

old enough to dispense with further studies, and to act as their own mistresses?"

Lyndoch raised his clear, grey eyes, and scanned the three fair faces; Miriam's, imperious, disdainful; Lydia's, placid, patient; Stella's, terribly hot and anxious.

"So much depends on the circumstances," he answered gravely. "I think your daughter and your nieces could hardly do better than follow the course of life they have been living up to the present time. The world has too little to offer, that we should clutch, and squander it too soon."

"I detest that kind of philosophy," Miriam said, her eyes flashing as she met Lyndoch's quiet gaze. "If the world has such a bitter experience to teach, isn't it better to get it over at once and not go on deluding one's self with false hopes that we shall only mock at afterwards?"

He looked for a moment in silence, but Miriam's gaze did not waver, and he knew she was waiting for his reply.

"Was Eve happier in her Eden, or did she rejoice when she had tasted the darker fruits of knowledge?"

"I do not know; I suppose if she had not found the fruit then the wakening would have come at some future time, and she would still have been dissatisfied."

After this Lionel Lyndoch lapsed into his former silence. He would have liked to continue the argument—to have brought her round to his way of thinking, for the sake of ensuring her peace of mind; but Miriam was a dangerous opponent, and, if he was to have sway with her, it would be best, he thought, to hold his own in silence.

Before another remark had been launched a child's shrill cry of terror echoed from the staircase; a cry that was repeated again and again, striking sudden agony into, at least, the souls of two who heard the first helpless shriek.

"My God! something has happened to Dora!" Sir Harcourt exclaimed, staggering to his feet, his face white and ghastly, the great clammy drops starting out on his brow, "My poor child—my poor baby!"

Lyndoch was the first to reach the door, to let in the ominous blaze of light filling the hall; and on the first landing, with her little arms thrown upward in terror, stood Dora in flames, her long night-dress fast blackening over slender body, her flaxen curls singed out of all fairness.

Lydia uttered a cry and sank on the floor sobbing, while Sir Harcourt made his way, like a man suddenly stricken with blindness, to the foot of the staircase; but before them all—swift as the flash of a bird's wing—there darted the form of Miriam, and, in the same instant, they saw her tear the flaming garment from the child, crush the tongues of fire from the darkened hair, and then, wrapping the small quivering form in the folds of her dress, she clasped the child to her bosom, and pressed her lips to the pale, horror-stricken face with passionate emotion.

It had all been done so quickly—the child rescued from the peril of a hideous death, almost before anyone had realized the danger; and now Miriam knelt among the still smouldering fragments of Dora's night-dress, soothing the child's terrified cries, and straining her to her heart as though her arms could never loose their hold again upon the little trembling form.

What a change from a few moments! Was this girl, with her unflinching and heroic courage, her wild forgetfulness of self, the same who had shown such a spirit of vain, unreasonable pride?

Without a word, Lionel Lyndoch had subdued the remaining flames, and, as the child's shrieks subsided, and she clung tighter to Miriam, he bent down and tried to take the little one from her.

"You are badly hurt," he said, his face turning pale as he saw the scars searing Miriam's fair, delicate arms which the quaint, puff sleeves left bare almost to the shoulder. "You must have a dressing put on your arms directly. I think the child was more terrified than injured—your presence of mind and quickness of action saved her."

Miriam looked up at him vacantly—dimly conscious that he was speaking to her—that he was there to help save Dora; then a dull, sinking sensation took possession of her, and as her arms relaxed their hold upon the child, she sank forward in a dead faint.

### CHAPTER III. BROODING SHADOWS.

When consciousness returned Miriam was lying on a sofa in the room they used as a boudoir, and Barbara was bending over her, putting some cooling lotion to her aching arms.

"Who brought me here?" she asked, trying to raise herself on the big chintz pillow. "I thought I was on the staircase with Dora!"

"You fainted, Miss Mollie, and Mr. Lyndoch carried you in here. He prepared this dressing for your arms, and he says if you keep it on the burns will nearly all be gone by the morning."

"Thank Heaven, I saved Dora from burning," she exclaimed, closing her eyes, as the terrible scene came back to her, "was she much hurt?"

"No, Miss, she escaped as if by a miracle; and only all her pretty curls are singed off. Mr. Lyndoch says nobody could have slung the burning clothes from her so quickly, and he thinks the child owes her life to you."

"And how did it all happen?" Miriam asked, shuddering as she pictured the horrible torture to which Dora might have been doomed, "how did she set herself on fire?"

"It seems that after I had put her to bed she got up and carried the candle I had left burning down to your room. She wanted to wait there until you came up, so as to see you again with this white satin dress, and the pearls in your hair. She must have leaned over the flame of the candle and set fire to her night-dress; the only mercy is that she was not burnt to death."

(To be Continued.)

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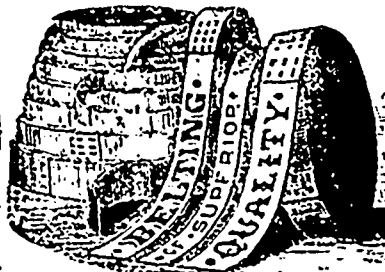
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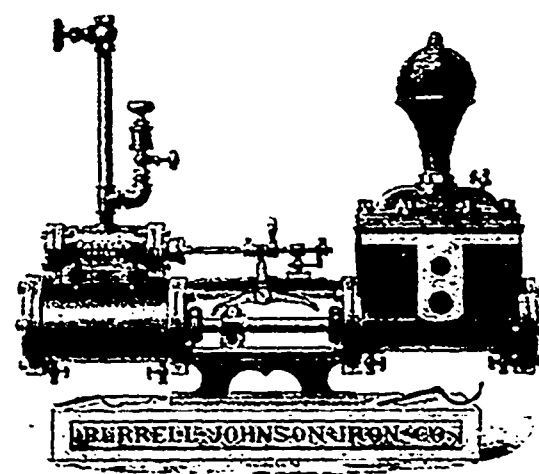
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