stronger than his own will held him back.

As he gazed at her clinging feebly to the back of the chair, weak and white from the effects of her accident yesterday, and with that look of helpless innocence on the fair young face, his conviction of her guiltiness was staggered. In the face of all the evidence, in the face of her terrible silence, he could scarcely believe that his beautiful, petted daughter was a deliberate sinner. Yet what was the meaning of the mystery in which she shrouded her absence from her home? Why had she gone to Delaney House, and what had she been doing there? If Oran Delaney had wronged his little darling, he said to himself, fiercely, his life should pay the forfeit.

"Aline," he said to her with startling abruptness; "tell me, what is Oran Delaney to you?"

She shivered and started as if an icy wind had swept across her.

"Tell me," he repeated sharply, "what is Oran Delaney to you?"

The sweet, frank blue eyes lifted earnestly to his face.

"He is nothing, papa," she replied.

"Nothing *now*, you mean," he said. "Well, I will put my query in another shape. What *has* he been to you?"

Her heart thrilled bitterly at the pointed question.

An impulse came over her to tell him the truth—to say, bitterly and truly, “He has been the evil genius of my life; he has spoiled my life for me; he has blighted all the budding hopes of my youth, and made earth a wide Sahara, where I must walk with blistered feet and a fainting heart.”

This would have been the truest answer she could have made, she said, bitterly, to herself; but she shut her lips over the unspoken words—they were not for her to say.

“You do not answer me, Aline,” said her father, and then she answered, gravely:

“I can only repeat what I said to you before. He is nothing to me.”

He walked away from her, and went over to the window that overlooked Delaney House and its beautiful spacious grounds. Drawing aside the curtain, he looked out upon the scene. The winter snow was falling in soft, thick flakes, and had been falling thus all day. The ground was covered with a soft, white carpet, pure and unspotted, for no footfall had smirched its virgin purity. Through the veil of softly falling flakes the gloomy gray outline of Delaney House glimmered indistinctly like a picture. To his wretched, distracted mind, filled with harrowing suspicions of his child, recurred a line or two from a familiar poem:

“Once I was pure as the snow, but I fell—
Fell, like the snow-flakes, from heaven to hell!”

A groan forced itself through his pale, drawn lips.

“My God!” he said, hoarsely. “Only to think, Aline, that while we were distracted over your unknown fate, while we sought you everywhere, while sleep was a stranger to our eyes and food tasted bitter on our lips, through the terrible strain of our anxiety for you, that you were hidden away in my neighbor’s house, within a stone’s throw of your own home! It was wicked, cruel, heartless!”

“Heartless!” she echoed, with weary bitterness, and a look of agony came over the white face. She recalled that time so well when she had sorrowed to feel what they would think of her at home; how they would miss her and grieve for her, blaming her for the terrible silence she was forced to keep.

“Aline, will you tell me one thing?” he asked. “I suppose it cannot greatly matter in the keeping of your secret. I am most curious to know how you left your room that day.”

“I went through that window, papa,” she answered, thinking that she might tell him the truth thus far, at least.

“But how?” he inquired, in palpable astonishment.

“Down a ladder,” she replied.

“Placed there by Oran Delaney?” he inquired, smothering a terrible imprecation on his writhing lips.

“Yes, papa,” she answered, wearily, for she was weak and tired, and in his excitement he had not thought of sparing her feeble strength.

“So then there was really an intrigue carried on between you?” he burst out, wrathfully.

“No, papa, there was not. I had never spoken to Mr. Delaney in my life until that day,” she replied, with such candor that he could not but believe her.

“How then did it happen that you allowed him to place a ladder for you to descend upon?” he asked.

The pale face grew suddenly scarlet again.

“Papa, it was the fault of my own willfulness,” she sighed.

“I told you so, Aline. I always knew that your willful ways would bring you into trouble,” cried poor, half-dazed Mrs. Rodney.

“Yes, mamma, dearest, and your words came true—as true as any words ever spoken in this world,” cried Aline, meekly; and she added, with a long, heavy sigh, “I do not believe any one ever paid a greater price for an innocent folly than I have done.”

Her mother broke into low, heart-broken sobbing, and buried her face in her handkerchief.

“Tell us how it came about, Aline,” said her father, impatiently.

“It was just in this way, papa. I was angry because I was left at home that day, and I threw the book mamma had given me to read out of my window

into Mr. Delaney's garden."

"Well, go on," he said, as she paused a moment.

Aline continued:

"You see, papa and mamma, I had no idea Mr. Delaney was walking in his garden that morning. But he was, and when I threw the book it struck him sharply on his head. He looked up and saw me, and then I was frightened at what I had done. I spoke to him. I apologized to him and explained that it was an accident."

"And then?" asked Mr. Rodney.

"He excused me after amusing himself with me a little while. He evidently thought me nothing but a child," said Aline. "I am sure I acted like a child. I told him how much I wanted some of the beautiful roses in his garden. So he brought an old step-ladder, placed it under the window, and told me to come down and take all the flowers I wanted."

"My God!" groaned her father, gazing at her in despair.

"I did not mean to do anything wrong. It was only one of my willful escapades, and I never thought that it could end more seriously than my other girlish freaks. I went down the ladder, papa, but, indeed, indeed, I did not mean to stay ten minutes. I just meant to have one breath of the sweet air under those shady trees, and a bunch of the roses, and then to come back before cook should find out my absence."

"Why, then, did you stay?" he inquired.

"That, too, was the result of my thoughtlessness and folly. When I found myself in the garden, among the beautiful flowers, I wandered away by myself, absorbed in the pleasant task of gathering a huge bouquet to brighten my lonely room. I was so charmed that I forgot everything else in my fascinating task. The poet has given us a pretty and appropriate quotation, papa," she said, looking at him with a faint, quivering smile on her marble-white face.

She repeated it softly:

"Too late I stayed—forgive the crime!
Unheeded flew the hours.

How noiseless falls the foot of Time
That only treads on flowers!"

Then she resumed, in a low, sad voice:

"It was just like that with me, papa. I did not remember anything but my pleasure in the sweet, fragrant flowers. I kissed their fragrant velvety faces a hundred times. I patted them softly with loving hands. I knelt down and whispered to them as if they had been sentient, human beings. I was filled with pleasure at their lovely forms and exquisite colors. I gathered one here, another there, until my hands were full. Never did Time fly so fast. It trod on flowers, indeed, but, ah me! ah me!" she sighed, clasping her small hands together in agony, "since then its flight has been slow and dreary, over thorny paths with bleeding feet."

They gazed upon her in troubled silence, knowing not what to say.

"Even then, papa, mamma, if I had come home when I found out that it had grown so late all might have been well," she said. "But the fatal curiosity our common Mother Eve bequeathed us led me on to my fate."

Again they had nothing to say to her. They hung eagerly on her next words.

"A bell rang from the house, then, for luncheon, and Mr. Delaney came to ask me to go to share it," she went on. "It was then that my inexcusable folly began. If I had come back home all would have been well. My foolish curiosity led me to enter the great house of which I had heard so much."

Mrs. Rodney groaned aloud in bitterness of spirit.

"I went into the grand dining-room and had my lunch—a delicate, luxurious lunch that appeared to have been spread by invisible hands, for no one appeared except Mr. Delaney and myself. I feasted luxuriously, then came out into the hall to return home, full of sudden dread that the cook had discovered my protracted absence."

"And then?" inquired Mr. Rodney, anxiously.

A look of fear and dread and bitter regret came over the white face of the tortured young girl. She answered, slowly:

"Then something happened that was the cause of my remaining hidden away wretched and maddened for three long months, that seemed longer to

me than all the years of my life that had gone before.”

“And that something? You must tell us what it was, Aline,” said her father, sternly.

“No, papa, I cannot tell you. I have sworn never to reveal it,” Aline replied, despairingly.

CHAPTER XLIV.

Again a disappointed and baffled expression crossed Mr. Rodney's fine face. He was cruelly tortured by this dreadful secret that lay, like a great, inky blot, on the fair fame of his beautiful, beloved daughter.

"Aline, did you know that it was wrong for you to take such an oath?" he inquired.

A piteous look came over the sweet, pale face.

"It was hard for me to do so, but I did not know that it was wrong," she replied. "I was perfectly ignorant, papa, of the dreadful consequences that would follow upon my silence."

"I wish to Heaven that you had never suffered any one to bind you to such a promise," he cried.

"But, papa, he—I mean, I could never have come home unless I had taken the solemn vow asked of me. At first I refused. I was determined to reveal all when I reached home. I was stubborn in my refusal to submit. But—when I found that I would never be permitted to come back unless I gave way, I yielded. I was so homesick and wretched, papa, that I could not hold out."

He crossed the room to her and took one of the cold, nerveless hands in his.

"Aline, forgive me for asking you so hard a question," he said, "for sometimes I am tempted to believe in your innocence still, in spite of all the circumstantial evidences to the contrary. My daughter, will you swear that you are as innocent and pure as when you left your home that dreadful day?"

She lifted her white hand to Heaven and looked at him fearlessly with her bright, clear gaze.

"Yes, papa, I swear before Heaven that I am as pure as when I went away," she replied.

Then there was silence for a moment. Mrs. Rodney had fallen down upon the bed, weeping bitter, but quiet tears. Mr. Rodney walked over to the window, and stood looking out again at the gloomy outlines of his neighbor's house. It had acquired a strange fascination for him since he had learned that his daughter had been hidden there so long

"I wonder," he broke out, abruptly, "what I have ever done to Oran Delaney that he should have done this thing to me?"

Aline had sunk wearily into her chair again. She looked around at him now, earnestly.

"Papa, I am sure you have done nothing," she said. "There are reasons relating to himself that compel him to wish the story of my presence in his house unknown."

"One thing I must know, Aline. This man who has so cruelly blighted all your prospects in life, does he love you?"

"No, papa," she replied, with something like wonder at his question.

"Yet yesterday he risked his life to save yours."

"I think he meant that in some sort as a reparation," she said, timidly.

"Then it was he that sent you the ten thousand dollars?" interrogated her father, quickly.

"It was he," she replied.

"Then you were right not to accept it," he exclaimed. "Oran Delaney must make you a greater reparation than that for the ill you have sustained at his hands."

"He will not reveal the secret—we need not hope for it," Aline said, despondently.

"A thousand revealed secrets could not clear the stain from your name, my poor child," he answered "You are irretrievably compromised by your stay in his house. There is but one atonement he can make you, and I, as the guardian of your honor, shall force him to that if it be at the point of the sword."

"Would you murder Mr. Delaney?" she exclaimed, in horror.

“I will meet him on the field of honor and fight him until one or both of us be dead,” Mr. Rodney answered, so resolutely that Aline shuddered. A vision of the scene he threatened rushed over her mind. Oh, what a terrible price she was paying for the willful folly of that summer day long past!

“Papa, you said there was one atonement he could make,” she said, timidly. “Will you tell me what you meant?”

“He must make you his wife, Aline. He must give you the shelter of his proud, honorable name to wash away the stain he has cast upon your own. In no other way can he make atonement for his fault,” Mr. Rodney exclaimed.

CHAPTER XLV.

Mr. Rodney's firm and decisive declaration had the effect of frightening his fair young daughter. She looked at him, piteously.

"But, papa, I do not want to be married," she exclaimed, with such a childish air of dismay and surprise that he could have laughed if he had not been so miserable. "I do not want to be married, I should not like to be married," Aline repeated, forlornly.

"But, my dear, all women marry," said her father.

"Not all," replied she; "I know several who did not. There are Miss Palmer, Miss Brown, Miss Robinson."

"Cross old maids, all of them," Mr. Rodney replied. "I hope you will never be an old maid, Aline. Indeed, you must not think of such a thing. You will have to marry, and the man you marry must be Oran Delaney."

"I dare say he will not want to be married any more than I do," said Aline, with unconscious hopefulness.

A certain hard and grim expression came over Mr. Rodney's handsome face.

"He will not have much choice in the matter," he replied.

"Oh, papa!" the young girl cried, and a deep color rose up all over her face.

"Well?" he said.

"Would you give me to one who took me unwillingly?" she asked, in a tone of blended shame and reproach.

He was silent a moment, and his brows knitted themselves together in a straight, hard line. Aline, gazing wistfully at him, saw that gray hairs had come into his brown locks that were not there a few months ago. Her heart thrilled with pain and remorse.

“Aline, I do not know how to answer you,” he said. “God knows that I do not wish to force you upon any man. But your good name is irretrievably compromised, and nothing can clear it except a marriage with Oran Delaney. As you are, you can never hope to hold up your head in society again. As his wife, you would soon live down the scandal that now assails you. You would have some chance of happiness. He owes you this reparation, and I, as the true guardian of your happiness and honor, shall compel him to make it. If he refuses—” he paused, and an ominous light came into his eyes.

“If he refuses,” she echoed, faintly.

“Then I will kill him, or he shall kill me!” he replied, bitterly.

Aline sat gazing at him like one stunned. All the horror of her position rushed over her.

Was there indeed no other way out of the labyrinth of error in which she was involved than by this dreadful forced marriage?

All the native pride within her rose up in arms against it. Could she give herself up to be an unwilling bride forced upon an unwilling bridegroom?

She shrunk sensitively from the thought. Better be dead, she thought.

She looked at her father and said, with a babyish quiver of the sweet, red lips:

“Papa, I wish that Mr. Delaney had not saved me yesterday. I should then have been spared all this trouble and distress. My poor life is only a sorrow and disgrace to you all.”

Mr. Rodney did not answer. Perhaps his troubled thoughts ran in the same channel.

Aline waited a moment for him to speak, but as he remained silent and abstracted, she asked, timidly:

“Papa, will you not tell me how you became possessed of my secret?”

“What good can it do you to know?” he inquired.

“None that I can think of,” she replied, wearily. “It was only my natural curiosity that prompted me to ask the question.”

“At some other time, Aline, I will tell you,” said her father. “I would prefer not to do so at present.”

And after a moment’s hesitation, he abruptly left the room. Aline remained sitting wearily in her chair, gazing into the leaping flames of the bright coal fire with sad blue eyes that could scarcely see for the thick mist of tears that filled them. Her heart ached drearily in her breast. Something like despair thrilled through her as she sat there with her small hands folded on her lap.

“It were better if I had died yesterday—ay, it were better if I never had been born,” she murmured to herself, with a sudden passionate bitterness.

CHAPTER XLVI.

While Aline sat gazing drearily into the fire that winter eve, the grave, taciturn master of Delaney House lay languidly on a silken couch in his quiet library.

The dark, handsome face had a worn and weary expression. It was pale, too, and the dark eyes were dim and heavy. His head rested wearily on a crimson satin cushion, and one hand was pressed against his brow, as if in pain.

There was a light tap at the door, and then Mrs. Griffin entered and replenished the fire, that had commenced to burn low behind the steel bars of the grate. Then she stood looking at him anxiously a moment.

“Your head aches?” she asked, questioningly.

“Slightly,” he replied, indifferently.

“Can I do nothing for you?” the old woman questioned, kindly.

“No; it does not matter. The pain will wear itself out by and by.”

She looked at him wistfully a moment, then went out quietly, leaving him to silence and repose again.

The fire crackled merrily in the grate, the clock ticked softly on the marble mantel. Outside, the noiseless flakes of snow fell lightly against the window-pane. Gradually the twilight began to fall, and shadows gathered in the room.

Mr. Delaney lay very still and quiet, with half-closed eyes shaded by his hand, his fine features grave even to sadness. In the gathering obscurity a heavy sigh drifted over his lips.

Mrs. Griffin came back, lighted the library lamp, then paused and regarded him with a strange expression.

He removed his hand and looked at her with his heavy eyes.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Oh, Mr. Delaney, there’s some one to see you!” she exclaimed.

He started up, all his gravity and calmness stirred by angry displeasure.

“Some one to see me? Have you forgotten my orders to admit no one?” he exclaimed.

“No, sir, I have not forgotten,” she answered. “But she did not knock. She came slipping in so softly, like a ghost, that I was frightened.”

“She? Whom?” he exclaimed, hoarsely.

“Miss Rodney, sir.”

“Miss Rodney—Aline—here in this house? My God!” he cried, abruptly.

“Yes, sir, down in the kitchen, waiting to see you,” said Mrs. Griffin. “You see, I forgot to lock the door, and just at dark the knob turned soft like, and she came gliding in, still as a ghost and pale as one, too, sir. And she says to me, weak and nervous-like, ‘I *must* see Mr. Delaney, quick. Go and ask him to give me an interview.’”

He could only stare at her in blank astonishment.

“I was so surprised and frightened, sir, that I did not speak one word to her, but just left her standing there shivering in the middle of the room, and came away to do her bidding. Now, what answer shall I take back? Will you see her, Mr. Delaney?”

He hesitated a moment, and Mrs. Griffin added, respectfully:

“I think she’s in a hurry, sir, and perhaps she’s afraid to stay down there alone.”

He drew a long breath and answered:

“Very well. You may show her up here.”

Mrs. Griffin turned the dim lamp up to a brighter flame and hastened away to do his bidding.

Oran Delaney remained standing in the center of the beautiful, lofty room, gazing expectantly at the door.

In a minute he heard Mrs. Griffin's heavy footsteps in the hall, with light, quick ones pattering beside them. The door opened quickly, and Aline entered alone.

She was wrapped from head to foot in a long, dark cloak, from which her pale face gleamed like some beautiful white flower. Her dark blue eyes were black with excitement, her parted, panting lips, from which the breath came in quick little gasps, showed the haste with which she had sought his presence. She stood just inside the door, a dark, chilly little figure from which the melting snow-drops ran down in little rills upon the velvet carpet.

Mr. Delaney shook off the trance of wonder that held him and went forward to meet her.

"Miss Rodney, what has brought you back to this ill fated house?" he exclaimed.

"I knew you would be surprised," she answered quickly. "Mr. Delaney, I came here to ask you to marry me!"

CHAPTER XLVII.

If the solid earth had parted beneath Oran Delaney's feet, he could not have been more surprised than he was at those words from Aline Rodney's lips. He did not answer, only stared at her in hopeless bewilderment.

"I came here to ask you to marry me," she repeated, clearly, thinking he had not heard her, and no blush stained the pale cheek, the white lids did not droop over the blue eyes that gazed at him frankly and gravely. What did she mean? Had she gone mad under the stress of her great trial?

He went over to her and lifted one of the white hands that hung by her side. It was cold as ice as he held it in the warm clasp of his own.

"Aline, child, I do not understand you. What was it you said to me?"

He saw a little shiver creep over the slender form, but she looked up at him bravely, and repeated her words:

"I want you to marry me, Mr. Delaney."

"To marry you, Aline? Do you then love me, my poor child?" he asked, gazing into the clear eyes with sudden compassion.

She shook her small head gravely.

"No, but I want to be your wife," she said, and the words filled him with the most utter bewilderment.

There she stood, a young, beautiful, intelligent girl, usurping his sex's prerogative with a calm, unblushing face and clear, frank eyes that regarded him with the innocent light of a child's—the calmness of an unawakened heart.

"You do not love me, yet you wish to be my wife! Aline, are you dreaming, or am I?" he asked, drawing her forward into the warmth of the bright fire, for little shivers of deadly cold were shaking the girlish form from head to foot.

He saw a sudden, passionate pain flame into the pale face. She threw out her hand with a gesture of despair.

“No, I am not dreaming, nor are you,” she said. “I would to God that we were! This reality is more horrible than any dream!”

“But, why—why should you wish—wish to—to—” he began, and paused, unable to continue, and feeling a shamed consciousness of a fiery, uncontrollable color overspreading his face. To be wooed in this calm, business-like fashion by this ridiculous child was too strange, too absurd for anything, and yet there were little thrills of rapturous emotion tingling along his nerves, his heart was beating quickly with emotion.

The girl’s eyes had wandered to the leaping flames of the firelight. She turned them back gravely to his face.

“Why do I wish you to marry me?” she said. “I will tell you, Mr. Delaney. The secret of my stay in this house has been discovered!”

“You have broken your oath!” he exclaimed in sudden anger.

She stood before him in proud silence, neither denying nor assenting to his affirmation.

Gazing at the fair face a moment he felt that he had wronged her by the brief suspicion.

“Aline, forgive me. I see that I am suspecting you unjustly,” he said. “But tell me, who has revealed the secret?”

“I do not know,” she answered. “But only a little while ago papa came in and charged me with it. He was very, very angry.”

“Angry with you?” he questioned.

“Angry with you,” she answered, a faint color creeping into the pallid face. “He told me that you had forever compromised my good name, and that I could never take my place in the world, in society, unless you married me.”

She was speaking to him with the simple directness of a child. He was staggered by her simplicity—assurance he would have called it in any other woman.

“And so he sent you here to ask me?” he said.

A look of terror came over the fair face. She glanced around her, fearfully.

“No, I have stolen away, and if he misses me he will come here to seek for me,” she said. “I must hurry back, but first I must have an answer to my question. Tell me, Mr. Delaney, will you do as I have asked you?”

CHAPTER XLVIII.

It was the strangest question Oran Delaney had ever heard from a girl's lips. He said to himself that Aline Rodney's simplicity was simply matchless. If she had been reared within the walls of a convent she could not have seemed more ignorant of the offense she was committing against society, against the creed of the whole world, in asking a man to marry her, and thus usurping his masculine prerogative.

Breaking in upon his stupid silence, she continued:

"Only a marriage in name, you know, Mr. Delaney. I should not live with you, of course. Neither of us would care for that. If you gave me the shelter of your name at the altar I would go back then to my father's house, and never trouble you again!"

"You do not know what you are saying!" he cried out, passionately. "Never trouble me again! Oh, my God!"

"Indeed I should not, Mr. Delaney!" she cried out, hastily, and quite mistaking the cause of his agitation. "I should never come here again. All that I wish is to satisfy papa and the world. The simple marriage ceremony would do that."

"And you would be content with that, Aline?" he asked, gazing down into her splendid violet eyes with a look she could not understand.

"Quite content," she answered, letting the long fringe of her lashes droop low before that anxious gaze.

"But I am a wealthy man, you know, Aline," he said. "Should you not wish to have some of my income settled upon yourself?"

She raised her blue eyes fearlessly to his face.

"I think I have told you before that the wealth of the world could not make up to me for the trouble you have caused me," she said, proudly.

"And you would refuse it even as my wife?" he asked.

“Yes,” Aline answered, steadily, and then there was a brief silence. The man turned his back upon her and walked to the furthest corner of the room. In that moment he was paltering with the most terrible temptation of his life. The angels of good and evil were fighting fiercely for his soul.

She waited in nervous impatience for him to return to her, and when he did after a few minutes, she spoke eagerly, without waiting for him to speak:

“Well, your answer, Mr. Delaney—is it yes or no?”

He parried the question by one that was cruel and cut deep:

“Miss Rodney, do you know that it is a bold and unmaidenly act for you to ask a man to marry you?”

The barbed shaft went home. The slight form quivered as if transfixed by an arrow, the blue eyes dilated and looked at him with an agony of reproach in their lustrous depths.

“Did you not know it?” he repeated, harshly, almost sternly, while he averted his eyes in cold disdain.

“I should have known it if—if only I had stopped to think,” she cried, and the great waves of crimson began to roll over her face on which he would not look. “I was so frightened for you that I put self aside. I thought only of saving you, and now”—she broke down suddenly, and finished the sentence through hard, dry sobs, “now you scorn and despise me!”

“Why were you frightened for me?” he asked, curiously.

“No matter—and yet God knows I would have saved you if I could—do not forget that, Mr. Delaney, since you will not marry me!” she cried, desperately.

“No, I will *not* marry you!” he cried, with a furious bitterness that was quite inexplicable. “Oh, go, girl, go! Why do you stay here to torture me thus?”

“I am going,” she answered, with a proud bitterness, as she tore the door open and rushed from the room. She ran along the hall, down the stairway, flew through the hall and the kitchen, pausing not until she found herself again out in the dark, starless night, with the soft, swift flakes of snow still falling steadily, and wrapping old Mother Earth in a pure white winding sheet.

“I shall never go home again—never!” said the girl, lifting a white, desperate face in the wintry darkness. “May God pity and guide me in my wretched exile!”

CHAPTER XLIX.

Oran Delaney drew a long breath of relief as the door closed behind the slender form of Aline.

He had been face to face with a great temptation, and he had mastered it by the strength of an indomitable will. But the great drops of sweat beaded his white brow as he sunk into a chair and gazed blankly at the carved oaken door that had shut Aline out from his sight.

“She thinks me cold, cruel, heartless,” he muttered. “But, oh, my God, what if I had taken her at her word? Ah, no, no, better let her go pure and innocent, though miserable, than such a fate as that, poor child.”

He remained silent a few moments, then rose from his chair and began to pace restlessly up and down the floor.

“Ah, Heaven, if only I knew what to do!” he cried. “It is a shame that her pure, sweet life should be sacrificed to the keeping of my bitter secret. Ah, if only I could beat down my wretched pride and confess the truth! Aline, Aline, I would give uncounted gold if only I had never seen your face.”

His distracted thoughts received a sudden and startling interruption.

A sound he had not heard for years echoed loudly through the house.

It was the peal of the long-unused door-bell. Once, twice, thrice, it echoed through the house, loudly and harshly, as if grasped by a hasty and authoritative hand.

Mrs. Griffin came flying into the room and met her master coming out.

“Oh, sir, the door-bell,” she gasped, breathlessly.

“Go back and guard her,” he answered. “I will answer the bell myself.”

He went with slow steps along the hall. Something told him what was coming. He was not surprised when he opened the door and saw his neighbor on the threshold.

“Mr. Rodney!” he exclaimed.

“Mr. Delaney!” replied the other as he stepped deliberately into the wide, dimly-lighted hall.

And then they stood gazing at each other in silence a moment. Mr. Rodney spoke first in low, deep voice of concentrated bitterness and repressed fury.

“I have come for my daughter,” he said.

“She is not here,” Mr. Delaney answered, steadily.

Mr. Rodney’s hand clinched itself as it hung by his side, until the sharp nails were buried in the tender flesh.

“Do not answer me with falsehoods,” he said, fiercely. “She has fled from her home, and I am quite sure that she is here.”

“I repeat that she is not here,” answered the master of Delaney House, with a forced calmness. “She was here but a little while ago, but she went away again.”

“Went away again,” repeated Mr. Rodney, with white lips. “Where did she go?”

“Where should she go but to her home?” queried Oran Delaney, in amaze.

“Where, indeed?” echoed the distracted father. “You might better ask yourself that question, Oran Delaney! You who have ruined her young life, might know better how to answer it!”

“Come with me, Mr. Rodney. We have much to say to each other,” said Oran Delaney.

He led his uninvited guest up to the quiet library where but a little while ago Aline had stood, asking him to save her ruined life by making her his wife. It was the father now instead of the daughter—quite a difference, Oran Delaney said to himself, with grim pleasantry.

He placed a chair for Mr. Rodney, but the latter declined it and stood up stiffly, with his arms folded over his breast. Their glances met, and Mr. Delaney saw bitter hatred in the dark-blue eyes whose likeness to Aline’s struck him with a strange pain.

“You have come to curse me, Mr. Rodney,” he said, drawing a long, deep breath.

“I have come to do more than that,” the man answered, passionately. “I have come to demand reparation for my daughter’s wrongs!”

CHAPTER L.

It was exactly what Oran Delaney was prepared to hear. Nay, he would have been disappointed if the proud, noble looking man before him had not made that passionate, determined assertion. He said to himself that, if he had been the father of Aline Rodney, he would have killed any man who had thus shadowed her life. He knew that he had a true man and a devoted father to deal with, and the groan that struggled up from his breast was not one of fear, but rather of grief that he could not make the reparation demanded.

“Let me ask you one question, Mr. Rodney,” he said. “Who has betrayed Aline’s secret to you?”

Mr. Rodney looked at him steadily, as he answered:

“I have no objection to telling you, sir. It was a New York detective, who has been upon Aline’s track ever since her first disappearance from her home.”

“How has he discovered it?” Mr. Delaney exclaimed, while a terrible pallor overspread his face. He knew what those keen New York detectives were. Was all his humiliating secret, indeed, revealed to the carping world?

“I cannot tell you that,” Mr. Rodney answered. “It is the man’s own secret. Suffice it to say that I am now fully aware that Aline spent the three months of her strange absence under this roof. You will not deny that fact?”

“Would to God that I could!” groaned Oran Delaney, involuntarily.

“Ah! you are frightened at the consequences of what you have done!” sneered the outraged father.

It he had expected to arouse a tempest of wrath in the other by his contemptuous sneer, he was mistaken. Mr. Delaney looked at him gravely, even sadly, but he made no answer to the angry words, His heart and mind were in a tumult. He could not think clearly. Aline’s beautiful, anguished face kept rising between him and her father. It haunted him, he could not banish it from his thoughts.

“Because I have grieved her so, I will speak no angry words to her father,” he said to himself.

He turned to the angry man and said, with grave dignity:

“I am quite willing to offer you all the reparation in my power, Mr. Rodney, for the injury I have done you and your daughter.”

“I think you know that there are but two ways of settling our difficulty,” Mr. Rodney said, gazing sternly into the troubled eyes of his neighbor.

“You mean—”

“The first way would be to marry my daughter and give her the shelter of your name,” said Mr. Rodney.

“And the second?” queried his neighbor.

“Satisfaction at the sword’s point” the other answered, sharply.

“A duel?” Mr. Delaney exclaimed.

“Yes.”

Then for a brief space they were silent, and gazed gravely at each other. The visitor was the first to break the deep, strange silence that reigned in the room.

“You have your choice, sir. Which shall it be—a death or a bridal?”

“Most unfortunately, I can have no choice in the matter,” Oran Delaney answered, in calm, repressed tones that showed no trace of fear or dread. “It must be the duel.”

“You refuse to marry Aline—you prefer death rather than be the husband of my beautiful child!” Mr. Rodney exclaimed, in mingled anger and wonder.

“I have already told you that I have no choice,” the other answered.

“Of course you will allow me to doubt that assertion?” sneeringly.

“I will allow *you* to do so for your daughter’s sake: but it would not be safe for any other man to say so much before my face.”

They gazed fixedly at each other. Mr. Rodney’s lips were just starting to speak, when the contemplated words were frozen on his lips by a terrible interruption. That terrible voice, which any one who had ever heard it never

forgot, rang suddenly and startlingly through the house, waking all the sleeping echoes into awful life. Mr. Rodney's blood tingled in his veins, every individual hair on his head seemed to stand erect with horror. He sprang forward and caught Mr. Delaney by the arm.

"What is it?" he cried, hoarsely.

His host did not answer for a moment. He stood still, listening to those ringing cries with a look like despair on his face.

"What is it?" Mr. Rodney repeated.

Then Mr. Delaney turned his tortured eyes on the other's face.

"It is the ghost of Delaney House," he said, in a changed and hollow voice.

"The ghost!" Mr. Rodney cried.

"Yes," Mr. Delaney answered, and then both were silent, while those shrill cries filled their ears with a horrible din.

A pause, and then Mr. Delaney said, abruptly:

"Do not think me inhospitable, but you had better go. Delaney House is no place for you or any one. It is haunted. It is the abode of unhappy spirits. Go now, and send some one to me in the morning on the business you propose."

Mr. Rodney obeyed mechanically. He was so surprised and confused by the sudden, dreadful sounds that still assailed his ears that he seemed to have no volition of his own. He moved toward the door that Mr. Delaney held open, and passed quickly through it, followed by his host.

"Are you sure that Aline is not here?" he asked, as they passed through the hall, his mind suddenly recurring to the fact of her absence an hour ago which had been discovered by her mother and reported to him in a frenzy of alarm.

"I give you my word of honor that she left me only a minute before you entered. You must have met her only for the darkness of the night. I am quite sure you will find her at home when you return," Oran Delaney answered, confidently.

“I shall send a friend to you in the morning to make arrangements,” Mr. Rodney said, presently.

“Very well. I shall make my will to-night,” Mr. Delaney answered, with grim pleasantry.

Then he opened the heavy door and ushered his visitor out into the snowy night, in whose gloom and darkness Aline had disappeared a little while ago.

CHAPTER LI.

When the retreating footsteps of his neighbor had died in the stillness of the night, Oran Delaney closed and locked the door against the outer darkness and returned to the library. He walked to the hearth and stood there gazing thoughtfully down into the glowing fire.

“The last night of my life, perhaps,” he said, half aloud. “Ah, me! how terribly I have been tempted to-night! How easy it would have been to have flung honor to the winds and yielded to the impulse that prompted me to seek happiness at whatever cost. Happiness — ‘ay, there’s the rub’ — should I have been happy? Would not conscience have pursued me with the bloodhounds of remorse?”

The weird shrieks of the fabled ghost of Delaney Hall had died away into silence now. In the stillness of the room a heavy sigh was distinctly audible as it drifted across the dark mustached lips.

“Poor child! Now I understand why she came to me on that strange mission to-night. She would have sacrificed herself to appease her father’s wrath and to save me! And I had to be cruel and unkind to her because I was not free!”

The wind sighed in the trees outside, and the bare branches rustled eerily. He thought to himself, with a shudder, that the snow must be deep by now. It had been falling almost steadily since yesterday. He remembered how the melting flakes had trickled down from Aline’s dark cloak.

“It must be cold and deep by now,” he thought. “I wish to Heaven that I were lying beneath it! Perhaps I shall be soon.”

He went to his desk, drew out writing materials, and began to write steadily. Half an hour passed in this occupation, when he was suddenly startled again by the loud alarm of the door-bell. The harsh clang pealed through the house discordantly. He pushed back his chair and hurried out into the hall.

“It grows late. Who can be coming now?” he said.

He opened the heavy door, and in the dim light of the hall lamp again saw Mr. Rodney's face. It was pale with deadly wrath, the blue eyes were lurid with rage.

"You have deceived me, Oran Delaney," he blazed forth, in accents of concentrated rage and hate. "Aline has never returned to her home. She is still here!"

"Here!" echoed the astonished master of Delaney House.

"Yes, here!" Mr. Rodney answered, stormily. "You need not deny it! Oran Delaney, if you do not give me back my child, I will kill you where you stand!"

The other reached out and drew the half-frantic man into the hall, closing the heavy door.

"My God, what do you mean?" he cried. "Aline not returned to her home?"

Astonishment and dismay were depicted on his countenance, but the infuriated man would not believe the signs of alarm and dread written on the face of the man whom he believed to be the destroyer of his fair young daughter's happiness.

"Do not act a part with me," he cried. "I warn you I will not bear it. Aline has left her home and fled to your protection. If you do not immediately restore her to me, I will not answer for the consequences!"

"She is not here, Mr. Rodney. I swear to you that she left this house five minutes before you entered it, this evening."

"I will not listen to your prevarications. I *know* that Aline is here. I will not leave Delaney House to-night without her!" cried Mr. Rodney, in a low tone of deadly menace, as he fixed his lurid, blazing eyes on the face of the man whom he hated with a terrible hate.

He was cruelly tortured. The thought of Aline's dishonor was like a thorn in his heart. He was filled with a deadly rage against her. She was so young and beautiful to be so wicked. He felt as if he could easily kill her—her and the man who had so cruelly wrecked her young life.

The grim, hard smile that played around his writhing lips in the dim light of the stately old hall was terrible to see.

“I am a desperate man,” Mr. Rodney continued, hoarsely. “You have taken from me my ewe-lamb. You must look to yourself. I shall not leave this house to-night until I find her. If you do not give her up, I shall search the house for her—ay, even if I have to pass over your dead body to do so!”

They stood looking at each other steadily. Oran Delaney had whitened to a deadly pallor.

“Mr. Rodney, you know not what you ask,” he said. “Can you not take my word of honor that your daughter is not here? If you searched my house thrice over you would find nothing but dust and gloom and ghosts of the dead past.”

“What about the hidden blue room?” sneered Mr. Rodney.

Mr. Delaney changed color at those words.

“The blue room?” he stammered.

“Yes, the blue room where you kept my child hidden so long. Let me look there,” said Mr. Rodney.

“It is empty. There is no one there,” said Mr. Delaney.

“It is a falsehood! I do not believe you!” Mr. Rodney cried out, beside himself with fury, and for a moment there reigned an ominous silence. The hot blood leaped to Oran Delaney’s dark face, his black eyes blazed.

“I come of a race that does not brook such words as those, Mr. Rodney,” he said, coldly and sharply.

“Clear yourself of the imputation, then, by proving your innocence,” the other retorted.

“My word is my proof,” Mr. Delaney replied, proudly, and again there was a short silence.

Mr. Rodney, goaded to madness by his wrongs, raised his head and regarded his foe fixedly.

“I do not take your words as proof,” he said, angrily. “I demand the right to search this house. Do you allow it?”

“No!” thundered Mr. Delaney, fiercely.

“Then I shall do so without your consent!” exclaimed Mr. Rodney, advancing and attempting to thrust him aside.

Oran Delaney firmly barred his further progress by placing himself between him and the stairway.

“You dare thwart a wronged and maddened father!” cried Mr. Rodney, in almost maniacal wrath. “You thus bring down doom upon your own head! Thus do I avenge poor Aline’s wrongs!”

A pistol gleamed in his upraised hand; there was a sharp report, a flash of fire, a cloud of thick smoke. Oran Delaney fell forward on his face, and lay there motionless.

CHAPTER LII.

Mr. Rodney did not pause to see the result of his maddened deed. He threw the smoking pistol far from him, sprung over the body of his prostrate victim, and rushed up the stairs, two at a time, in his eagerness to find his runaway daughter.

At the head of the stairway he found himself in another long, wide hall, richly carpeted and dimly lighted by a large swinging lamp. On either side stretched a row of closed doors, and as he gazed at them irresolutely one on the left opened hurriedly, and a woman rushed out and came running down the hall toward him. His heart leaped into his mouth. Could that be Aline?

But as she came quickly up to him, he saw that he was mistaken. It was not Aline. It was an old woman in a cap and glasses.

She ran up to him and caught him quickly by the arm, and then he saw that there had been a mutual mistake, for when she saw his face she recoiled from him in terror.

“My God!” she said, “I thought that it was Mr. Delaney. What are you doing here, sir?”

“I am seeking my daughter. Bring her to me, woman,” he cried, wildly, catching her by the sleeve as she was about to rush away from him.

“You are Mr. Rodney,” she said, looking curiously into the strange face with its wild, excited eyes.

“Yes, I am Mr. Rodney,” he answered, in hoarse, strained accents. “I am the father of the wickedest girl that ever cursed a father’s life. Woman, woman, where is my Aline? Bring her here to me, that I may curse her for her sins!”

“O, Mr. Rodney, she is not here,” cried Mrs. Griffin, regarding his wild strange visage tearfully.

“It is false. I *know* that she is here,” he thundered at her.

“Oh, sir, you are mistaken. Miss Rodney is not here,” she answered. “But I heard the sound of a shot. What was it? My master—”

“Yes, I have murdered your master. He stole my pure darling from me, and now he has paid for the sin with his life. He lies down there in his own hall, shot to the heart by an avenging father,” cried Mr. Rodney, with a harsh laugh, of satiated hate and revenge.

Mrs. Griffin did not wait to hear another word. She pushed him from her, with a piercing cry of grief and terror, and ran headlong down the stairway. Mr. Rodney, released from her detaining presence, set about his search for his missing daughter.

Outside, the soft, cruel snow still fell with slow regularity, and the rising wind tossed it into deep, treacherous drifts. He dreamed not that while he sought her amid the gloomy splendor of Delaney House, his fair and tender Aline was wandering in all the perils of that winter night. He did not believe the combined assertions of Oran Delaney and his housekeeper that Aline was not in the house.

Where could she be but here? he thought, and in his heart he vowed that if he found her he would kill her, too—the wicked girl who had broken her father’s heart and made him a wretched murderer.

In his horror at her sin, he was fast becoming a monomaniac. The blood upon his hands only whetted his thirst for more. In his madness, it seemed to him that the horror of her sin could only be wiped out in her blood, shed as an expiation.

He had vaguely noticed that the door from whence Mrs. Griffin had issued had been left slightly ajar. Perhaps she was in there, he thought. He would go and see.

He crept softly along the hall toward the door of that room. He vaguely wondered if this was the hidden blue room of Dr. Anthony’s story. Would his sight be blasted by the sight of her, his little Aline, who had been the pet and darling of his life, sitting there contentedly in splendid sin, mistress of the vile wretch whom he had slain in his anger?

He crept softly to the door and peered in through the narrow crevice made by the slight opening of the unlatched door. He peered into the room, and it

was with difficulty that he repressed a cry of horror. Heavens! Was this a fiend that his straining gaze encountered?

It was a large, splendidly furnished room into which he gazed, all purple and gold, with soft, luxurious couches and chairs, large, fine pictures on the walls, and everything that could please the eye save and except the many little objects of delicate *bric-à-brac* in which feminine eyes and tastes delight. The room was utterly void of such trifles. It was splendidly, even garishly furnished, but everything was strong and substantial. There was nothing light and airy in the large, lofty apartment, with its large, white lamp swung from the ceiling out of reach, and the glowing fire before which a wire guard had been carefully placed.

But the wire guard had been ruthlessly torn away from the fire now, and the sole inmate of that luxurious room was a creature that might have struck terror to a heart even more desperate than was the lawyer's as he gazed into the room.

"My God, what is it? Can it be a human creature, or is it a fiend from the nether world?" he asked himself.

He might well ask himself the question. The creature on which he gazed was a small, misshapen thing, with such horribly distorted features, as caused a shudder of loathing to run through Mr. Rodney. The crooked form was clothed with an almost barbaric splendor of apparel—in crimson satin, embroidered in golden thread, while the fire of priceless diamonds flashed from the yellow arms and neck, and upon the tangled braids of coarse, black hair that fell down her back.

She—for he had concluded that it was a woman from the long, black hair, and the womanly apparel—had snatched a fire-brand from the glowing grate, and was now running about the room, uttering discordant shrieks of fiendish glee, while with a ruthless, vandal hand she held the flaming brand now here, now there, against the satin hangings and the filmy lace curtains, the lambrequins, the silken fringe of the chair-covers, until all became a smoldering mass, through which small jets of lurid flame began to creep weirdly.

Mr. Rodney gazed for a moment like one fascinated upon this horrible scene, and then he made a bold and desperate dash into the room.

He ran up behind the horrible fire-fiend, threw his arm over her shoulder, and wrenched the flaming brand from her clasp, threw it down upon the floor, and trampled it into a black, charred mass. Then he was obliged to turn round and defend himself.

For the dreadful woman had thrown herself fiercely upon him, and was choking his life out with her long, talon-like fingers and sharp nails, that held his throat in a vise-like pressure. Half strangled, he made a supreme effort against the furious maniac, and succeeded in tearing her hands away from their murderous hold. She was wonderfully strong and agile, but he held her firmly, and wild screams of rage issued from her distorted lips. He recognized the sounds as those that had so frightened him in the earlier part of the evening.

“This, then, was the ghost of Delaney House!” he thought grimly. “My God what can this terrible creature be to Oran Delaney, and does Aline know of her existence?”

He held her firmly by both hands while she bit and tore and raved in a frenzy of maniacal fury. He was perplexed what to do with her. He knew that she was a dangerous creature, but he would not have harmed her for the world. She was already too terribly blasted in body and mind. But he longed to make some disposal of her that he might make some effort to quench the smoldering flames that already filled the room with a thick and suffocating black vapor.

She solved the question for him herself by suddenly wrenching her hands from his and making a rapid exit through the open door. It did not occur to him to follow her. Instead he threw all his energies into the task of subduing the flames.

He tore down the heavy satin hangings and trampled them beneath his feet, he found an ewer of water and deluged the smoking cushions of the chairs and lounges fighting bravely amid the smoke and fire, reckless that his strong hands were torn and burned with the superhuman efforts that he made.

CHAPTER LIII.

But when all was done that a brave and energetic man could do Mr. Rodney found that his efforts had been spent in vain.

The maniac fire-fiend had fired the filmy lace curtains and the blaze ran along the inflammable material, licking it up with a fiery tongue of flame and mounting to the ceiling where it ignited the curtain-rods and then the ceiling. The lawyer gazed at it an instant, and seeing the leaping tongues of flame spurting out he realized that he could do no more toward stopping the fire. He ran out of the smoking-room to give the alarm in the street, forgetting for a moment the terrible deed he had done and that his own safety demanded instant flight.

Rushing wildly down the stairs he encountered Mrs. Griffin coming up at a pace as headlong as his own.

She caught him entreatingly by the arm.

“Oh, sir,” she cried “you have not quite killed him! He breathes yet—he can talk a little. Oh for pity’s sake bring some one to him. I cannot leave him alone to go myself.”

Her words recalled him to himself. In the excitement of the past few moments he had momentarily forgotten that down-stairs in the wide hall lay a man whom he had ruthlessly slain. It rushed over him now with a keen pang of remorse.

“He lives!” he exclaimed and there was a keen note of relief in his voice. Already the thought of murder had begun to lie heavily on his hitherto unspotted soul.

“Yes, and you must bring a doctor quick,” Mrs. Griffin said imploringly.

He glanced back up the wide stairway into the hall. It was already filled with a volume of thick smoke that was pouring out from the doorway of the room he had just quitted.

“Look!” he said.

Her glance followed his.

“My God! have you fired the house?” she cried, in a terrified tone.

“No; but it was fired by the hand of a deformed maniac in that room you quitted,” he answered.

“And she?” cried Mrs. Griffin.

“Has escaped!” he answered.

“Oh, I always thought it would come to this!” cried the housekeeper, wringing her plump hands. “I thought she would murder us all in our beds, or set fire to the house; and she has done it, just as I thought she would. And where is she, Mr. Rodney—not in that room, surely?”

“No; she ran away after she had half strangled me!” he replied, with a shudder at the remembrance of the uncanny creature.

“My God, then she has escaped! Oh, what will Mr. Delaney say? I must go and find her! She must not leave the house!” cried Mrs. Griffin, breaking from him and continuing her flight up the stairs.

He followed and overtook her.

“Woman, are you mad?” he cried to her. “Of course she must leave the house. Every one must leave it. It will be burned to the ground presently! And hark you, if my erring child is here—if she perishes in this holocaust of flame—her blood will be upon your head!”

“Oh, Mr. Rodney, she is not here!” Mrs. Griffin answered, so earnestly that he could not but believe her. “She was here a little while ago, but she went away. I let her out of the kitchen door myself. I saw her go away.”

“Then, where can she have gone?” he cried distractedly.

“I do not know; but I must find that poor crazy soul!” she cried, again breaking from him and fearlessly rushing into the smoke filled hall.

Mr. Rodney ran down the steps, flung wide the front door, and sent his voice ringing out into the snowy night:

“Fire! fire! fire!”

A distant shout answered him from some belated wayfarer whose ear had been caught by the ominous words. He waited for no more, but, leaving the door ajar, ran back into the hall, and knelt down by the side of the man whom, in his murderous wrath, he had tried to murder just now.

Mr. Delaney lay quite still and motionless in the spot where he had fallen, save that Mrs. Griffin had turned him over upon his back, giving him better facilities for breathing. The long fringe of the lashes lay dark and stirless, against his cheeks, but his chest heaved faintly, showing that life was not quite extinct. Strange to say, Mr. Rodney was overjoyed to find that he lived.

“I am glad I did not kill him,” he muttered. “For deeply as I have been wronged, it was terrible to feel myself a murderer.”

He examined the wound, and found that his bullet had entered Mr. Delaney’s shoulder near the breast, but not necessarily in a vital part. With care he might, perhaps, recover.

“But what shall I do with him now?” he thought, in perplexity, hearing a babel of voices outside. “He cannot remain here, and it would be too dangerous to remove him far.”

He decided rapidly that he could not do less than to remove him to the cottage.

By some strange revulsion of feeling, he was now most anxious to save the life of the man whom but a little while ago he had been tempted to kill.

A score of men came hurrying over the threshold of the open door just then. By the help of some of these the wounded man was carefully removed to Mr. Rodney’s house, a physician was hastily summoned, and the men returned to the scene of the fire. The only fire-engine the small town afforded was quickly upon the spot, and every effort was made to save the burning house.

But all in vain. The devouring element had obtained too deadly a headway. It was impossible to beat back the swiftly encroaching flames. They leaped into the air like hydra-headed serpents, coiling and twisting in mad delight over their doomed prey; they lighted the darkness of the snowy night into fierce and lurid grandeur; they licked up at a breath the beautiful articles of *virtu* that generations of dead and gone Delaneys had gathered in their

ancestral home at the cost of many thousands of dollars. They spared naught that came in their way, and when the gray dawn looked with dim eyes at the scene of desolation, nothing remained of the Delaney House but a huge black pile of smoking ruins.

CHAPTER LIV.

It was a strange mockery of fate that had thrown Oran Delaney, wounded and helpless, beneath the roof of the man whom he had injured, and who had wounded him near unto death.

Yet so it was; and he was likely to remain there several weeks, for the physician, who was summoned to attend him, declared that the wound was a serious, if not fatal, one, and that it would be some time before he could be moved with safety.

Mr. Rodney, who had been temporarily maddened by excitement last night, had come to his senses now. He made no attempt to fly from the consequences of his assault upon Oran Delaney. He went and delivered himself up to the authorities, accusing himself of the crime.

They laughed at him at first—it was so strange for a man to accuse himself of crime without even a witness to testify against him—but he insisted that his statement was true; so they put him under bonds to appear when Mr. Delaney was well enough to come into court, and released him.

In a day or two, when he was well enough to be seen, he told Oran Delaney what he had done.

“So that, whether you live or die, your wrong will be avenged,” he said, grimly.

“I do not wish it so,” said Oran Delaney, gravely. “In any case, I shall not appear against you. You only did what I, in your place, would have done. No one can blame you.”

Mr. Rodney said to himself that if the man’s sense of honor was so lively, he should not have acted as he did with regard to Aline. He said nothing, however—only turned upon his heel and left the room. His heart was on fire with anxiety, for he had heard no word of Aline since that snowy eve when, finding that her secret was discovered, she had fled from her home.

Neither had any trace been found of the escaped lunatic who had fired Delaney House. Mrs. Griffin had been so suffocated by the smoke and flame of the hall that she had been unable to prosecute her search far. She had been forced to retreat before she had penetrated all the rooms. It was the same way with the men who had gone to the rescue. The smoke and flame had beaten them quickly back. So it was not certainly known yet whether the dreadful creature had fallen a victim to the fury of the fire her own hand had kindled, or if she had wandered out into the stormy night and perished in some of the huge drifts of snow that the wild wind had blown together in out-of-the-way places.

But the storm was over now, and the deep snow was melting away. It was three days since Delaney House had been burned.

The hidden secret for whose keeping poor Aline Rodney had paid so dire a penalty, belonged to the world now. Oran Delaney, in the troubles that had crowded thickly upon him, had thrown pride to the winds and revealed all.

Let us listen to him as he tells his own story to Mr. Rodney.

"I will tell you my story briefly now," he said, "and then you will understand why I have led such a strange, retired life. And," he added, with a dark-red flush creeping over his handsome face, "you will know, too, that I have never harmed your beautiful young daughter as you think. She is as innocent and pure as she is fair."

Somehow the words carried conviction to Mr. Rodney's heart. He waited eagerly for the story Mr. Delaney had promised to tell him.

His first words filled him with horror and amazement.

"That poor, deformed maniac whom you saw in that upper room, who set fire to Delaney House, was my wedded wife," he said, with a shudder he could not repress.

"Great Heavens, your wife! How could you wed that creature?" Mr. Rodney cried out, startled.

"How, indeed!" echoed Mr. Delaney, with a groan. "But that is what I am about to tell you. I was made the innocent victim of a terrible fraud."

Mr. Rodney began to feel strangely interested in this man whom his avenging bullet had laid low upon a bed of pain. He waited eagerly for

further disclosures.

“Who could have perpetrated such a monstrous fraud?” he exclaimed.

CHAPTER LV.

A look of bitter pain came over Mr. Delaney's handsome face at those words from Mr. Rodney's lips.

"Who could have been so cruel, so wicked?" repeated the lawyer.

And then Mr. Delaney answered:

"One to whom I owed a debt of gratitude, and who caused me to pay the heaviest price man ever paid for a like debt."

"I do not understand you," said Mr. Rodney.

"I did not suppose you would. My reference was too obscure. I will make my meaning more clear," said Mr. Delaney. "When I first went on my travels abroad, I met in France a native of that agreeable country, by name Monsieur Sanson. Our first meeting was on an occasion, when he saved my life, in what manner I will not now relate, as my strength would not hold out for the recital. But we became friends from that hour, and in course of time fellow-travelers. I found my new friend one of the best-read and most agreeable men I had ever met. He was clever, cultivated, full of *bon camaraderie*—in short, a man of the world, full of wit and *bel esprit*. He was middle-aged and good-looking and appeared to have the means of living well, and even extravagantly, at his command. He told me that he had no family ties with the exception of one daughter, a young and lovely creature then being educated in the retirement of a convent school. Of this daughter, his '*chère* Julie,' as he lovingly called her, he never wearied of talking and expatiating on her manifold perfections. Once he showed me a small portrait of her. It represented the loveliest brunette I ever beheld. I fell in love with her and begged to be presented, but he laughingly refused, telling me that he did not intend to have his plans for *chère* Julie spoiled in that way. After awhile he told me more seriously that in France the parents seldom permitted daughters to have any male acquaintances, fearing unfortunate love-affairs for them, as they were usually affianced by their parents to men of wealth and position."

“I have heard that that is the way they manage affairs of marriage in France,” said Mr. Rodney at this point.

“I found it so to my cost,” groaned Oran Delaney, and then there was a short silence. He lay still with closed eyes, breathing heavily.

“You have unduly wearied yourself in talking so much. Defer the remainder of your story until you are better,” said Mr. Rodney.

“No, I will go on. I am anxious now that the secret I have kept so long in my morbid pride should be revealed. I am anxious to clear the name of Aline from the stain I suffered to rest upon it to save my own,” he answered.

“My poor Aline. Shall I ever find her?” sighed the wretched father.

“God grant you may. Oh, if I only were not chained down to this bed by my weakness, I would search the world over, but I would find her!” cried Oran Delaney with feverish impatience.

A vision came over his mind of the fair young face and the sweet supplicating eyes, he seemed to hear her voice again as she spoke the strange words that made the warm blood run tingling through his veins with rapture.

“I want to be your wife,” she had said, in her clear, frank voice, with her large eyes lifted childishly to his face, while in her exceeding innocence she had never dreamed of the passion of pain and despair in the man’s heart as he refused her request.

“Ah, Heaven, if only I might have taken her at her word,” he sighed to himself, “I would have taught that young heart to love, and that soft cheek to blush at my glance. I would have won her heart as well as her hand. Aline, my poor darling, where are you to-night?”

He put away the thought of her with a great effort of will and returned with a shudder to the subject of his story.

“I was young and impressible, Mr. Rodney. My heart was touched by the beauty of the picture I had seen, and Monsieur Sanson’s refusals to present me to the original only fanned my boyish passion into hotter flame. I importuned him often, but he only laughed at me, artfully leading me on by

his apparent reluctance to yield to my desires. Ah, what a simple, gullible young fool I was in those days.”

He paused and drew his breath with a heavy tortured sigh.

Mr. Rodney held a reviving cordial to his lips. His heart was pierced with remorse as he looked at the pale face and heard the weak voice, and realized what a wreck he had made of the strong man.

“It would be much better if you waited until you are stronger before you finish,” he said, compassionately, though his anxiety to hear the rest was very strong.

“No, I cannot wait. Let me tell my story and clear Aline’s name, then if I die, what matter? I have long been weary of life,” sighed Oran Delaney.

There came to him across the mist of the long intervening months a memory of the words he had read to Aline when she lay wounded and impatient in the beautiful blue room—the words she had rejected in the blindness of her ignorant youth:

“How many days will it be, I wonder,
And how will their slow length pass
Till I shall find rest in silence under
The trees and the waving grass?”

“Not long now, perhaps,” he thought, wearily, for he felt strangely weak and faint, and his sufferings were most severe from his wound.

He cleared his throat and slowly proceeded:

“When I look back at that past time, Mr. Rodney, I am lost in wonder at the consummate young fool I was in those days. Would you believe me, sir, that in my infatuation for a girl I had never seen, but of whose perfections I had been told day by day for months, I proposed to marry Monsieur Sanson’s pretty little school-girl daughter?”

“Impossible!”

“I did, Mr. Rodney, and I was in the most serious earnest. Monsieur Sanson pretended to be shocked when I laid the matter before him, but promised that he would consider it, and assured me that he would have no objection

to an American son-in-law, declaring that he admired Americans individually, and as a nation, to a most excessive degree. I was delighted at his blarney, which slipped from his tongue as easily as from a son of the Emerald Isle.”

CHAPTER LVI.

“Monsieur Sanson must have been a villain,” exclaimed Mr. Rodney, vehemently.

“He saved my life once, and now he is dead. I scarcely feel at liberty to express my real opinion of the man,” said Mr. Delaney.

“All obligations were canceled by the wrong he did you,” said Mr. Rodney.

“Perhaps so. He saved my life, but then he certainly made it valueless to me,” said the wounded man, musingly.

After a moment, he continued:

“After a short time and without any further solicitation on my part, he consented to allow me to consider the beautiful Julie my *fiancée*, but only on condition that we never met until the bridal day. Although I was most eager to meet my fair intended bride, I was forced to acquiesce in his decision. Indeed, I did not greatly care to change it. I was carried away by the romantic idea of never meeting my bride until the hour that gave her to my eager arms. Its very difference to the customs of my own country had its peculiar charm for me. Monsieur Sanson wrote to his daughter, and she consented to the marriage in a *naïve* pretty letter that transported me with rapture. It was arranged that the fair one would leave her convent school to become my bride in about six months. Do I weary you with all this preliminary explanation, Mr. Rodney?” inquired the invalid, pausing suddenly.

“On the contrary, I am deeply interested in your story,” replied the lawyer.

“I will hasten to the end, then,” said Oran Delaney. “We continued our travels for awhile, when about two months before the time set for my marriage, Monsieur left me, to return to his villa at Nice, ostensibly to make preparations for the marriage. He was to write to me when to come, but in little more than a week I was telegraphed to go to his death-bed. He had accidentally shot himself.”

He was growing excited now. The feeble breath came from his lips in great palpitating gasps.

“You are over-tasking yourself,” Mr. Rodney reminded him again.

“No, I shall soon have done now,” Mr. Delaney answered. “Well, I went with all haste to Nice, and I arrived there late one night, and found Monsieur Sanson dying, indeed. They told me that he had been handling a revolver when it exploded in his hand, fatally wounding him. He lay at the point of death, and his one anxiety was his fair young daughter whom he was leaving alone in the world. Would I have any objection to fulfilling my marriage contract now, he asked me, that he might die satisfied?”

“I told him I would marry Julie at once, and his mind was at once relieved of its load of care. Preparations were made for a midnight marriage. A priest was summoned. Everything was arranged with perfect legality.”

He paused and swept his aristocratic white hand wearily across his brow.

“How it all comes back to me,” he said. “It was a beautiful summer night. A wind from the sea came into the room through the open windows, mingled with the breath of tropic flowers. A dim light burned in the room where the dying man lay breathing heavily. They brought my bride in to me. I could not make out either her face or her form for the great billows of snowy lace in which she was enveloped from head to foot, but I fancied that all womanly loveliness was centered in her form. Well, they made her my bride, and then led her quickly from the room, for Monsieur Sanson’s death-hour was near at hand. He thanked me feebly for what I had done, and then he bound me by a solemn oath to protect and cherish his Julie as long as she lived, never leaving nor forsaking her.

“‘I have already promised the priest all that,’ I said, in wonder. That was no matter, he said, and persisted in his request that I would solemnly swear to do what he asked. An oath made to a dying man would be more sacred, he said.

“Though I thought him unreasonable, I could refuse nothing to a dying man; so I took the oath he asked of me. I thought it could not greatly matter anyhow. I had no idea of ever forsaking my fair young foreign bride. I was too much infatuated with the charming young creature the fertile imagination of the Frenchman had painted for me.

“He died in a little while after the ceremony and left me to comfort his bereaved daughter. It was not until after the funeral that she allowed me to see her. She was prostrated by the shock of her father’s death, they told me.

“Oh, Mr. Rodney, can you guess what a terrible shock it was to me when I beheld her at last?

“I had in my mind the vision of an angel. I imagined my bride lovely in mind as in person, and thought myself most fortunate in the possession of such a perfect creature.

“When they showed me the creature to whom I had bound myself—the misshapen, deformed, blighted creature, with a mind as blasted and out of shape as her body—do you wonder that I almost went mad?”

“Surely the laws of any land would have freed you from such a creature!” exclaimed Mr. Rodney, indignantly.

“I made no attempt to free myself,” said Oran Delaney. “I was so shocked at finding myself placed in such a terrible position, so ashamed of the foolish ease with which I had fallen into the trap set for me, that I was like one dazed or stunned. It was some little while before I realized it, and then the weight of my oath to the dying held me back from taking any steps toward freeing myself from my horrible incubus.

“Monsieur Sanson had left a letter for me, too. It was a confession.”

“A confession!” repeated Mr. Rodney.

“Yes. It appeared that the story of the accidental shooting was all a hoax. The man had given himself the death-blow with a suicidal intent.”

Mr. Rodney uttered an exclamation of horror and dismay.

“He had committed suicide, but why?”

“Because he had run through his property and was reduced to beggary. He had led a fast and gay life and had nothing left to live upon. The villa and all its furniture were mortgaged beyond their value, and were to be seized. There would be nothing left for him and the deformed maniac, his daughter, whom, despite her afflictions, he seemed to cherish with a strange morbid affection.”

Mr. Rodney could not repress a shudder of disgust. He thought of his three brilliant, beautiful children with a feeling of pride, and he wondered that even a father's heart could have cherished tenderness for the dreadful, misshapen maniac of Delaney House.

"So he formed that dreadful plan for providing his deformed and maniac daughter with a husband to take care of her, and then he consummated it in the way I have told you. When it became impossible to enjoy the wealth and pleasures of this world any longer, he sent himself out of it, with a shocking deliberateness, and shifted his burden upon my shoulders."

"He was a villain! But you were not compelled to accept the loathsome legacy he bequeathed to you. The marriage, being with a person of unsound mind, was really null and void in the eyes of the law," said the lawyer.

"I did not resort to the law to help me out of my trouble," said Oran Delaney. "I was too proud, for one thing, to let the public know how shamefully I had been duped. I was bitterly ashamed of my own credulity; besides, I was weighted down by the solemnity of my oath to the dying. I could not forsake poor Julie Sanson, even though I had been so horribly duped and deceived. I had sworn to devote my life to her; and, in his letter of confession to me, Monsieur Sanson again committed his daughter solemnly to my care, urging that, as he had once saved my life, it was but right that I should devote it to the daughter left so helpless and forlorn by his sinful death."

"He had much better have let you die, than saved your life to such a horrible end!" exclaimed Mr. Rodney.

"Much better," sighed Oran Delaney. "But, as it was, I accepted his dying charge. I brought Julie Sanson to America, and confided her to the care of my old nurse, Mrs. Griffin. I have lived at Delaney House in seclusion for years, shunning my kind, because in my morbid pride, I had sworn that the carping, censorious world should never know my dreadful secret. Mrs. Griffin has been most faithful in her trust.

"We lived on quietly there, and poor Julie's mania developed itself in two forms. She had a fierce thirst for human blood, and a most inordinate love for finery, delighting to array her dreadful form in the richest robes and most brilliant jewels. In the hope of subduing her bloodthirsty mania, I

humored the harmless taste for dress to a great extent. I constantly made additions to her wardrobe, of the most gorgeous and dazzling apparel, and I provided her with a jewel-box of splendid paste imitations of diamonds. She never wearied of decking herself in these things, and would be quiet and docile for weeks together in placid enjoyment of them. Again her mania for shedding blood would seize upon her, and she would fly at me and at Mrs. Griffin in a fury of rage, with murder flashing from her eyes. On one occasion she accidentally got out of her room, possessed herself of a tiny jeweled dagger, and flew through the house like a raging lioness seeking her prey. On that occasion she wounded me first, and then your beautiful Aline!”

As if overcome with horror, he groaned aloud and buried his face in the pillow.

“Much as I would like to hear the remainder of your story, I must refuse to listen to you longer now, for I can see that you are completely exhausted,” said the lawyer. “I shall leave you now to repose. To-morrow, if you are better, you may continue your story.”

“But I am so anxious to clear Aline in your eyes that I am too impatient to postpone my story,” said Oran Delaney feebly, for it was quite true that he was exhausted by the efforts he had made.

“Nevertheless, I shall refuse to hear any more to-day,” answered the lawyer, with a smile. “I am going out now, and I shall send Mrs. Griffin in to take charge of you.”

He left the room, and the old nurse came in and installed herself by his pillow. The next morning, after the refreshment of a sound night’s sleep, he continued his story to Mr. Rodney.

CHAPTER LVII.

“I would sooner have died than have wronged your willful, innocent child, Mr. Rodney,” he said. “When she came into the garden that day I had no thought but her pleasure. She seemed but a child to me, and I saw no harm in her going into Delaney House with me to share my lunch. I had been so long secluded from the world that I did not remember its hard rules. I was pleased with the beautiful, happy girl, and I thought that her people had treated her unfairly, in leaving her at home, while they went away to enjoy themselves. In a languid, careless way I allowed her to enjoy herself. It seemed very easy to her to do so.”

“She had a sunny, happy temper when all went well with her,” said Mr. Rodney, with a heavy sigh to the memory of his self-exiled daughter.

“Yes, I thought so,” said Oran Delaney, echoing the sigh. “I saw that she was willful and a trifle wild, but I thought nothing of it. She was too young and fair to be worldly-wise. Poor child, would that she had been! She had never then entered the fatal portals of Delaney House.”

“Fatal indeed!” groaned the afflicted father.

“I blame myself that I let her enter there,” said Oran Delaney. “The child must have charmed me, for I forgot my usual prudence and allowed myself to be pleased in her happiness. She ate her lunch with me, then, frightened at the flight of time, left me and ran out into the hall to go home. It was then that the accident happened to her.”

Mr. Rodney listened with painful interest.

“While she was going through the hall,” continued Mr. Delaney, “a series of horrible shrieks saluted our ears from the upper hall. Horrified at my carelessness I bade Aline fly home, and I rushed up the stairs to confront the dangerous maniac. I met her in the upper hall, arrayed in all the splendor of her wedding-robcs, with a flashing dagger in her hand and fury flashing from her eyes. She rushed at me with a murderous shriek, and before I could disarm her she had thrust the keen point of her dagger into the fleshy

part of my arm. The keen pain threw me off my guard a moment, and in that moment the would-be murderess escaped me and flew down the stairs. Heedless of my wounded arm, I followed her, but was just one minute too late. Just as I reached her, she had pursued Aline through the deserted parlor, and the poor girl fell across the threshold wounded in the breast by the maniac's dagger. I came up to them just in time to arrest the second descent of the blade. Mrs. Griffin came to my assistance, and together we disarmed Julie, and locked her into her room again."

He paused, drew a heavy sigh, and then continued:

"Then my folly and selfishness began. I knew that I ought at once to apprise Aline's parents of her accident, and yet I also knew that to do so must be to disclose the hidden secret of my deformed and maniac bride to the world. My morbid self-consciousness shrunk from it. I felt that I could not endure the ordeal. Hastily, and without counting the cost to the victim of Julie's dreadful mania, I decided upon my course. I removed Aline to a comfortable chamber, and Mrs. Griffin attended upon her faithfully. I went to Maywood and brought Doctor Anthony to see her. He did not consider the wound dangerous, so I did not have him renew the visit. I considered it too hazardous to my secret. You may well look at me reproachfully, Mr. Rodney. I can understand now how culpably I acted, but then my conscience was deadened within me by my sensitive horror of the world's finding out my bitter secret."

Mr. Rodney had no words to answer him. He sat listening in painful silence.

"Aline was very angry, when she recovered consciousness and found that I was determined not to apprise her parents of her situation. I told her that she should never leave Delaney House until she swore solemnly never to divulge the secret of her whereabouts and the manner in which she came by her wound. She refused in the bitterest terms at first, declaring that she would never keep the secret from her parents. I told her that she should never even see them again until she obeyed my dictation."

"My poor girl!" sighed Aline's father.

"I was hard and cruel; I recognize it now, although I did not then comprehend the enormity of what I was doing," said Oran Delaney. "Aline was bitterly angry. She declared that she would never submit to such

injustice; and she worked herself up into such a state that she became dangerously ill. There were six weeks when we nursed her night and day, scarcely believing that she would live from one day to another.”

“And yet you would not let us know! I do not believe that I can ever forgive you,” cried Mr. Rodney.

“I can never forgive myself,” Mr. Delaney answered, sadly. “But I was willfully blind; I never once realized the full enormity of my offense against you and your daughter—my selfish misery made me desperate. I was agonized by her sufferings, but I never once relented. When she at length convalesced and renewed her entreaties to go home, I steadily refused to allow her to do so until she had bound herself to solemn silence. She was as obdurate as I was, at first. She affirmed that she would never do so. But, at the end of three months, her girlish patience gave way, and, in her anxiety to see her dear ones again, she weakened and solemnly bound herself to all that I asked her. Then, after telling me, in a gush of girlish passion, that she hated me, she went home.”

He paused, and there was a deep silence in the room. He was thinking of the night when the graceful young figure had flitted out from the doors of Delaney House, leaving it darker and more gloomy than ever. He recalled the last moment of her stay, when, with her small hand clinched in bitter, impotent wrath, she had said, scathingly:

“I hate you, Oran Delaney, for all that you have made me suffer!”

The words had pierced his heart like a sword point. They had remained with him ever since, growing harder to bear day by day. He could not bear that those frank blue eyes should rest on him with hate and scorn. It was like a wound in his heart.

CHAPTER LVIII.

Mr. Rodney was thinking too. He remembered the night that Aline had come home. All that was strange in her manner then was explained away now. He remembered how hard and stern he had been with her; how he had been goaded to desperation by the fear that she was a miserable sinner. A weight of care was lifted from his mind by Oran Delaney's revelation.

"God, I thank Thee!" he cried, lifting his hands involuntarily to heaven, "that my beloved daughter is proved innocent of all the evil laid to her charge."

"She is innocent as an angel," said Oran Delaney. "I do not ask you to believe my unsupported testimony. Mrs. Griffin will confirm all that I have told you."

He was silent for a moment, then added, gravely:

"I wish you to make public to the world all that I have told you, Mr. Rodney. It is my dearest wish, whether I live or die, to have Aline's memory cleared from all stain. Let all my folly and shame be known, all my pride and weakness, so that she be proven innocent and deserving."

"It is hard upon you, but it is only just to Aline and her family," said Aline's father.

"It is just, and I deserve it," said Oran Delaney. "The world will censure me; but let it do so, I am ready to bear it. Indeed, it will be a relief to my mind to have the truth known. I am weary of evasion and concealment, even if concealment were possible any longer."

A look of grave anxiety was on his pale, drawn face.

"There is a weight upon my heart that nothing can shake off," he said. "Poor Julie Sanson—she whom I swore to the dying never to leave nor forsake—oh, what has been her terrible fate? Is she dead in the ruins of Delaney House, or in the drifts of snow?"

“Whichever has been her fate, it is a most happy release for her imprisoned soul,” said Mr. Rodney. “You cannot regret her!”

“No; only the horrible manner of her death, if, indeed she be dead,” Mr. Delaney answered.

“I do not believe that there can be any doubt as to that,” said Mr. Rodney. “If she had lived, we must have heard of it. My own opinion is that she never escaped from the burning house.”

“It is most unlikely,” said Mr. Delaney, and then he lay silent, musing deeply: “Was Julie Sanson, the poor, deformed lunatic dead, indeed? Was he free, indeed? Free—his heart gave a great throb of almost painful rapture at the thought—to marry Aline Rodney if she would give herself to him?”

“Tell me one thing,” said Mr. Rodney, breaking in, abruptly, on his musing mood. “Why did Aline come to you that night when I found out her secret?”

They looked at each other, steadfastly. A hot, red flush mounted to Oran Delaney’s face.

“She wished me to save the honor of her name by linking it with mine,” he said, in a low, pained voice.

“And you?” said Mr. Rodney, anxiously.

“I was not free, you know. I was bound to Julie Sanson by that wretched farce,” answered the other.

“You refused her request?”

“I could do no less,” Oran Delaney answered, in a low, tortured voice.

“My God, then, the child has been driven desperate! Who would have dreamed that my fury that night would have driven her to such a step! I shall never see her again. She has gone away and died of shame for her thoughtlessness,” cried Mr. Rodney, wringing his hands in impotent despair.

“No, no, it was not thoughtlessness, it was the act of an angel,” cried Oran Delaney. “It was to save me from the threatened duel. She had no thought of self at all! And I, oh, my God, if she had not been an angel, I should have taken her at her word, for the temptation was almost too great for human endurance. For I love her, Mr. Rodney, with all the madness of a first, great love. Guess how cruelly hard it was to me to hear her sweet voice pleading

for that which would have been Heaven itself to me, and to be forced to put her away from me!”

CHAPTER LIX

There was a moment's silence and Mr. Rodney gazed steadily at the flushed face and sparkling eyes of the man who thus avowed his love for beautiful Aline.

"I love her," he repeated. "She won my heart in the three months while she stayed in Delaney House. At first I thought her a spoiled willful child, whose sharp tongue and determined obstinacy excited my anger, but as I grew to know her better, when I found out what a warm and tender little heart beat under all her brusqueries and waywardness, she stole into my heart, unconsciously to myself. I would have given all the world for the power to make her my wife. But, alas! even as I love her, she hates me, and justly, too, I own, for she has been most deeply wronged by my cowardly silence: I cannot blame her if she never forgives me for my fault."

Mrs. Griffin came in with some tea and toast. While she was arranging it Mr. Delaney asked, suddenly:

"Will you tell me now, Mr. Rodney, how you became possessed of the secret of Aline's whereabouts?"

The lawyer glanced with a smile at Mrs. Griffin.

"If I should tell you that your good nurse there is the traitor, would you believe me?" he said.

Mrs. Griffin looked at him, red with indignation.

"Indeed, sir, you need not charge it on me," she said, quickly. "Mr. Delaney knows that no one is more faithful to his interests than I am. Why, sir, I carried him in these arms when he was a baby, and do you think any one could make him believe I could betray anything he wanted kept secret?"

The humorous twinkle in Mr. Rodney's blue eyes deepened. He waited until the old woman had arranged the invalid's repast to his satisfaction, and then said slyly:

“Your new lace cap is very becoming, Mrs. Griffin. I should like to know where you bought it?”

It was very fortunate that the nurse had put down the tea-tray, for otherwise she must certainly have dropped it, such a start she gave at those words. She stared at Mr. Rodney, her complexion turning to a brilliant crimson.

“Why, what do you mean, Mr. Rodney?” she gasped amazedly.

“Have you forgotten Cheap Jane?” he asked, smiling.

Instantly Mrs. Griffin’s mind went back to that snowy eve when, in her loneliness, she had been overpowered by the temptation to admit the female peddler within the tabooed precincts of Delaney House. The guilty red of her cheeks grew brighter. She glanced apprehensively at her master. He was gazing at her in wonder.

“What does he mean?” Oran Delaney asked her.

She shook her head, and glanced inquiringly at Mr. Rodney.

“Yes, I remember Cheap Jane,” she said. “But what has that to do with Miss Rodney and my master?”

“If you will tell Mr. Delaney all that you know about Cheap Jane, I will show you the connection,” he replied.

Mrs. Griffin was heartily ashamed at the thought of her adventure with Cheap Jane being exposed; but she saw that it was too late to attempt concealment. She made a virtue of necessity, and related the story to Mr. Delaney, frankly apologizing for her fault.

“I know I did wrong,” she said, turning to Mr. Rodney; “but still I cannot see what harm was done by my imprudence. The old creature only stayed a little while.”

“That is where you are mistaken,” said Mr. Rodney. “Cheap Jane spent the night in Delaney House.”

“Spent the night?” she echoed, staring at him stupidly:

“Yes,” he replied.

“But how could that be?” exclaimed Oran Delaney, looking up from his untasted toast. He was too much excited to eat.

“It happened in this way,” said the lawyer. “When Mrs. Griffin went to answer your bell, the peddler slipped into a deserted room, and hid herself and her basket of potions in an unused closet. She thus remained in Delaney House all night.”

Mrs. Griffin wrung her plump hands, and cried out, dejectedly, “The wretch!”

But Oran Delaney did not utter one word; he only gazed inquiringly into the face of the lawyer.

“She remained at Delaney House all night,” repeated Mr. Rodney. “After the inmates were locked in unsuspecting slumber, the hidden peddler came forth and prowled through the house. You were sick that night, Mr. Delaney. In your fever and unrest you talked to the walls in your room—you revealed the secret of Aline’s stay in your house.”

“Great Heaven!” he cried.

“It is strange, but true,” said the lawyer. “And your uninvited guest, the peddler, who had stolen into your house like a thief by night, heard all. It was from him I learned all I knew—namely, that Aline had been a wounded prisoner in Delaney House.”

“You said ‘from him’—yet I understood that the peddler was a woman,” exclaimed Oran Delaney, quickly.

“A man in disguise,” explained the lawyer.

“Then it was no common person—the plan was a deep-laid one,” said Oran Delaney, with an inquiring look into the other’s face.

Mr. Rodney shook his head.

“No, it was not I,” he said. “It was a detective whom I employed last summer to trace Aline. He failed at first, but when she came back to us and refused to reveal the secret of her absence, he set himself to work to ferret out the truth.”

“And succeeded,” said Oran Delaney, with bitter sadness. “And where is your clever detective now?”

“He is again on the track of my missing daughter. I have for the second time employed him to find her.”

“He shall be richly rewarded if he succeeds,” exclaimed Oran Delaney, earnestly.

He lay silent for a moment, and then added gravely and thoughtfully:

“I can bear no resentment against your clever detective, Mr. Rodney. I am glad now that the truth has been found out. A burden is lifted from my heart.”

“You are not angry with Mr. Lane for his bold invasion of your house, and his betrayal of your secret?” exclaimed Mr. Rodney.

“No, I am not angry. I am glad that the truth has been revealed. I feel quite curious to see your Mr. Lane.”

“Perhaps you will permit me to bring him to see you?” said the lawyer.

“Willingly,” answered Oran Delaney.

He did so the next day, after he had told Mr. Delaney’s story to him, and the good-looking detective spent an hour with the wounded man. Mr. Delaney was most anxious that Aline should be found.

“Only find her,” he said, earnestly, to Mr. Lane, “and you shall name your own reward.”

A strange expression gleamed in the eyes of the detective.

“I shall make every effort to find her,” he said. “But I tell you frankly, Mr. Delaney, I am not working up this case for money.”

“Of course you have a professional interest and reputation at stake,” said Mr. Delaney.

“It is not that, either,” said the detective.

They gazed steadily into each other’s eyes.

“I will tell you the truth, Mr. Delaney,” said Mr. Lane. “I find that my early professional interest in this case has merged into a romantic one. People call me a woman-hater where I am best known, and I confess that female society has hitherto had no charms for me. But the beauty and sweetness of Miss Rodney have won my heart. If I find her I shall ask no reward from her father except her hand, if she will give it to me.”

Mr. Lane paused and waited for a reply. He did not dream what an agonizing pang tore through Oran Delaney's heart in that moment.

"Do you think she loves you, Mr. Lane?" he faltered then, in a hollow voice.

"Scarcely; for I have had no chance to woo her," said Mr. Lane. "And yet it is so much better that she should marry that perhaps she will waive that consideration. Afterward I could teach her to love me."

Again that fierce, jealous pang tore through Oran Delaney's heart. A vision came over him of the beautiful young face and the violet eyes with their shady lashes of deepest jet. How much more beautiful it would be when the woman's heart was awakened in her. How that charming face would be glorified by love!

"Ah, Heaven, only to call her mine!" he groaned to himself. "It is cruel, cruel, that this man should take advantage of her trouble to try to win her. He has no right to her. She is far above him. Her beauty and sweetness make her the peer of any one in the land."

He silently repeated some lines to himself:

"A king might lay his scepter down,
But I am poor and naught;
The brow should wear a golden crown
That wears her in its thought."

He looked fixedly at Mr. Lane.

"Why do you say that it will be better for Miss Rodney to marry?" he asked, slowly.

"Surely, you know that her long stay in Delaney House has so damaged her maiden fame that she can never take her proper place in the world until sheltered by some good man's name," said the detective.

"You forget that I have explained everything, and that Miss Rodney's reputation is cleared from every shadow of blame," exclaimed Mr. Delaney.

"No, I do not forget it. But I know that the world is censorious and cruel, and I am not sure whether it will accept your statement as true. At any rate,

I am prepared to help Miss Rodney all that I can. I am rich and prosperous. I will marry her and take her away forever from this place where she has suffered so much if she will have me.”

He paused a moment, and then added:

“Of course if you were not already married, Mr. Delaney, you would be the most proper husband for Miss Rodney, but, as it is, I feel myself quite free to woo and wed her if I can, and to save her from all the troubles she would be likely to endure, unmarried.”

He went out and left Mr. Delaney to some bitter reflections.

CHAPTER LX.

When Mr. Delaney's physician came next day he declared that his patient was not as well as he had expected to find him. He looked apprehensive over him.

"What have they been doing to you?" he asked, brusquely.

"I have had the best of care, doctor," Mr. Delaney answered.

The old physician looked at him, curiously. The dark, handsome face was grave, and there was a settled sadness on it. But the tone, more than the words, struck the physician. A heartache ran drearily through it.

"You are fretting over something," he said. "Come, Delaney, this will not do. You will never get well at this rate."

Oran Delaney only smiled, but he said to himself that he did not greatly care. He had long been tired of his life. What matter how soon the end came. There would be no one to grieve for him, except his faithful old nurse. He thought of Mr. Rodney, but he said to himself that no jury in this southern land would convict him even if his victim died. All would think him justified in avenging his daughter.

That day Mr. Delaney made his will. He left Mrs. Griffin a comfortable legacy, left a large sum of money to take care of the maniac, Julie Sanson, if she was ever found, and the residue of his large fortune he bequeathed unconditionally to Aline Rodney.

And then he said to himself that he was ready to die. He had provided the best he could for the future of the girl whom he loved, and he had no more left to live for. His life had been ruined in its prime by a bad man's treachery. Hope, love, happiness, henceforth could be only names to him. He did not care to live.

A great despair had fallen upon him. He had wakened up to the one grand passion of his life, and it was utterly hopeless. He loved Aline Rodney, but she hated him for the sorrow he had brought into her young life. She would

marry Mr. Lane, perhaps, when she came home again, and Oran Delaney said to himself, with a pang of the bitterest despair, that he would rather be dead than live to see the fair young creature he loved the wife of another.

Days went and came, and he lay there wearily and hopelessly, and the physician went and came daily, growing more and more puzzled over him.

“He goes down hill every day, and yet, the case was very favorable at first,” he said to Mr. Rodney. “I am puzzled over him. I am afraid it is the mind wearing out the body. What do you think about it?”

“I have the same opinion as you,” the lawyer answered. “It is not the wound I gave him, it is mental trouble that is killing him. It is the old fable of the sword wearing out the scabbard.”

“Can nothing be done?” asked the old physician, who had become deeply interested in his new patient.

“Nothing, I am quite sure,” Mr. Rodney answered, for he knew now all the pain and sorrow and remorse that were killing Oran Delaney.

“Then he must die. All my medical skill can avail nothing to save him,” answered the physician, regretfully.

In the meantime Mr. Rodney had followed out Mr. Delaney’s wishes. He had made public all that strange secret, whose keeping had cast that black shadow over Aline’s life.

Chester was all agog with curiosity and excitement. It was a nine days’ wonder.

As often happens in such cases, there was a complete revulsion of feeling. The great wave of public sentiment rolled toward Aline in a gush of pity and sympathy. The world was not as bad as Mr. Lane had believed it. No one was found to doubt the story Mr. Delaney had told on what all believed to be his death-bed. It was so strange and romantic, it appealed so powerfully to that love of the wonderful and mysterious inherent in all hearts, that every one believed it. If Aline had been at home society would have made her the heroine of the hour. It would have taken her to its heart of hearts, and worshiped her as blindly as it had wronged her. It would have made atonement for its hasty judgment, but pity and regret were now alike too late. Aline had vanished out of her old life as utterly as if she were dead

and buried. The places that had known her knew her now no more. In her home they mourned her as one dead.

In the stress of her trouble and anxiety, poor Mrs. Rodney had taken down to her sick-bed again. The pretty, self-possessed, dignified lady was completely broken down. She blamed herself as the author of all her beautiful daughter's sorrow.

"I was too harsh, too strict with her. Her faults were only those of youth and inexperience, united to high spirits. Her punishments were too severe, and I am rightly punished for my hardness of heart," wept and sighed the poor mother, in the long winter nights, while she tossed upon her sleepless bed, tormented with remorse and misery over the treatment she had given Aline.

A month passed away, and it was time for the return of Dr. Anthony and Effie from their bridal tour. They were to settle down to housekeeping in a pretty house the doctor owned at Maywood.

Mrs. Rodney yearned for Effie's return. She longed to pour into her sympathizing ears all her sorrow and despair at the loss, for the second time, of her beautiful Aline.

The cottage was a most dreary place for sunny-tempered Max Rodney, in those days. He missed his beautiful sisters, the gentle, graceful Effie, and the light-hearted, volatile Aline. His mother was always in tears, now, and seldom left her room. Besides, there was a real invalid in the house, and the enforced quiet was most irksome to the high spirited lad whose gay voice, blending with his younger sister's, had been wont to waken joyous echoes from garret to cellar of the roomy cottage. In despair, Max took to spending the most of his time from home, unreprieved by his grief-stricken parents, who had become almost apathetic in their dumb, agonizing sorrow for their lost daughter.

And one day, when the sun was shining brightly, and the winter snows that had lain for weeks upon the frozen earth were melting under its genial glow, Max came home from a long excursion with "the boys," and burst into his mother's room like a small cyclone or tornado.

"Mamma," he cried, all in a flurry, "may I go into Mr. Delaney's room? I have something to tell him."

Mrs. Rodney looked curiously at the flushed cheeks and sparkling blue eyes of her handsome boy.

“Why, what is it, my dear?” she asked. “You know the doctor wishes to keep Mr. Delaney very quiet. He is very low now, and we must do all that we can to make him well; for if he died, people would look upon your dear papa as a murderer!”

She shuddered; but the boy’s eyes flashed, and he cried out, proudly:

“No one would call papa a murderer, mamma, even if Mr. Delaney died. He was right to shoot Mr. Delaney if he thought he had my sister shut up in his house. I have heard a lot of people say so. If I had been a man, I should have shot him myself.”

“But you are not a man, Max, so you must not talk so boldly. What is this that you have to tell Mr. Delaney?”

“A bit of news that will please him, I dare say,” said the boy.

“Oh, Max, is it news of Aline?” quivered the poor mother.

“No, no, mamma; for of course I would tell you that first,” said the boy.

“Then what can it be? You know we must not excite Mr. Delaney, dear. It might be his death. You must tell me what you have heard, and then I can decide better if you may be allowed to tell him.”

“Oh, mamma, I wanted to be the first to tell him,” objected the boy.

“I am sorry; but we must not run the risk, indeed,” Mrs. Rodney said.

Max looked disappointed.

“Well, then, I cannot keep it any longer!” he burst out. “We—that is, the boys and me—we have found Mr. Delaney’s crazy wife—”

“Impossible!” Mrs. Rodney exclaimed.

“Under a melted snow-drift,” continued Max. “She must have been dead a long time—ever since that night she set fire to Delaney House, I guess—for she is in a very bad state; but we are perfectly certain that she is the one. She is dressed just as papa described her, in the finery and the jewels. Do you think that Mr. Delaney will be glad, mamma?”

“Glad that the poor creature is dead, Max?” she cried, quite shocked.

“Yes, mamma,” he replied, undauntedly. “Everybody should be glad, for what pleasure could that poor, afflicted creature have in her life, and why should one wish her to live? Mr. Delaney will be glad, I know, and no one can blame him!”

“Hush, dear, you do not know what you are saying,” said his mother, “and, besides, this is all surmise on your part. It may not be the woman at all.”

“Very well, mamma, we shall soon know, for they have sent me to bring Mrs. Griffin to identify her,” he said.

It all turned out as the little lad had said. The poor creature who had lain for long weeks under the frozen snow-drifts proved to be Julie Sanson, indeed. The mystery of her fate was solved at last. She had not perished in the fiery flames that consumed Delaney House. She had wandered out into the dark and stormy night and met her death in the cold, white, drifting snow that wrapped the earth like a ghostly winding sheet.

It came upon Oran Delaney with a shock that the deformed maniac was dead. It pained him that death had come to her in such horrible shape. Indeed, the very existence of such a creature upon the earth had always seemed to him something for which one might almost arraign Divine Providence. Why was it permitted?

“I cannot understand it,” he said. “And it pains me that she died so hard a death. Yet I cannot be sorry that she is dead. She was a horrible burden upon my life, and her existence was a joyless one. I thank God that having done my duty by her, I am free at last.”

They buried her quietly and simply, but the circumstances were so well known that a large number of people attended the burial. Every one rejoiced that Oran Delaney was free at last from the horrible fetters that had bound him. He had become quite a hero in these few days.

When his strange story became well known it excited the greatest sympathy and pity. Many of the townspeople would have liked to call upon him to express their feelings, but this was strictly forbidden by the physician, who prescribed the strictest quiet for his patient. Every one was very sorry for him, although under the peculiar circumstances of the case no one ever blamed Mr. Rodney for what he had done. Every father sympathized with

him, and declared that with the same provocation they would have done the same.

Effie came at last. Dr. Anthony drove over from Maywood with her the morning after their return. There was a most affecting meeting between mother and daughter. Mrs. Rodney fell on the bride's neck in tears. Effie listened to her story of Aline's disappearance, with a strange look upon her beautiful, happy face.

"And he is here, Effie, Mr. Delaney is here," she said. "It is stranger than a novel, is it not? Aline lay wounded and ill in his house once, and now here he is in ours, wounded and dying."

CHAPTER LXI.

Dr. Anthony was most anxious to meet Oran Delaney when they told him the story of all that had transpired while he and Effie were absent upon their bridal tour.

Mr. Rodney undertook to ask Mr. Delaney's permission to present his son-in-law to him. He felt rather dubious over it. He was not at all sure that he would care to meet Dr. Anthony under the new conditions in which he found himself.

To his surprise Mr. Delaney was willing and eager to meet the young physician whom he had treated so cavalierly on that long-to-be-remembered night. He declared that it would not excite him at all. On the contrary, it would be a relief to see him and ask his pardon for his rudeness.

Dr. Anthony was surprised when he entered the room and saw the man whom he remembered so vividly, although he had never seen his face. He now beheld one of the handsomest men he had ever seen in his life in spite of the pallor and emaciation of illness and hopelessness. He thought he had never seen such splendid, fathomless dark eyes as those that now turned upon his face with something that was almost humility in their sad gaze as he extended his hand.

"Dr. Anthony, I do not know how to ask you to forgive me for the way I treated you," he said. "But I was half maddened with fears for Miss Rodney. That must be my excuse."

"I am not at all angry with you," said Dr. Anthony, with his frank smile. "I can find it in my heart to excuse your rashness, considering the circumstances of the case."

And after that the two men were good friends always. The genial, handsome young doctor, who was so happy with his fair young bride, had a great fund of pity and sympathy for the man who, while but a few years older than himself, had had his whole life blasted by the treachery of one whom he believed his friend.

“You cannot know how I regret it all,” said Oran Delaney, unburdening his heart to this new friend as men do sometimes on rare occasions to one another. “If I could go back to that day and undo all the harm I caused Miss Rodney by my stubborn pride, I would give all that I own, my poor life into the bargain. I was mad and blind. I had brooded over my secret until it assumed such gigantic proportions of shame and sorrow that I grew morbid over it. I would have risked anything rather than have it revealed to the world. I was frantic with fear when that poor lunatic attempted Miss Rodney’s life. I believed that the poor girl would surely betray my secret if I let her go free. So I bound her by that cruel oath—how cruel I did not know; for I did not think of the dreadful consequences to her.”

“Dreadful, indeed!” assented Dr. Anthony.

“And now, if by the sacrifice of my life I could bring her back to her friends, I would most gladly die,” said Oran Delaney, with an earnestness that carried conviction to the hearer’s heart. “I pray daily to God that Mr. Lane will succeed in finding her.”

“I do not believe that he will ever do so,” said Dr. Anthony with *empressement*.

“You do not surely believe that she is dead!” cried Oran Delaney, with horror and despair in his face and voice.

Dr. Anthony looked pityingly at the pale, handsome face lying on the white pillow with the ruddy blaze of the firelight casting a sort of false glow on its deep pallor. He saw that Oran Delaney’s remorse and despair and grief were most genuine.

“You do not surely believe that she is dead?” he cried in the utmost despair, and Dr. Anthony answered, sadly:

“Why not? No tidings have come to you of her fate. Is it not most probable that she has perished in the cruel snow-drifts even as poor Julie Sanson did?”

Mr. Delaney shuddered, and put up his thin, white hands before his face.

“Oh, for Heaven’s sake, do not name Aline, in the same breath with that creature!” he cried. “No, no, I cannot believe that she is dead! Heaven

would not be so cruel! She will come back, my beautiful darling, even if it is not until the cold earth is heaped upon my breast!”

Then with a great effort he threw off the terrible agitation that possessed him; he looked at Dr. Anthony and said, sadly:

“In my weakness I have revealed my secret to you, Doctor Anthony. I love Aline—have loved her ever since she was an inmate of my home. My shame and sorrow and remorse for all that I have done are killing me by inches. If she does not come back soon I shall never see her. I shall be dead—killed by my love and sorrow!”

“I am sorry for you!” cried Dr. Anthony, melted by the exceeding grief of the other. “But indeed you must not agitate yourself like this. It is very hurtful to you.”

He hastened to feel the patient’s pulse, and seeing that he was considerably agitated, administered the composing draught that stood ready upon the little table, and went out to seek his wife, who was with her mother.

CHAPTER LXII.

The early winter eve was falling drearily when Dr. Anthony went out of the room, and left Oran Delaney alone, watching the dark shadows that already began to creep about the corners—fantastic shadows cast by the leaping blue and yellow flames of the fire.

He lay still and watched the eerie darkness closing in with strange feelings. Just so was his life ebbing to a close, just so the shadows of eternity were falling around him. Life's brief day was almost ended. It seemed to him that already he felt the chill of the grave in which he would soon be lying.

"When I am dead she will come back," he said to himself. "She will be here again in her old home, with all the shadows lifted from her, and she will be happy. Poor little wronged Aline! I should like to see her just once more to ask her to forgive me for my fault. To the dying all things are forgiven."

He closed his eyes and lay thinking of the time when he had first met her, a lovely, volatile creature, who half vexed and half amused him. He did not dream then that she would be his fate. Now memory went back and recalled her to his mind as the fairest vision that ever blessed man's eyes.

He hardly knew how love had come to him first. He could recall the time when he had been most angry with her, when he would have liked, above all things, to give her a hard shaking for her petulance, her unreasonableness, her childishness. He thought it must have been in those days when she lay ill and unconscious, and he had hung above her in an agony of fear lest she should die there away from all who loved her and grieved for her. He had fancied that the blue eyes dwelt upon him wistfully, and followed him even in the wildness of delirium with a strange half recognition. Then in the long, slow days of convalescence, when she was helpless as a child, the sweet, pale, reproachful face had crept into his heart. When in her anger she would tell him that she would stay at Delaney House and die there before she would take the cruel oath required of her, he was conscious that his heart had beat half gladly at the thought of her staying beneath the same roof with him and his misery. But he put the thought away

from him as selfish, and tried to be glad when she broke down at last, and pledged herself to the silence he required of her.

That night when she went back to the cottage he had spent in a miserable vigil watching her window with haggard, anxious eyes, yet little dreaming of all that was transpiring behind it, or how bitterly the girl would have to suffer for her silence. Man-like, he had not thought of the world's busy tongues, always wagging in cruel despite.

Well, it was all over now for Aline, and all over for him. He would not believe that she was dead. He could not fancy those violet eyes closed in the eternal sleep—those sweet lips silent forever! God would not be so cruel now when life was opening so fairly for her, the shadows all gone from her sky and her pathway bright with the sunshine. She would come home and be happy after he was dead.

Deeper and deeper grew the shadows in the room. The fire sputtered and sparkled, and a cinder fell noisily from the grate. He had become so very nervous that even that little thing made him start and open his eyes.

He opened them and glanced about the room. A cry broke from his lips. He was not alone!

Just between him and the flickering firelight stood a girlish, graceful figure with loosely falling hair, and a lovely white face turned toward him. The blood around his heart seemed suddenly to turn to ice.

“What was it? A lying trick of the brain?

Yet I thought I saw her stand,

A shadow, there, at my feet.

High over the shadowing land.

The ghastly wraith of one that I know.”

CHAPTER LXIII.

After that one cry of surprise and wonder, Oran Delaney could not utter another word. He stared speechlessly at the fair vision that had arisen, as it were, between him and the flickering firelight.

Until this moment he had had an abiding conviction that Aline Rodney was not dead. His conviction was staggered now. How else had she come there, a silent shadow in his room, save from the world of shadows?

“She is not of us, as I divine;
She comes from another stiller world of the dead.”

He lay still and awe-stricken, gazing at the fair young face that shone so white in the dim light. It was turned fully toward him, and the large blue eyes were fixed upon his face in an intent gaze. He quivered under it, and keen arrows of pain shot along his nerves, but he could not turn his eyes from the vision. Not a feature, not a curve, not an outline escaped him. He noted how soft and long were the dark, curling tresses that fell in loose waves upon her shoulders, how gracefully the plain dark robe was fitted to the slender figure, how proudly her white throat rose from the dark folds.

Death had not robbed her of that superlative beauty that charmed the eyes of all beholders. The frank, violet eyes, the arch red mouth, the adorable little nose, the cream-white skin, the dark waving hair all were here as of yore, and thrilled his heart again with a passion of love and despair.

He gazed and gazed, his nerves strained to their utmost tension, and she stood there moveless, stirless, breathless, it almost seemed, for his own tense, heavy breathing drowned all other sounds in the room.

At length with a great effort of will, he broke the bonds that held him, and cried out, hoarsely:

“Aline, Aline, have you come back from the dead to reproach me?”

It was like an electric shock galvanizing the seeming ghost into life. The girl started and made a step forward. She came nearer and nearer until she was leaning toward him, and her sweet, warm breath floating over his cheek. This was no ghost, but a living, breathing, sentient woman!

“Oh, Mr. Delaney,” she cried, with something like awe in her voice, “is it possible that you take me for a ghost?”

He could not speak for joy. His brain reeled deliriously. Could it be Aline Rodney in the flesh? Aline Rodney, come back to him before he died, looking at him kindly, speaking to him gently? Should he not awaken presently and find it all a delusive dream?

He put out his wasted hand and touched her warm, white wrist.

“Let me touch you, for I cannot believe my eyes,” he said, wistfully. “Is it really you, Aline, or only the blesseddest dream that ever dazed a man’s senses?”

She did not repulse him. She let him hold her hand in his a moment that he might assure himself of the reality of this vision.

“Yes, it is really I,” she said, reassuringly, and then she added, curiously, “Why did you take me for a ghost? Did any one tell you I was dead?”

“No, no, it was only my fancy. I was dazed when I opened my eyes and saw you there. I had not heard a sound except the cinders falling from the grate. What could I think but that you were a ghostly visitant from another world?”

She stood gazing down at him, seeming to forget that her hand still lay lightly in the clasp of his.

“They told me to come in softly,” she said. “They thought that you might be asleep. So I turned the knob softly and came in. But when I saw that your eyes were closed I was just going away quietly again when you awakened.”

“It was very good of you to come,” he said, softly pressing the warm, white hand that lay passive in his. “I did not deserve it. I thought that you would hate and scorn me too bitterly ever to speak to me again. Thank you a thousand times for coming.”

Something came into the wistful face into which he was anxiously gazing—kindness, pity, almost sadness.

“Yes, I have been very angry with you,” she said, with a curious catch in her breath. “I meant that you should never, never see my face again. But they told me that you were—were ill, and then I came. You know we forgive all things to the dying.”

CHAPTER LXIV.

He had felt that he was slowly dying; he knew that the physician and all the others thought so, too. He had not cared for it. He had rather exulted in the thought, for he had grown weary of his ruined life.

But when Aline Rodney in those few frank words told him that he was dying, it touched a chord in his heart that thrilled with the keenest pain. There came to him a pang that was like despair at the thought of leaving the world with her in it.

For the first time since that horrible night that had freed him from the hated fetters that bound him to the deformed maniac, he recalled his freedom with a vague, wild rush of happiness at all that was possible to him now, if only—if only that gaunt, black shadow of death had not stretched out its dark wings over him.

The pang was sharp and bitter. He loved her, and to his fancy it seemed as if fate had created this beautiful woman to be his wife. They had been at war with each other, and yet his heart had gone out to her with its whole freight of manly love and devotion. Must he die now and leave her for some other happy man—Mr. Lane, perhaps, of whom he was morbidly jealous?

A great longing for life took possession of him. Oh, if only he had battled harder to save this existence, which now he prized so much! He hated himself when he remembered that the physician had said that he had recklessly flung away his life by his despondency and hopelessness.

He pressed closer in his the little hand, and looked yearningly into the sweet girl-face with his hollow, burning, dark eyes.

“So you forgive me all?” he said, and she answered, gravely, “Yes, all!”

“Forgiveness is the boon we grant to death,” he said, mournfully. “But if I were going to live, Aline, would you be less kind? Would you refuse to forgive me then?”

He waited anxiously to hear what she would say, though he knew that it could not greatly matter now whether she answered him yea or not. It was too late now. He was drifting too near to the borders of the Shadow-Land.

She looked at him with a faint, almost tender smile on her exquisite red mouth.

“I would forgive you if you lived just as freely as I forgive you dying,” she answered. “You have made all the atonement you could, and I thank you and bless you for it.”

“You know all; they have told you all,” he said, with a faint flush creeping into his wan cheeks.

“Yes. I have heard all. It was very hard for you, Mr. Delaney. You must have been half mad with your trouble; so I forgive you now all that you have made me suffer. Perhaps it will make your dying-bed easier,” said Aline, with the wonderful pity and forgiveness of a true woman’s heart.

“Easier!” he repeated, with a groan, and she did not know that it only made it harder. “For if I lived, and she forgave me, I might win her yet,” he said to himself. “Oh, how hard it is to die knowing all this!”

The door opened softly, and the nurse entered with the inevitable tea and toast. She laid fresh coal on the fire and lighted the lamp. Then she nodded at Miss Rodney, with a smile.

“He will get well, now that you have come back and forgiven him,” she said.

“I hope that he may,” Aline answered, with frank simplicity.

And again she did not know how much harder these words of hers made it for the man who knew that he was sinking daily in the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

“What would I not give to live?” he inwardly groaned.

“I must go back to mamma now,” said Aline moving to the door.

His dark eyes followed her entreatingly.

“Do not go so soon,” he pleaded. “You have not told me yet where you have been and how you came back, and I am so anxious to hear.”

“Do stay a little longer, Miss Rodney,” pleaded Mrs. Griffin, and Aline readily consented to do so.

CHAPTER LXV.

It looked very pleasant and cozy in the sick-room, with the curtains drawn and the bright fire. Aline sat down in the easy-chair Mrs. Griffin wheeled forward for her, and was quite unconscious what a picture of fair, girlish beauty she made sitting there, in her pretty dark blue dress with her dark hair falling over her slight, pretty figure.

“Do you know,” she said, looking at the nurse, “that this reminds me of the time when I was at Delaney House?—only that it was I who was ill then, and not Mr. Delaney.”

“Can you recall those times without being angry with me, Aline?” inquired Mr. Delaney, half fearfully.

“I told you I had forgiven you all, Mr. Delaney,” answered Aline, as if that implied everything.

“Thank you,” he answered, dropping his head back, with a sigh, upon the pillow.

Mrs. Griffin busied herself in preparing the little table by the bedside, which she now wheeled forward with the simple repast neatly arranged upon it.

“Do you know that I could not swallow a mouthful now?” he said, looking at her with a slight smile. “I am so impatient to hear Aline’s story, that I can think of nothing else.”

“But he must keep up his strength, mustn’t he, Miss Rodney?” said Mrs. Griffin, anxiously.

“Most certainly! And I shall not begin the telling of my story until after he has eaten every bite of his toast and swallowed every mouthful of his tea,” answered that young person, with her usual cruel directness.

He looked at her imploringly.

“Do you not know that I am far too much excited to eat?” he said.

“If that is the case, I am very sorry that I came,” exclaimed Miss Rodney. “I was told, particularly, that you must not be excited. So I will take myself off at once.”

“Do not go, Miss Rodney,” pleaded the nurse, while the invalid cried out, anxiously:

“Stay, Aline, and I will at once proceed to devour every morsel on the plate.”

“Very well. In that case I may permit myself to remain awhile longer,” she replied.

She sat down again and watched him taking his tea. There was a very sober, grave expression on her face while she did so.

She was shocked at the change that had taken place in Mr. Delaney since that snowy night, barely five weeks ago, when she had asked him to marry her and he had refused her request.

Then he had been tall, strong, handsome, full of life and health. Now how pale, how wan, how shadowy, appeared the wasted face in which the great burning black eyes appeared so large and solemn.

“Poor fellow! he will not be here long. How dreadful to think that my papa should be the cause of his death,” said the girl to herself, with a great wave of pity and regret sweeping over her heart.

He finished his toast and looked at her with a wan smile.

“Now, Aline, you will tell me where you went when you left me that night,” he said, pleadingly.

A wave of crimson swept over her face. She recalled the mission upon which she had gone to him that time.

“I know what you are thinking of,” he said. “But it was a noble motive that prompted you that night. You would have saved me from the consequences of your father’s wrath. Ah, Aline, I was horribly tempted to take you at your word; but if I had done so I should but have done you deeper wrong.”

“Yes, I know now, and I thank you for what seemed cruel then,” she answered, simply, but the blush still burned her face. She could not recall that hasty, impulsive action without the deepest shame.

He gazed at her with sorrowful eyes and an aching heart. Ah, how soon the grave would hide him from the sight of those sweet, blue orbs!

While the blush still burned her fair face she said to him with a half smile:

“Did you think I should be rendered so desperate by your refusal that night, that I should go away and drown myself?”

“I thought you would go back home, and I was horrified when I found that you had not done so,” he replied.

“No, I was too wretched to go back,” she said. “I was in a fever of unrest and trouble when I came to you that night. My brain was on fire. I had not stopped to think or to reason. I acted on impulse wholly. But your sarcasm, your sternness, stunned me, cooled me. When I staggered out of Delaney House I was almost dead with shame and despair for what I had done.”

She put up her hand a moment to hide the sensitive quiver of her lips, then resumed:

“My first thought was to get away from my home. I longed to break loose from old associations and hide myself from all who knew me. I turned my steps away from Delaney House, and staggered along in the snow until my sense of physical discomfort cooled my reckless mood. I began to think that I must stop somewhere or I should perish in the cold. Then I remembered my sister Effie, who had gone South on a bridal tour.”

She looked from him to Mrs. Griffin, with a smile in her blue eyes.

“You were expecting to hear something tragic, but my story is the most prosaic one imaginable. I was not meant for a heroine at all; I am too afraid of discomfort and trouble,” she said, with a soft little laugh. “When I started I was quite desperate; I did not care where I went. But when the snow beat into my face and chilled my feet, I became discouraged. I did not want to go back, but I longed intensely to be with some one who loved me, and to be warm and comfortable.”

“Poor dear!” sighed Mrs. Griffin, sympathetically.

“I had some money in my pocket,” continued Aline. “Papa had given it me to buy a black silk dress. I walked to the next station from here, bought a ticket to Florida, and went to Effie and Dr. Anthony. You see, Mr. Delaney,

there was nothing remarkable at all in my second disappearance from home," she said.

"You should have written to your parents," he said.

"I am ashamed to say that I would not do so," she answered. "I thought that if I let them all think that I was dead, my father would drop the subject of the threatened duel. I did not want him to be killed, neither did I want you to be hurt, for, angry as I was, I shrunk from the thought of bloodshed. So I would not write myself, nor would I suffer Effie to write."

"You would have spared us all much unhappiness had you done so," he said.

"I came home to Maywood with them at last," she said. "By that time they had argued me into a more reasonable mood. I was willing to return home; but that morning they came over to Chester I did not come with them. I sent them before me as *avant couriers*, with the caution not to tell them unless they were very anxious over me. They brought back such news that I was stunned. Delaney House burned to the ground; the deformed maniac dead; you wounded by my father's hand and your whole story revealed; my own name cleared from obloquy, and my friends all ready to crave my pardon for their unkindness. It took my breath away."

He smiled in spite of his pain as he saw the sudden joy-light flash over her face. What mattered all that had happened to him so that she was saved, this fair sweet girl who had suffered so unjustly.

"You must be very angry with papa, aren't you, Mr. Delaney?" she asked, wistfully.

"Angry? No! I have never blamed him. In his place I should have acted the same, no doubt," he replied, calmly.

"But I am very sorry, and so is papa. I came over this morning, and it was one of the first things he told me. He would give anything in the world to undo what he has done!" exclaimed Aline.

"Anything?" he repeated.

"Anything!" she reiterated, earnestly.

"And you, Aline?" he questioned.

“I feel worse than papa over it,” said the girl in her frank, innocent way.

CHAPTER LXVI.

Mrs. Griffin had slipped out of the room quietly with her tray of empty dishes a moment before. They were alone. Aline shivered a little. He looked so wan and ill, what if he should die here alone with her?

She half rose from her seat, trembling with agitation, and made a step toward the door.

“Are you going so soon?” he asked wistfully.

It flashed over her that it was cowardly to leave him alone because she was afraid to see him die. When he held out his hand to her she went up bravely to his side.

“I will try not to be afraid,” she said to herself.

“You are going before I have said all that I wish to say to you,” he said.

A sudden light flashed over her face.

“Oh, and there is something I must say to you—I had nearly forgotten!” she exclaimed.

“Well,” he asked, looking up into the wide blue eyes regarding him attentively.

“They told me you had made a will—that you had left me a great fortune. Oh, Mr. Delaney, that must not be! I cannot take it!” she cried, earnestly.

“You must, Aline. It is but a small reparation for all the sorrow I have caused you,” he said.

“But I do not wish to do so. I refuse to accept it!” she cried.

“You are a rash and foolish child, or you would not refuse to accept a fortune, Aline,” he said.

“No matter. I will not have it,” she said, resolutely.

“You do not know what pleasures it will procure you,” he argued.

“I shall not care for them,” she replied. “You must leave your fortune to some one else, Mr. Delaney.”

“To whom?” he asked.

“I do not know. Any one you wish,” she replied, indifferently.

All in a moment he caught her hand with a strength she had not deemed him possessed of, and drew her toward him.

“Aline, darling,” he whispered, with his lips very near to her cheek, “will you not let me leave the fortune to my wife?”

She staggered back from him, the color flowing out of her cheeks.

“Your wife?” she faltered.

“Yes, my wife,” he said. “Oh, Aline, do not turn away from me so coldly. I love you, my darling, and I could die happy if I could call you my wife, if but once before that great final hour. Oh, Aline, will you give yourself to me for the little while I have to live? I do not deserve such happiness, I know, but it will be such a boon to me that you cannot refuse. It is only for a little while, you know, only to soothe a dying hour!”

She gazed at him, bewildered by his eloquence, her face growing deadly white.

“Do you hear me, Aline?” he asked. “I am asking you to be my wife. I love you devotedly. I have loved you ever since I first met you. Will you not grant my request?”

“I do not want to be married, Mr. Delaney, and—and—you are only asking me because—of—that—night,” she said, slowly, with downcast eyes.

“On my honor, no, Aline. I am asking you because you won my heart long before that dreadful night, and because it would make me happy in dying to know that I had left you my fortune and my proud old name. It is a most honorable name. Aline, even you, so beautiful and sweet, need not disdain it,” he said.

She did not answer a word. She seemed like one dazed by the suddenness of all this.

“You said you would do anything to atone for your father’s sin, Aline,” he said, earnestly. “Will you do this? Would it be very irksome to be my wife a few days or hours, as the case might be? It would only be a little while, remember.”

She raised her large, earnest eyes to his face.

“It would be only a little while—that is true,” she said reflectively. “I wonder what my father would wish me to do?”

“Will you let me ask him?” said Oran Delaney, eagerly.

“Yes, you may ask him, and I will do just what he tells me. I owe him that much obedience in return for all the sorrow I have caused him,” said Aline, with her pretty, childish directness.

CHAPTER LXVII.

“I will do just what papa tells me,” said Aline, trustingly, and an eager light of joy gleamed in Oran Delaney’s eyes. He fancied that Mr. Rodney would be kind to him—that he would give him the boon he craved.

He was right in his surmise. The lawyer was disposed to be very kind to the man whom he had wounded near unto death. Now that the truth had come to light, now that his beautiful daughter was safe at home again, he was sorely repentant for what he had done. He was haunted by remorse. He would have given anything in his power to undo the deed he had done in his bitter wrath.

And now when Oran Delaney told him in a few frank words that his descent into the dark grave would be soothed if he might call Aline his bride before he died, he was most eager to grant him this boon. Aline, touched with a strange awe at the nearing presence of death, and willing to atone for her father’s sin, consented at once to give her hand to the man who at best could claim it but a few short hours.

Every one of the household was quite willing for this strange marriage. They argued that it did not matter, even although Aline did not love him, as it was for such a very little while.

So the very next morning there was a strange and quiet marriage in the sick-room. Aline, arrayed in all the wedding finery of Effie, and lovely as a dream in the new gravity and dignity that had settled upon her, stood by the sick-bed with her hand in Oran Delaney’s and responded to the solemn marriage service that made her his own until Death should part them—Death, that stood silent and unseen in the room even now, fearful of being robbed of his prey.

Oran Delaney’s voice rang clear and steady in the beautiful responses. Aline’s was low and firm. As in a dream, she felt the wedding-ring slipped on her finger, she heard the clergyman’s blessing. There was a little stir about her, and then mamma and Effie were kissing and crying over her, her

father and Dr. Anthony were pressing her hand. She shook herself free from them all presently, and tried to realize what had happened to her. She, Aline Rodney, who, such a little, little while ago had been a willful, thoughtless child, was married! She was no longer Miss Rodney—she was Mrs. Delaney, and in a short while she would be a widow. How strange, how dream-like it all seemed.

She turned suddenly and looked at her bridegroom. He was regarding her with a wistful yearning in his beautiful dark eyes. At the same moment Effie whispered in her ear:

“Your husband would like to kiss you, darling.”

She went to his side and bent her head so that he might kiss her cheek. He pressed his mustached lips softly against it, whispering, fondly:

“Thank you, and God bless you, my wife.”

And then the dark head fell and the eyes closed. For a minute they all thought that he was dead, for no breath or pulsation could be detected. Mr. Rodney was in despair.

“Oh, this is too dreadful!” he cried. “I had hoped that he would rally, that God would spare his life, and that I might be saved the wretchedness of knowing myself a murderer. And you, too, my poor child, are a widow in the hour of your bridal!”

CHAPTER LXVIII.

But Dr. Anthony, who had been making a careful examination of the patient, looked around at these words, and said, hurriedly:

“No, no, you are mistaken. I can detect some signs of life yet. It is only a deep swoon. Let all leave the room except the nurse and myself, and let the attending physician be sent for immediately.”

They all retired, and Aline went to her own room to strip off the wedding finery. Then she locked herself in for the remainder of the day.

Mr. Lane came that day fresh from an unsuccessful quest after Aline, and was amazed and delighted when he heard that she had come home, and that she had been in Florida all the time with Dr. and Mrs. Anthony. He grew red and pale by turns when he heard that Aline was married to Mr. Delaney. She was the only woman he had ever loved. A swift pain tore his heart as he realized that she was lost to him forever, for although her husband was dying, she would be too far above him socially as the wealthy widow of Oran Delaney for him to ever aspire to her hand.

He remained silent a few minutes fighting down his pain and disappointment, and at length reason came to his aid and told him it was better so. He was quite old enough to be Aline's father, and besides she was socially his superior. He put away his broken dream from him with a suppressed sigh, and declared that he was glad that all had turned out so well. All would be well with Aline now. Fate had settled her future for her. No one would ever dare to asperse her now when she bore the proud name of Delaney.

He would have liked to see her and congratulate her, but they told him that she was locked into her room, refusing admittance to any, so he went away, leaving his best wishes for her and her husband if he ever rallied sufficiently to receive them. That night he went back to New York, and in his busy life tried to forget the sweet, luring face of the girl who had lured him into such a sweet, momentary dream of domestic happiness. He never loved again,

never wooed nor wedded. A memory of Aline always remained with him, but it became in time only a sweet and pleasant one, unmixed with pain. Several years after that day of disappointment and pain, he met her in New York, and then he saw the wisdom of his loss. She was far too brilliant and beautiful ever to have linked her lot with his. He smiled and murmured to himself: "Fate is above us all!"

Aline was very sweet and kind to him when they met. She had heard the story of his attachment to herself long before that, and at first she had been inclined to laugh at the old bachelor's romance, but when she heard how kind a motive had blended with his love, she felt more kindly toward him. In her youth and beauty and perfect happiness she could well spare a kindly thought to one who had loved her in vain.

She laid her round white arms fondly about the neck of him who had made her life so bright and blessed.

"I am sorry for him, dear," she said. "But I never could have loved any one but you, my own, own darling one."

CHAPTER LXIX.

Aline's momentous bridal day waned slowly to its close.

The physicians remained with Mr. Delaney all day, then left him to Mrs. Griffin's care and went away. He was better, they said, but he must have careful nursing.

The wintery day was fading into darkness. Mrs. Griffin had slipped out for the tea and toast again, and Mr. Delaney lay among his snowy pillows, gazing thoughtfully into the bright fire. His lips moved, and he murmured, sadly:

"She will hate me, perhaps."

The door opened softly. His bride of a day came gliding in, clad in her simple dark-blue dress, the loose curls falling on her shoulders.

"You are better?" she said, coming up to him. "Ah, I thought you were dead this morning!"

She sat down in a low chair by the side of the bed, very close to him. His heart beat with sudden rapture.

"Yes, I thought that I was dying, too," he said. "You remember that moment when I kissed your cheek? Well, just then I had a sensation as of falling from a great height. I thought it was the last of earth, that I had looked my last on your beloved face, that I was surely dying!"

"We all thought so," she replied, calmly and gravely.

He reached out and took her hand in both his own.

"Aline, will you look at me?" he asked.

She lifted the shyly drooping lashes from her violet eyes and gazed into his face, frankly and steadily.

"Aline, do you realize that you are really my wife?—that you belong wholly to me?" he asked her.

“Yes,” she answered quietly.

“Is there any sorrow, any regret, any repulsion in the thought?” he inquired, and she answered in a low voice:

“No.”

“I have something to tell you,” he said, “but oh, Aline, I am afraid.”

She grew very pale at those words from his lips. She looked at him anxiously.

“You need not be afraid to tell me. Go on. I will try to bear it,” she said, with a falter in her voice.

“But, Aline, my own, my darling, you must not hate me for this,” he said, passionately. “Indeed I did not know! I believed I was surely doomed! And, now, now if only you could forgive me for my unconscious deception, I should be the happiest man in the world.”

She bent her blue eyes on him full of reproach and pain.

“Happy—at dying? Happy—at leaving *me*?” she said, in a low, strange, bewildered voice.

And for a moment they gazed wonderingly at each other. Then he spoke—almost incredulously:

“Aline, have you misunderstood me? I have been trying to tell you that the doubt is over. I have rallied from my illness! Love and joy have wrought a miracle! *I shall live!*”

“You—will—live?” she gasped, and stared at him, speechless.

“Oh, my dear, are you so sorry? Do you regret that you gave yourself to me? Oh, I would far sooner have died than this!” cried out Oran Delaney, in a passion of despair.

But she caught the hand he threw out in his frenzy of despair and pressed her lips upon it.

“Ah, Heaven, how glad I am!” she cried; and he answered, wonderingly:

“And you are not sorry—you do not hate me, Aline?”

“No, no, I love you,” she answered, hiding her face against his hands. “I think I must have loved you long, but I did not know it until I believed you dying. Oh, I thank Heaven that it has so kindly granted my prayer!”

“Your prayer, darling?” he said, gathering her in both arms tightly, as if he never meant to let her go again.

She whispered, with her lips against his cheek:

“I have been locked into my room all day, Oran, praying, praying, on my knees, that your life might be spared to me. And Heaven has granted my prayer. You will live for me, my husband!”

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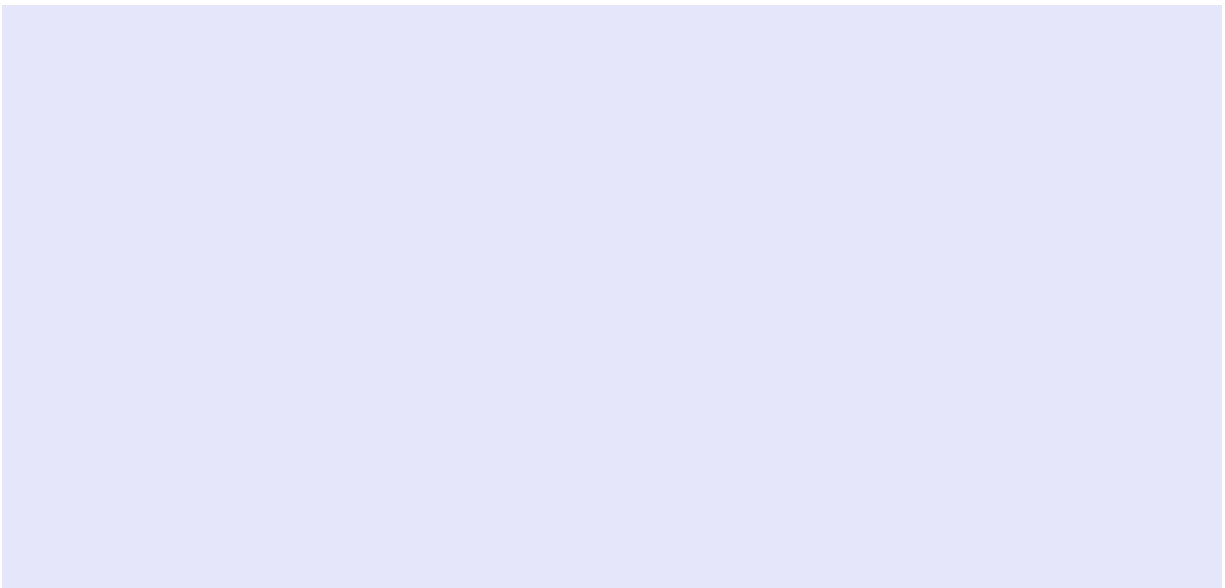
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This novel first appeared as a serial in the *Fireside Companion* story paper from October 1, 1883 to February 4, 1884.

Obvious typographical errors have been silently corrected.

Some inconsistent hyphenation (childlike vs. child-like) was retained from the original.

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