

**HELENA GRAHAM,**  
—OR—  
**THE BRIDE'S SACRIFICE.**  
CHAPTER XII.

With her hands clenched until the nails sank into the quivering flesh, her teeth set hard, her deep, labored breathing, her passion-convulsed face, she looked more like an enraged pythoness than a frail girl learning for the first time her lover's infidelity.

She required no further proof now. He whom she would have trusted with her soul's salvation was false. And, oh! what is there more terrible in this world than to learn that one whom we love and trust has proven untrue?

Helena had loved as she had done everything else—madly; had trusted blindly; had worshipped idolatrously, adoring man instead of God; and now this awakening was doubly terrible. Had Jessie been in her place, she would have wept and sobbed in the utter abandon of sorrow; but her grief would have been nothing compared with the dry, burning despair in those wild black eyes.

Now that she had learned the worst, her fiery, tempestuous fierceness passed away, and there fell a great calm—a calm all the more terrific after her late storm of passion.

"And so I am forsaken," she said, in a deep, hollow voice, "and for her—this pretty blue-eyed baby. I that he promised to love through life and beyond death. Saints in heaven! shall he do this and live?"

"You?" said Jessie, lifting her pale terrified face. "And did he promise to love you too?"

"Yes, learn it, and let it whelm your soul with shame. Before he saw you, before he knew you, he loved me; and I was to be his wife. Yes, weep, and wail, and sob; your tears shall not soon dry. You have caused him to forget his vows, his honor, his pledged faith, his promised love to me, and you must pay the penalty."

"Oh, I never knew it—I never knew it!" wailed Jessie, wringing her hands. "And as he has been false to me, so likewise will he be false to you. You are the cause of this treachery, of his broken vows, his perjured soul, you are the cause of all; and thank you such love can be blessed!"

"Forgive me! O Helena, forgive me!" still wailed Jessie, in a dying voice.

"May heaven never forgive me if I do!" cried Helena, with impassioned vehemence. "Think you, girl, I am one to be won by tears and protestations? Fought you should have thought of all this when you listened to his unlawful love."

"Oh, I did not know! As heaven hears me, I did not know. I would have died sooner than listened to him, had I known."

"Pshaw!" said Helena, with a sudden gleam of her dark eyes.

"How—how! Only say how I shall redeem my error! Let me know how I may atone!"

"Atone!—you?" said Helena, with a withering sneer. "I tell you, girl, if your life could be prolonged for a thousand years, and every second of that time spent in torture, you could not atone for the wrong you have done me. But make such expiation as you can—prove at least that there is some truth in your words."

"O Helena, I would willingly die if I could redeem my fault."

"Your death would not redeem it. What is your paltry life to me? Neither do I require it—the sacrifice I would have you make is easier. Give him up!"

"Oh, anything but that! Helena, that is worse than death," cried the stricken child-bride, in a fainting voice.

"Did you not say you would atone?—prove it now—give him up—it is my right, and I demand it. Promise."

"Oh, I cannot—I cannot!" moaned Jessie, shrinking down, down, as though she would never rise again.

"And this is your repentance—this your atonement for what you have done?" said Helena, stepping back, and regarding her with superb scorn. "This then is the end of all your fine promises. Girl, I tell you, you dare not; it is at your peril you see him more. My claim is above yours. I warn you, I insist, I demand you to give him up. It is my right, and you shall do it. What are you, little reptile, that you should stand in the path of Helena Graham?"

"I am his wife," arose to the lips of Jessie.

That little sentence she well knew would have silenced Helena's claim for ever; but she remembered her promise in time, and was silent.

"Rise, girl, don't cower there at my feet," said Helena, stepping back in bitter contempt. "It is your place, it is true; but his love has ennobled you, since it has raised you to the rank of my rival. Am I to understand you to promise your connection with him is at an end?"

"Miss Helena, I cannot. I love him."

And pale and sad, Jessie rose and stood before her.

The blaze, the dark, scorching, flaming glance from those eyes of fire might have killed her.

"And you dare to say this to me?" she said, or rather hissed, through her tightly clenched teeth. "Audacious girl, do you not fear that I will strike you dead where you stand?"

Again Jessie thought of her vision, and trembling, terrified, fainting, she clung to a rock for support, unable to speak. With all the fiery, long-slumbering passion of her lion-heart aroused, the fierce, dark girl before her looked desperate enough for anything.

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Guelph, 1874. d2aw-w

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