

washed her hands, as if she felt his kiss had soiled them.

Then she flung herself on her bed, and broke into a passion of tears, beating on the pillow with her clenched hands.

"One can always get what one doesn't want—always the one—that one doesn't want—" she groaned wearily.

After a time she grew more quiet, and lay with wide eyes very still—thinking. She realized that she had reached a crisis in her life, which she would have to face with determination.

There could be no more drifting—no more putting off of the evil day. When it came to a battle of wills with her mother, Margaret knew she had no mean adversary to fight—and she had also a shrewd idea that Lord Wallsend would not easily be beaten back.

"I do not love him—I do not love him!" reiterated the girl to herself again and again, as if the weary refrain relieved her wounded feelings, and were a justification even to herself for rebelling against her mother's wishes.

"After all, it is not mamma who has to live with him all her life—it is I—I—I! She has no right to force me in this way, it is abominable!"

Her indignation rose again to choking point and her eyes flashed dangerously.

"No! I will not stand it—come what will—I will not stand it."

Lady Assitas, for her part, grown wise by past experiences, left Margaret severely alone. She was accustomed to carry out her own plans relentlessly, but without arguments, for she considered arguments were tiresome and lacking in dignity. All the same, she was quite aware that Margaret, more than either of her other daughters, possessed a will of her own, and she rather feared there was going to be trouble over this affair.

Hour after hour, in the solitude of her own room, Margaret's busy brain was racing to and fro—forming and rejecting plans.

She rose at last with a look of fixed determination on her face and, ringing for her maid, ordered dinner to be brought up to her room, after which she sat down, and for the space of an hour wrote steadily. When she had finished, she looked with satisfaction at the pile of letters beside her, and drew a sigh of relief.

"There! That ought to end the matter once for all," she said, as she folded up her writing pad and put away her stylo pen. Then she rose wearily and stood looking out of the window into the darkening night.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Fate Takes a Hand in the Game.

IT was quite by accident that John Grey saw, amongst the fashionable events of the week, "that a marriage had been arranged between the Honourable Margaret Assitas, youngest daughter of Lord and Lady Assitas, of Stone Hall, Kent, and Lord Wallsend, of Wallsend Priory."

At first he read the words mechanically and then as their meaning became clearer to him, the world went suddenly black before his eyes, and in letters of fire there seemed written the words: "A marriage has been arranged—a marriage has been arranged!"

"Could a marriage be arranged?"

He asked himself the question with stupefied reiteration.

At the moment John Grey was sitting on a seat in the Park. In an hour he was due to take the car round to the Maisonette for Miss Pragg. He had strolled out to get a paper, and sat down idly unfolding it, intending to glance over it for a few minutes before returning to the mews, and that was what he had seen.

The paper fell from his hands, and he stared with eyes darkened by pain at those flaming words which met him wherever he lifted them.

"A marriage has been arranged!" Could anything in life be arranged?

The answer came to him, as a little boy of about five years old, dressed in a white drill sailor suit, broke away from his nurse and flashed across the road, just as a large, private motor

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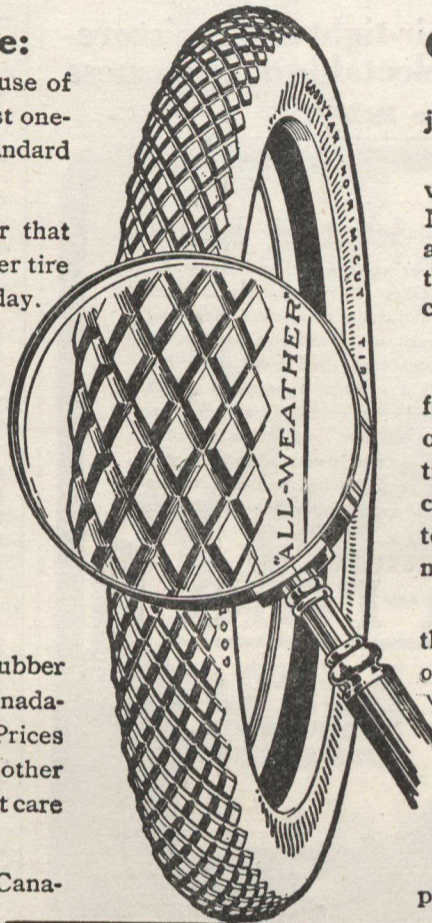
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