

The harsh, grating laughter, eloquent with scorn, devilish with malice, incredulity, and fury, turned the girl's outraged protest into speechlessness.

She wrapped her long crape garments about her hands, and the beautiful figure of Margaret Walsingham—her one charm, and a perfection it was—vanished from the incensed eyes of St. Udo Brand.

"Well, what think you of woman's wit after this?" cried he to the executors when the door had closed. "Who says a woman can't scheme, and cleverly, too? What fool ever called hers the softest sex?"

"I must request of you, as the executor of this will," said Mr. Davenport, slapping it loudly, "is bound to do—to apologize to the young lady whom you have just now insulted, for your treatment of her."

The captain's magnificent eyes were blazing with anger, and his brow was contracted with the scowl of a baffled demon, but at the plucky lawyer's proposition, he threw back his head and burst into another shout of laughter that made the ceiling ring again.

"What! trust my unwary heart to the red-hot fingers of a Torquemada? She would dissect it leisurely for its vulnerable spot, and probe that with spiteful blade. It needed not my insults, as you call them, to turn her venom against me. Did I not read it in the loathing eyes and shrinking figure before ever I opened my mouth? Am not I the one obstacle between her and the fortune she has lain in wait for during four years? She can afford to take insults from me; they will not hurt her. They are my tribute to her talent as a fortune-hunter."

"I must disabuse your mind of all unjust suspicions against Miss Walsingham," cried Mr. Davenport, meeting the captain's frowning eyes with as fierce a frown; "she has never schemed for this disposition of your grandmother's property. On the contrary, to my extreme surprise and disapprobation, she vehemently implored that she might be left out of the will altogether, and sent for me an hour before Mrs. Brand's decease, hoping that you might arrive in time to prevail upon Mrs. Brand to revoke the clauses concerning her."

"Save me these rhapsodies, friend," returned the captain; "those heavenly qualities to which you direct my lover-like regards, but whet my appetite like that of the ravening wolf. Let me make a mouthful of my bliss; but I warn all officious fingers to keep out of my pie."

"You mean by that, I suppose, that you will submit to the conditions of the will?"

"I mean nothing of the kind, my good sir. To the infernal shades I consign your scheming adventuress."

He rose from his lounging attitude with another of those bitter and cynical bursts of laughter, and dashing open the glass door, stepped out upon the gravel walk to saunter, his hands behind him, past the old moss-grown fish-pool, into the shrubbery.

The sun shone on the stately form and on his purple black hair. It wavered between leafy banners on his angry face, so dark with ominous clouds, and merciless with the dance of inward passions.

And yet it was a grand picture of desolation, that lofty countenance in its wrath. The fires of a thousand passions had graved these deep curves of bitterness, and marred the once genial mouth with the never absent sneer, and perverted an intellect once pure and stately.

No wonder that the two men, who were watching him in silence as he deliberately slashed down lilies with his cane, shuddered when they thought of the poor girl who stood between him and Castle Brand.

Margaret sat in her room, dumbly enduring the first humiliation of her life. Her humble soul had been outraged—disgraced. That cruel, insulting laugh still rang in her ears. Her cheeks flamed with shame; her eyes were suffused with hot tears. She could do nothing but sit in a trance, and busy-brained, revolve it over and over until she trembled with the agony of wounded pride.

Her sense of womanly honor had been trampled upon; her unapproachable self-respect had been bandied about by impure hands. Margaret felt that she was forever disgraced. To have been thrown at his feet, to suffer his eyes to scorn her, to see the wicked mouth sneer—the reckless head thrown back—to hear the muttered "Ye gods! what a Medusa!" to be stunned by the loud "ha! ha!" to be consorted with a monster of dissipation, such as he was—and to be scorned. Oh, cruel Ethel Brand: to force a friendless girl into such a position! Why had she not rather turned her from these castle doors, four years ago, than reserve her for such a fate as this?

Margaret began to see that she was terribly in Captain Brand's power—that if he were rascal enough to propose to her, she could scarcely in honor refuse him, and keep him out of his property. She also saw, with vague, prophetic eyes, a vision in the distance, of *stealthy hands stretching toward her life in either case.*

The ruddy sun, slipping down behind the cliffs two hours later, looked in at Margaret, who, with her door securely locked, sped about with motions of nervous energy, packing a small valise of clothes to take with her upon a sudden journey.