

"Tell Him I Loathe Him."

CHAPTER XXXIV. The End of the Tragedy.

He uttered a cry like that of baffled animal; then summoning all his strength for one supreme effort, he fought his way against weakness to her side.

He fell exhausted upon his knees, his face buried in her bosom.

"Dear love," he whispered. "Let me do one pure thing in my wretched wasted life. Wait for me, take me by the hand, and pray God to forgive me. Only a moment, darling, only a moment and I shall be ready! Wait! Wait! God, let it come! Let death come, and quickly, that I may join her, if only for one brief instant. Lord in heaven, am I worse than the thief on the cross? Have I sinned beyond forgiveness? I beseech Thee—pardon—for her sake—for her sake! Wait—my darling! Only a moment! Only a moment!"

They watched him turn, then they saw an expression of relief pass over the distorted features.

"It is over!" he gasped. "Are you there, Bebe? Take my hand, dear. God will not refuse me admission to paradise if you ask Him. I see you, dear. How deliciously cool your hand is upon my burning brow. You were so good to wait. I am ready!"

The last word was scarcely more than a gasp, but Virginia Beaufort upon her knees beside him understood.

She had taken the poor, unfortunate, sinful head from the dead bosom to her own, and held it there as gently as though he had been a tenderly loved brother.

She watched the breathing grow fainter, until at last it ceased altogether, then she motioned them to take him from her.

CHAPTER XXXV. A Rift in the Clouds.

The beautiful, moonlit face of Soeur Mathilde was very pale and tremulous with emotion as she entered her little private office in connection with the hospital.

To her surprise a man came out of the shadow and extended his hand.

"Poor little woman," he said gently. "How tired you look. There is little resemblance between our regal Duchess of the old time and pale-faced, sad-eyed Soeur Mathilde. I am afraid it has been too much for you, dear!"

"Ah, no," she replied wearily. "But for my work I think I could not have lived through all this dreadful thing. He pressed her hand affectionately. "Tell me of Childes' wife!" he whispered.

"She is dead! Oh, Charlie, I feel as though I were to blame for that poor child's fate! But for me she might now be well and happy with him. I alone am censurable, and—"

"Don't say that, Duchess!" he interrupted, tenderly placing her in a chair. "It was not your fault. There is a divinity that shapes our ends, rough hew them how they will, and that divinity has guarded you through all your sore trials, dear, bringing rest and peace at last. It is much better as it is, Duchess, and you must never doubt but that God knows best."

"But one is surely not to blame that from our finite standpoint one cannot always see it so," she cried, with suppressed passion. "I have no one to reproach but myself, Charlie, and I do not! I do not! My odious pride caused it all! I set myself up as a guide, and God has very bitterly punished me. But I should not speak

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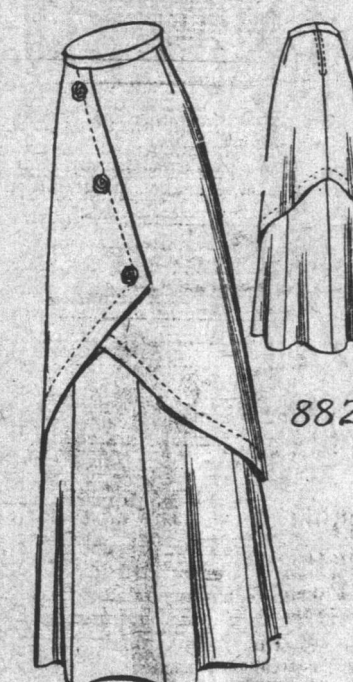
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sofly. "I believed that it was when I offered it to her, and very likely I should have gone on believing it to the end had not fate sent into my life the love that showed me how weak and insignificant the other was."

"Then you are not grieved?"

"No, dear, I am not in the least grieved."

"But she is so beautiful!"

"Not more so than another little girl who has shown me the tremendous mistake I might have made. Mignon, do you believe in the divine birth of love? Do you believe that the creation is perfect from inception? Or do you believe that like a life it must take time to develop, months or years to grow?"

She stood before him for a moment with downcast eyes, then slowly lifted them.

"I believe in the bursting of the bud into flower in a single night," she answered huskily.

"Darling!"

He caught her hands in his and held them closely.

"Tell me that your love is mine, Mignon," he whispered tenderly. "Say that you will make me the happiest man under heaven by promising that you will be my wife."

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"Oh, Mr. Quintard, wait, wait!" she cried, with a note of misery in her pathetic voice. "You know too little of me to ask a question like that. You are great and noble, while I am only an ignorant girl who has picked up a little knowledge in a rambling, bohemian life while following the footsteps of a gambler whom I believed to be my father. Why, I cannot even read or write!"

"Do you think that makes you less dear to me? Do you think that your misfortunes, however great they might have been, could ever have changed my love?"

"But you do not know all yet. How can I tell you? My mother—"

"Yes, I know all about it, dear. If I had or had not it could not make no difference. You are going back to America, Mignon, where Eric Childes and Miss Beaufort will be your only friends. They will do all they can, but with your independence of spirit it will be very hard and lonely for you, sweetheart. Will you save yourself and me that? Will you make me the happiest man in the world, dear heart, by returning to America as my wife?"

"How generous you are."

"Not generous, love, but selfish in the extreme. It is because I love you, because without you life would be weary and miserable indeed, that I ask it. Answer me, dearest!"

"You know there can be but one answer to your question if you are quite sure that you are wise in asking it. What woman could decline the honor so great when her whole heart was already given?"

"My own!"

To be continued.

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