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A MYSTERIOUS QUEST.

CHAPTER XVIII.
FACE TO FACE.

It was midnight. Peace and quiet had settled upon the great house. Not a light twinkled from its many windows; not a sound disturbed its universal peace. But, in the walks beneath, it was not so. There a restless figure moved, pausing now and then to gaze at the vault of stars above his head, but oftener to turn toward the house from one of whose windows an influence breathed which chained him to the spot.

It was Hamilton Degraw, the artist. What were his thoughts? What were his dreams? What was the charm which made this vigil more alluring than the repose which awaited him in his own rooms? He had parted from the signorina under the eyes of Miss Aspinwall and her friends. He had not dared to utter one of the countless appeals which rose to his lips. She had not encouraged him to do so, and he would not have ventured if she had. Indeed, her manner had been in a slight degree repelling. Though she had smiled upon him, and even blushed at his look, which conveyed more of his feelings than he, doubtless, intended, at the moment, she had not shown that shy delight at his homage which he had observed in her before the advent of the other Mr. Degraw. He had, therefore, this estrangement to think of, as well as of the danger which possibly threatened her. And there was another thing. He had sometimes thought that the mysterious Montelli and the unknown persecutor of the innocent girls so often alluded to were one and the same man. But if this gentleman whom he had met this evening were the latter person, as he fully believed, then he and Montelli were two distinct persons; for he had noted the figure and face of both, and realized that by no art could the one have been transformed into the other. There were, therefore, in the case of the signorina, two enemies to fear, which of these was to be dreaded the more, it was impossible to say.

But it was not to watch or think that he lingered in Miss Aspinwall's grounds on this night. It was to be near the woman he loved, to breathe the same air, to sigh beneath the same stars. It was next to having her promise; next to knowing that she returned his sighs and dreamed his dreams. He would not have courted sleep if he could; it was too much like Paradise to stray beneath the trees and think himself a Romeo to this Juliet.

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He had paced several times up and down a certain gravelled walk bordered by clustering bushes, when suddenly the fancy took him to stray into another path less heavily shaded. But, as he stepped into it, he paused. Was it safe to travel on unlighted surfaces, with no light, he perceived it to be, of only one-half of the house? No; it was not safe. But for that very reason it was tempting to him; and, without sounding very deeply the intuitions which led him to this sudden exposure of his presence, he passed smilingly down its lengthened vista into the semicircle of evergreen which terminated this walk.

An exclamation of astonishment, followed by a sudden recoil, was the result. He was not alone in this place of expected solitude. A man was before him, whose tall form, drawn up within a shadow that failed to conceal his presence, gave to the artist such a shock that he well-nigh lost his self-possession.

The other, who had evidently been driven into this retreat by the sound of approaching steps, showed great embarrassment also. Though he came forward at the first exclamation of the intruder and made a bow that should at once have reassured the most suspicious, the words he uttered did not sound quite natural to the artist's sensitive ear, nor did his bearing betray that ease which had hitherto accompanied it, even in situations most trying to a gentleman.

"Mr. Degraw!"
The words rang simultaneously, but in woolly dissimilar tones. Then the two paused and looked at each other, and then the gentleman from Cleveland remarked:

"You find me still intruding upon Miss Aspinwall's grounds. How shall I explain it? Not by the real reason, least that should seem sentimental to you. Shall I say that it is the beauty of the night which allures me, and trust to your good-nature not to be contradicted in my statement?"

The artist, who had withdrawn himself into the moonlight, responded by a short but significant silence. Then he observed:

"I shall contradict you in nothing, Mr. Degraw. I have not yet recovered from the surprise of encountering a person of my own somewhat unusual name."

"You make a great deal of that. Shall I relate to you my pedigree, or send for that leaf in our family Bible, which is duly inscribed with my name?"

"Could you?"
"Mr. Degraw, you insult me. Were there any cause for it, I should probably resent it. As there is not, I find it more consistent with my self-respect to regard you as a moon-struck enthusiast, unworthy my attention or revenge."

This tone, which was certainly unexpected, took the artist by surprise. For a moment he hesitated, not knowing what to reply, then he said, boldly:

"I certainly find myself under great obligations to you. To be thought a moon-struck enthusiast is better than to be thought a villain and a fraud!"

And with a determined step he wheeled about, leaving the passage open to the man whom he now believed he had made an enemy.

He had walked but a short distance, however, before he heard the other's step ring close at his side. "I cannot let you go," said the stranger, as the artist turned toward him, "till you have in some measure explained yourself. When my name was first mentioned, you showed an unnatural astonishment, and at the time of my introduction to you, I was met by a sarcasm which my own courteous feelings towards you certainly neither merited nor called for. What excuse have you to make for all this, I cannot say; but it must be a good one to reconcile you to so out of keeping with your general character and fame."

"You are right," assented the artist, baffled by the other's coolness, but for an instant shaken in his doubts. "I had an excuse and if you wish to hear what it is I must give it. But I would rather be excused from offending you and would esteem it a great favor on your part if, instead of requiring explanations from me, you would consent to answer three questions."

"You are moderate in your demands," sneered the stranger, with a curl of his strong lip and a flash of his keen eyes. "As the insulted party, I have certainly the right to refuse them. But I am something more than an insulted party; I am a gentleman and on honest one; therefore, if you have anything to ask, ask it. I will be brief but straightforward in my replies."

A cold perspiration started out upon the artist's brow, but he pursued bravely the course into which fate had led him.

"You will answer questions? said he. 'Perhaps, then, you will be kind enough to tell me whether you can directly here from Cleveland?'"

"I did not."
"Have you been staying, then, in New York, and was it from that place you travelled to this spot?"

"You have said it. I have been in New York, and it was from there I came no later than to-day on the five o'clock express. Would you like to know what baggage I brought and what was the amount of the fee I gave to the porter?"

"I wish to know nothing but what vitally concerns myself and the welfare of a person dearer to me than myself. Miss Rogers—"

"Ah!"
"There was a change in the stranger's manner. He seemed at once to have received a hint to the mystery of the other's antagonism."

"Is the bearer," imperturbably continued the artist, "of a name that has lately been the mark for peculiar shafts of fortune. As the lady is dear to me—you will pardon the self-revelation given by these words—I have constituted myself the shield to protect her. If, therefore, you have ever spoken to any other person by the name of Jenny Rogers, do not think that you will be allowed to speak to this one. If you have not—"

"Sir!" interposed the other, haughtily, "you are a madman. Not speak to Miss Rogers? Why, if she were your wife I should address her if I pleased, that is, if she allowed me the privilege of doing so, and I think she would."

This shaft, which was only too deftly levelled, struck home at once. The artist recoiled, and stammered some ineffectual words, before he returned to the attack.

"Miss Rogers is no judge of her own danger," he finally remarked. "If she were, you might expect less indulgence on her part."

The stranger laughed.
"You show an ignorance," he asserted, "both of my nature and the character of my interest in Miss Rogers that excuses you for much more folly than you evince in this interview. Danger does not menace Miss Rogers, that is, not from me, but if it

did, you have scarcely taken the wisest means to avert it."

"This was only too true. Carried away by his feelings, the artist had allowed himself to go further than his own judgment approved. But to be told of it by his adversary was humiliating and did not serve to increase his satisfaction. It was, therefore, in a bitter enough tone that he replied:

"I have but done as any honest man would do. I have reasons for distrusting you and I tell you so. All that I shall add to what I have already said, is this: That if grief or any peril comes to Miss Rogers, I shall know where to look for its cause. Neither your seeming good-bredness nor the dignity which invests your person and conversation shall save you in that hour from a revenge that will have not only love but the law to back it. So beware!"

He turned away; the stranger looked after him doubtfully and took one step as if to follow him. But this determination did not hold, and Mr. Degraw of Cleveland remained silent and unmoved, while the other passed slowly down the paths till he reached one of the two gates which guarded the place. There the artist paused, and his antagonist, convinced that he would go no further while he himself remained on the ground, was content, natured enough, or wise enough to turn away toward the other gate. The watchful artist, perceiving this, passed out, and presently the two could be seen hastening through the street, the one toward the hotel, the other toward the neighboring dwelling which held his rooms.

Would they have passed so lightly had they possessed the power of perceiving the girlish figure that sat behind one of those open casements upon which they now turned their backs? I will not, for in the eager face uplifted to the moon there was a look which puzzles us and would have puzzled them. Was she listening? Was she dreaming? Was she hoping? Is it a spell of delight or of apprehension which holds her enthralled and makes her a statue of wakefulness amid a household of sleepers? We may not know at present. Will the time ever come when we shall?

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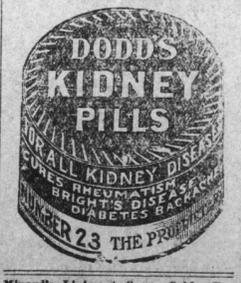
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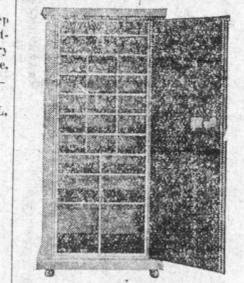
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