

my secret? Then Myrrhina told me that you would be here to-night."

She seemed to have something more to say that would not out. She looked at the Briton with expectant, almost imploring eyes; but Esca was young and frank and simple, so he waited for her to go on, and Valeria, discouraged and intimidated for the first time, proceeded in a colder and more becoming tone.

"The packet with which I intrust you must be delivered by yourself into the hands of Licinius. Not another creature must set eyes on it. No one must know that you have received it from me, nor, indeed, that you have been here to-night. If necessary you must guard it with your life! Can I depend upon you?"

He was beginning to feel that he could not depend upon himself much longer. The lights, the perfumes, the locality, the seductive beauty near him, so lovely and so kind, were making wild work with his senses and his reason. Nevertheless, the whole position seemed so strange, so impossible, that he could hardly believe he was awake. There was plenty of pride in his character, but no leavening of vanity; and, like many another gentle and inexperienced nature, he shrank from offending a woman's delicacy, with a repugnance that in some cases is exceedingly puzzling and provoking to the woman herself. So he put a strong constraint upon his feelings and undertook the delivery of the medicine with incredible simplicity and composure. The statue of Hermes at the door could not have looked colder and more impenetrable. She was a little at a loss. She must detain him at all hazards, for she felt that when once gone he would be gone for ever. She determined to lead him into conversation; and she chose the topic which, originating, perhaps, in the instinctive jealousy of a woman, was of all others the most subversive of her plans.

"I saw you once again," she said, but it was in the hurry and confusion of that sudden broil. It was no fault of mine that the priests committed so gross an outrage on the poor thing you rescued. I would have helped you myself had you required assistance, but you carried her off as an eagle takes a kid. What became of the girl?"

The question was accompanied by a sharp inquisitive glance, and a forced smile of very perceptible annoyance wreathed her lip when she perceived Esca's embarrassed manner and reddening brow; but she had unwittingly called up the Briton's good genius, and for all women on earth, save one, he was a man of marble once more.

"I placed her in safety with her father," he replied; adding, with an assumption of deep humility, "Will you please to give me your commands and let me depart?"

Valeria was so totally unused to opposition in any of her whims or caprices that she could scarcely believe this obvious indifference was real. She persuaded herself that the Briton was so overpowered by her condescension, as to be only afraid of trespassing too far on such unexpected kindness, and she resolved that it should be no fault of hers if he were not quickly undeceived. She sank upon the couch in her most bewitching attitude, and, looking fondly up in his face, bade him fetch her tablets from the writing-stand. "For," said she, "I have not yet even prepared my communication to Licinius. Shall you be very weary of me, if I keep you my prisoner so long?"

Was it accident or design that entangled those rosy fingers with Esca's, as she took the tablets from his hand? Was it accident or design that shook the hair off her face, and loosed the the rich brown clusters to fall across her glowing neck and bosom? It was surely strange that when she bent over the tablets her cheek turned pale, and

her hand shook so that she could not form a letter on the yielding wax. She beckoned him nearer and bent her head towards him till the drooping curls trailed across his arm.

"I cannot write," said she, in trembling accents. "Something seems to oppress me—I am faint—I can scarcely breathe—Myrrhina shall give you the message to-morrow. In the meantime, we are alone. Esca, you will not betray me. I can depend upon you. You are my slave, is it not so? This shall be your manacle!"

While she yet spoke, she took the bracelet from her arm and tried to clasp it round his wrist; but the glittering fetter was too narrow for the large-boned Briton, and she could not make it meet. Pressing it hard with both hands, she looked up in his face and laughed.

One responsive glance, the faintest shadow of yielding on those impassible features, and she would have told him all. But it came not. He shook the bracelet from his arm; and while he did so, she recovered herself, with the instantaneous self-command women seem to gather from an emergency.

"It was but to try your honesty!" she said, very haughtily, and rising to her feet. "A man who is not to be tempted, even by gold, can be safely trusted in such an affair as mine. You may go now," she added, with the slightest bend of her head. "To-morrow, if I require you, I shall take care that you hear from me through Myrrhina."

She looked after him as he disappeared under the silken hangings of the portal, her face quivered, her hands heaved, and she clenched both hands till the round white arms grew hard as marble. Then she bit her lip once, savagely, and so seemed to regain her accustomed composure, and the usual dignity of her bearing.

Nevertheless, when the despised bracelet caught her eye, lying neglected on the couch, she dashed it fiercely down, and stamped upon it, and crushed and ground the jewel beneath her heel against the floor.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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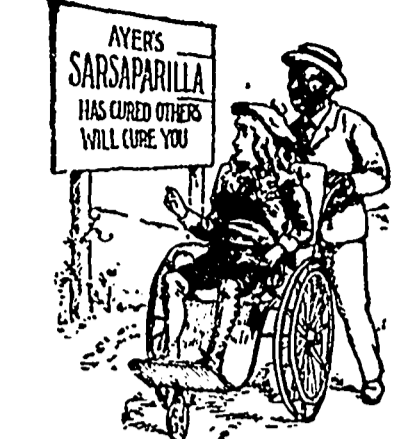
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