

MARCIA'S MADONNA.

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(Conclusion.)



DO hope I am not an intruder," he said to her on the way, "but if I am, I am a very happy one, Miss Marcia."

"There can be no intrusion where there is real friendship,"

was her guarded reply, after which she smiled very sweetly and reiterated her good-night.

She looked in at the guest-room on her way to her own apartments; it was aired and ready, with a good maple knot burning brightly in the fireplace. "It was very curious," she was saying to herself. "Winter—Christmas—and Mr. Walton in the house!" She strayed to the window. The storm was over, and beams of broken moonlight were scattered about the grounds. Gradually her head drooped until it leaned against the casement, and then by turns her eyes grew bright and dim, her lips quivered and smiled, her brow contracted and relaxed. A strange, wild Christmas reverie it must have been—yet not more strange nor wild, perhaps, than a thousand others within the narrow radius of that dull town. Whoever we are, and wherever we are, we see things in the Christmas moonlight that only God and ourselves know anything about—things that might have been, and to our sorrow, were not and shall never be; things that may yet be—if not here and now on this trite planet and during this transient life, then farther on, and later on, in a better place and time in God's safe keeping. Such things Miss Marcia's wistful, dreamy eyes were made to conjure in the Christmas moonlight.

She turned from the window suddenly and drew the curtains together. A Sixtine

Madonna looked tenderly down at her through the fitful firelight. It was a picture she had loved from childhood. She got up on the chair beneath it, and with half-blurred eyes she kissed the Mother's cheek, and laid her own against it while she muttered her nightly prayer: "To thee, and to thy blessed charge and special keeping I commend myself body and soul. My every hope and every joy, my every trouble and every sorrow, my life and my life's end I commit to thee—that by thy intercession all that I have may be ordered, all that I do disposed according to thy will and that of thy divine Son," after which she crept softly away to her own apartment and was soon sleeping a dreamless, heavy sleep.

Mr. Walton and his host smoked by the fire below for hours after Marcia's departure; they talked about many things and argued from their different standpoints in friendly controversy until the small hours startled them. Then Marcia's father escorted his guest upstairs and left him to his own reflections.

It was not likely, late as it was, and tired and worried as the travelling and the unpleasant news had left him, that he was going to tumble into bed as usual and forget his cares in oblivious sleep. Indeed when he had closed his door upon his host he felt as if he had only just then wakened up to a full and proper realization of the strange experience that had befallen him. He drew a chair up to the fire and fell into it anyhow, and let his thoughts so long restrained flow as they listed. Now and again the firelight leaped—just as his heart did—and startled him into some new groove. Once he lifted his eyes and saw the sweet Madonna looking at him. In the warm glow of the maple knots she seemed to live and breathe. He let his gaze rest on her until heart-aching memories of the mother who had taught him to love and reverence this type of truest womanhood flooded his mind and soul. He