

so uncongenial to one of your enterprising disposition.—That is better, Lenore, child; let us have a little more light on the scene—it is a pleasure to look on the face of an honest man—and we may, perchance, need it all before we have done. More light, girl, do you hear!—And now, perhaps, Sir Derwent Varrel will favour us with some explanation—any, the most simple will of course do for me—of how he came to be hidden, like a common thief, behind the curtains of my drawing-room.”

Varrel's pale olive cheek flushed deeply at this little speech, and a dangerous light began to glitter in his eyes as he stepped out of his hiding-place, and advanced into the room.

“Colonel Lomond shall have an explanation as simple as he desires,” he said. Then he stopped to refresh his nerves with a pinch of snuff.

“You are aware, sir,” he resumed, “that I love your daughter; that several months ago I would fain have made her my wife; and that your consent alone was wanting to such a union.”

“Precisely so,” said Colonel Lomond in the iciest of tones, as he balanced the handle of his riding-whip between his thumb and finger.

“You might prevent our marriage, sir, but you could not keep us from loving one another,” said Sir Derwent proudly.

“In other words, my daughter had still sufficient respect left for me to refuse to wed you without my consent; but you had not sufficient respect for her to refrain from using your influence over her weak girl's will to induce her to deceive her father, and to consent to nocturnal assignations with a libertine like yourself. Love! The word is sullied in coming from such lips as yours. You and I, Sir Derwent Varrel, had high words together six months ago, and I told you then that I would rather see my daughter lying in her coffin than wedded to such a one as you; and those words I repeat again to-night—Come hither, girl,” he added, seizing Lenore roughly by the wrist “come hither, and choose at once and for ever between me and this man who has taught thee to lie to thy father. What do I say? Nay, there can be no choice between such as this man and me. I tell thee, girl, that thy ignorance cannot fathom the depths of such iniquity as his. A gambler so deeply tainted that in no society of gentlemen is he allowed to play; a libertine so vile, that to couple a woman's name with his is a passport to dishonour; a sharper and blackleg, who has been twice hooted off the Newmarket course; a bankrupt so desperately involved that only by a wealthy marriage—with such a one, for example as the heiress of Gledhills—can he hope even partially to retrieve his fortunes. Bah! what can thy country-bred ignorance know of these things?”

“Hard words, Colonel Lomond, very hard words,” said Sir Derwent disdainfully; “but I am happy to think, utterly incapable of proof.”

“Hard words! ay, hard enough to have moved an innocent man to righteous anger, but not, as it seems, to flutter thy slow-beating pulses ever so faintly; and that because thou knowest them to be true. Proof! Here's one out of a dozen. Who lured sweet Mary Doris from her home in yonder valley, and hid her away in London past the finding of her friends? Who held the simple village beauty lightly for a month or two, and then discarded her to starve or die as she might think best? Who but you, Sir Derwent Varrel, unless this letter also lies—a letter signed with your name, and found in the poor child's pocket when she lay with white staring face and dripping hair in the dead-house by the river. And now it is my daughter thou seekest to entrap!”

As Colonel Lomond drew from his pocket the letter of which he had been speaking, Lenore, with a low cry of anguish, sank fainting to the floor; and the horror-stricken Varrel reeled backward like one suddenly stabbed.

“Reptile! it is time the score between us were settled,” said Colonel Lomond with a venomous ferocity of tone. “Only one of us two must leave this room alive.”

“I cannot—I dare not fight with you,” murmured Varrel.

“O ho! do not think to escape me thus. You refuse to fight. Then take the punishment of cowards.” And with that the heavy thong of Colonel Lomond's riding-whip whistled through the air, and came down on Varrel's neck and shoulders twice, twisting round his face on the second occasion, and leaving a thin livid wheal across his cheek where it had cut into the flesh. Varrel's first impulse was to shrink backward with a mingled cry of rage and pain; but the next instant he closed with the colonel, and wresting the whip from his hands, flung it to the other end of the room.

“Give me a sword—a pistol—a weapon of any kind!” he cried hoarsely. “This vile treatment absolves me from all consequences. Colonel Lomond, your blood be upon your own head!”

The colonel smiled sweetly on him. “Well spoken, he said, “only that you express yourself somewhat after the Furioso fashion. Your cry to arms is worthy of all praise, and I hasten to comply with it. In this cabinet, sir, are a couple of as pretty playthings as ever gladdened the eyes of a gentleman. *Voilà!* they are both alike in every particular. The choice is yours.”

Varrel's fingers closed over the hilt of one of the rapiers thus presented to him; and while he tried its edge and temper, by running his finger and thumb appreciatively along its length, and by bending its point back nearly to the hilt, Colonel Lomond disembarassed himself of the cumbersome overcoat in which he was enveloped; and next minute the two men fronted each other.

“Gardez-vous, monsieur!” cried Colonel Lomond as he made the first pass.

It was thoroughly understood by both of them that they were fighting for dear life—that neither of them must look for mercy from the other. Both of them were excellent swordsmen, but Sir Derwent had the advantages of youth and agility on his side, and he pressed the colonel hardily, who, while keeping up his defence warily, yet felt himself compelled to retreat step by step before the desperate lunges of his antagonist.

The clash of the swords seemed to rouse Lenore from the stupor into which she had fallen. With her hands pressed to her temples, and with glaring eyeballs, that followed every movement of the combatants, she staggered to her feet. Her lips moved, but no sound came from them. Perhaps she was asking herself whether it were not all a hideous nightmare, which the first breath of reality would dissipate for ever. With the same mingled look of horror and unbelief on her face, she watched the two men coming slowly down the room again, for Colonel Lomond was still slightly overborne by his more youthful antagonist. The rapiers clashed together; bright sparks flew from their polished blue-black surface, as they struck each other, and bent and quivered like things of life in the grasp of the sinewy hands that held them.

The combatants were just opposite the spot where the half-demented Lenore was standing like one incapable of motion, when suddenly, at a movement in tierce, the point of Colonel Lomond's rapier snapped off; an advantage which Varrel instantly followed up with a dexterous stroke, which sent the colonel's broken weapon flying across the room. Lenore, with the quick instinct of love, divined her father's danger; and the same moment that the rapier was twisted out of his hand, she sprang forward with a wild inarticulate cry to shield him with her body from what she knew must follow; and the sword of Varrel, aimed at her father's heart with all the strength which hate and the desire of vengeance could lend to such a thrust, passed instead through the body of the hapless girl. Her father's arms caught, her as she was falling. “Papa—kiss—forgive,” she murmured in his ear; then a stream of blood burst from her lips; she shuddered slightly, and was dead.

Colonel Lomond passed his quivering lips tenderly on her forehead; then lifting her in his arms, he carried her to a couch. “Lie there for a little while, sweet foolish darling,” he said. “Perhaps I may join thee on thy journey before long.”

Varrel, who was like a man half-crazed, would have rung for help, but Colonel Lomond, by a gesture, forbade him to do so. “You and I, sir,” said the colonel, “have still our little business to arrange.”

“Great Heaven! what would you more?” exclaimed Sir Derwent.

“Revenge my daughter's death!” said Lomond gloomily.

“Her death was a pure accident.”

“Granted. She died to save my life, and that life I now devote to avenging her memory. What I said before, I say again—only one of us two shall quit this room alive. Here are two pistols: one of them is loaded, the other is unloaded. Choose one of them. In three minutes, that clock on the chimney-piece will strike the hour. At the first stroke, we will fire across this table; and may Heaven have mercy on the soul of one of us!”

“It would be murder!” said Varrel in a low voice, while a cold sweat broke out on his ashen face.

“Call it by what name you will,” said Lomond; “but as I have said, so it shall be. Dare to refuse, and by the great Fiend of Darkness, whose true son you are, I will thrash you with yonder whip within an inch of your life, and send you forth into the world branded for ever as a coward and a rogue!”

Sir Derwent wiped the perspiration off his forehead with his lace-bordered handkerchief, and his dry lips moved in faint protest. His courage was beginning to waver. The slow patient ferocity of his enemy was not without its effect upon him.

“Choose!” said Colonel Lomond as he laid a brace of pistols on the table. Varrel hesitated for an instant which to pick, and Lomond smiled grimly. No fresh arrangement of position was necessary, they being already on opposite sides of the table, on which poor Lenore's embroidery was still lying, as she had cast it aside in the first flutter of hearing her lover's signal.

“Colonel Lomond, I must make a last protest against this bloody business,” said Varrel.

Again the colonel smiled. “In ten seconds,” he said, “the clock will strike. Be ready.”

There was a great contrast between the two men as they stood thus, fronting what for one of them must be inevitable death. Colonel Lomond's bronzed cheek looked even darker than usual, and his eyes seemed to burn with intense hate as he stood gazing at his antagonist from under his lowering brows; but his extended arm was firm as a bar of steel. Varrel was evidently nervous. His lips had faded to a dull bluish white; he pressed one hand to his chest occasionally, as if to still the throbbing heart beneath; while the other, which held the pistol, trembled slightly in spite of him.

Four seconds—three seconds—two seconds. The deathly brooding stillness that pervaded the room was something awful. One second. The silvery bell of the little French clock had not completed its first stroke before the two triggers were pulled. A flash, a report, and a gush of smoke from one of the weapons, and Sir Derwent Varrel, shot through the heart, fell back dead.

“So perishes a thorough scoundrel,” said Colonel Lomond as he gazed into the face of his dead enemy.

Suddenly a door opened, and shewed a very old lady, with white hair, and clad in a white dressing-robe, standing in the entrance. From the movements of her hands, you understood at once that she was blind, or nearly so.

“Henry! Henry! where are you?” she cried. “Some one fired a pistol just now. Oh, tell me that you are not hurt!” and she advanced a step or two into the room.

A spasm of anguish passed over the face of Colonel Lomond. “I am here and well, mother,” he said. “Pray, return to your own room. I am sorry to have disturbed you.”

“And Lenore,” said the old lady plaintively, “why has not Lenore been to kiss me, and say goodnight? Has the child gone to bed?”

“Lenore is asleep, mother,” said the colonel in a whisper. “We must not disturb her. She shall come to you in the morning.”