

FAITHFUL MARGARET.

CHAPTER I.

A DYING WOMAN'S COMMAND.

She was dying—good old Ethel Brand, the mistress for half a century of the hoary castle which stood like an ancient cathedral in the midst of the noble estate in Surrey, Seven-Oak Waaste.

No need now of these whispering attendants, and that anxious little physician; she would not trouble them more. No need for these grim medicine vials, marshaled upon the little table near her couch; she was past mortal needs or mortal help; her face, set in cold repose, seemed glistening with supernatural light, while waiting for the fatal kiss of death.

And over her bent a woman, breathless, pulseless, motionless, as if carved from stone, listening, with straining ear, for each slow, rattling breath; watching, with great, glistening eyes, for each darkening shadow over the noble face—Margaret Walsingham.

No high-born dame was she; no fortunate next-of-kin, watching with decorous lament for the moment of emancipation from her weary wait for a dead woman's shoes. Only Mrs. Brand's poor companion, Margaret Walsingham.

Four years had she ministered to the whims, the caprices, the erratic impulses of that most erratic of all creations, an eccentric old woman; and exalting the good which she found, and pardoning the frailties she could not blind her eyes to, her presence had become a sweet necessity to the world-weary dowager, who repaid it by unceasing exactions and doting outbursts of gratitude; and there had been much love between these two.

Paler waxed the high patrician face, darker grew the violet circles beneath her heavy eyes.

Margaret clasped her hands convulsively. "Will she go before seven?" whispered she.

Old Dr. Gay stooped low and listened to the labored inspiration.

"Going—going fast," he said with faltering lips.

A wail burst from the crowd of servants standing by the door; sobs and tears attested to the love they had borne their dying mistress.

"Hush!" whispered Margaret. "Do not awake her."

"They'll never wake her more," said Dr. Gay, mournfully.

She turned at that with terror in her eyes; she laid a small, strong hand upon the doctor's arm and clung to it convulsively.

"She must live to see St. Udo Brand," said she, in a low, thrilling voice. "She must, I tell you—it is her dearest, her last wish—it is my most earnest prayer. Surely you will not let her die before that wish is fulfilled?"

She gazed with passionate entreaty in the little doctor's face, and her voice rose into a wail at the last words. He regarded her with helpless sympathy and shook his head.

"She can't live half an hour longer," said Dr. Gay. "She'll not see St. Udo Brand."

A fierce shudder seized Margaret Walsingham from head to foot. The blood forsook her lips, the light her eyes—she stood silent, the picture of heart-sick despair.

She had often appealed to Dr. Gay's admiration by her faithfulness, her kindness, her timidly masked self-sacrifices; she appealed straight to his heart now by her patient suffering, unconscious as he was of its cause.

"I will do what I can to keep up her strength," he said, approaching the bed to gaze anxiously again at the slumberer. "I will try another stimulant, if I can only get her to swallow it. Perhaps the London train may be here by that time."

"Thank you! oh, thank you!" murmured Margaret, gratefully. "You little know the desperate need there is for Mrs. Brand seeing her grandson before she dies."

Tears welled to her eloquent eyes, her lips trembled distressfully, she waved the ser-