

friend's—or rather my enemy's—speech.

"Stay, Miss Merton. I want a word with you before you leave this room and house."

She held out an open letter towards Grace Merton as she said these words.

"This epistle belongs to you, I believe, since it is in your handwriting. I picked it up in the hall. As it began with my name I read the first two lines, but soon discovered from the tenor of it that it was not addressed to me, but, I conclude, to your sister. I immediately closed it then, for I am above reading that which is not mine. I hold the person who reads or opens letters addressed to another in the utmost contempt. Take your letter."

My curious eye could not resist seeing the first two lines as my aunt reached across to hand the letter to its owner.

"DEAR BETTS,—I am not sleeping at my post of duty. I am in possession of the heart of Bernard McGregor."

I closed my eyes with a sensation of faint sickness.

My aunt addressed herself to Miss Merton.

"You foolish girl," she said in bitter accents, "you may be capable of winning hearts for an idle hour, but you could not retain them. No one could live in the house with you and not see through you. I read you from the first."

Grace Merton turned pale with that inner rage which is so dangerous and deadly.

"You prying old maid," she cried, with a fierce glance, "how dare you open my desk?"

"Miss Merton," I exclaimed, no longer able to keep my temper calmly under control, "my aunt is a woman of honor, who acts up to the advice she gives. I have lived with her from a child, and I never knew her guilty of a shabby or mean action. I beg you will at once quit this house, and never dare return to it."

She glided towards the door with a stealthy cat-like tread, she cast upon me one lingering gaze of concentrated anger, and without uttering one word, closed the door.

In about half an hour's time I heard her leave the house. Thus I lost my friend, but still retained my lover, which her powers were not great enough to lure away from me.

As I heard the hall door close on her, I drew a breath of relief—I felt that the house was at last free of the viper.

My aunt sat herself down beside me and placed her hand on my arm, with the same peculiar firmness which was her habit whenever she had something serious to say to me.

"Child," she said, looking penetratingly into my face, "was my warning to you an idle fancy? Did I not strive to save you from this?"

"Yes, aunt," I replied, "you were correct in your judgment of Grace; but she has not proved my rival as you predicted, for—"

Bernard came to my rescue, seeing my confusion.

"No, aunt, Gertrude is not to be rivalled by such a person as that," he cried, taking my hand, "nor is our love lessened in the least."

My aunt shook her head prophetically.

"You are not out of the wood yet, my dears," she said, with a heavy sigh; "there is no end to the trail of the serpent."

"But, aunt, she has gone."

At that moment a ring was audible at the hall door.

"It is only the servants' bell," I cried, in answer to my aunt's "hush," and we resumed our conversation.

"That girl has the face of an angel and the heart of a demon," my aunt said after a pause, during which she had been looking intently at the clock over the mantelpiece.

"The face of an angel when the mask is drawn over it," replied my lover. "But did you ever see a face so altered as hers became a short time back. I cannot forget that awful glance she cast upon Gertrude as she closed the door. The look was a volume, yet her white lips did not open. She is a dangerous woman to trifle with, I am convinced of that."

"Oh, let us forget her. I want to bury her very memory," I replied, with a shudder. "Shall we have a little music?"

I rose to the instrument, and commenced one of Beethoven's sonatas. I only cared for classical music, and Bernard's taste was like my own.

Just in the midst of it I heard the hall-door close. I looked out of the window, and saw Grace Merton walking hurriedly away, a dark veil over her face.

"What on earth has that woman come back for!" I cried. "It must have been she who rang."

"I will ask the servant," my aunt replied, and she laid her hand upon the bell, which was almost immediately answered.

"Mary, who was that who rang just now?"

"Miss Merton, ma'am. She came back for her music, which she left upstairs."

"Her music," I echoed. "Why, she never brought any—I am positive of that."

"She came back to listen to what we had to say, no doubt," said Bernard.

Mary withdrew, and we resumed our music. Bernard had a lovely voice, and he sang better than ever on this especial evening.

Afterwards we played chess and cards, and indulged in a long and earnest discussion about the future building those charming, airy castles which all young engaged couples delight in.

Dream on, young people; what matter if they are but idle dreams after all, so long as they afford you present happiness, present bliss? Is not life itself a long continued dream? Time enough to awake when the spring has passed and the summer sun set.