



The Web;

OR,
TRUE LOVE'S PASSION.

CHAPTER XXI. The Deadly Drug.

He had moved to the cupboard as she spoke, and took the small blue phial from it, and held it hidden in his closed hand.

"You mean it, Becca?" he said, with a smile, though his face was pallid and his dark eyes seemed to glow with the light one sees in the yellow orbs of the tiger just before he springs. "You mean to make a scandal of our little love affair—"

She put her hand upon the door, and vouchsafed no reply.

"Well," he said, "I don't know why I should care. After all, perhaps—" he went on talking incoherently to gain time as he approached her—"after all—here, you have dropped your handkerchief, Becca."

She turned, and saw that he had wound his handkerchief over his own mouth, and as she stood wondering, half-fearfully, at his action, he sprang upon her, clipped her arms with one hand, and held the phial to her face.

One cry, and that only a faint, gasping one, rose from her lips, then her head fell forward, and she slipped limp and helpless to the ground.

Gulldford Berton, after a glance at her, let her lie as she had fallen, until he had carefully rechecked the phial and put it in his pocket; then he slowly removed the handkerchief from his mouth and bent over her.

"Almost instantaneous," he muttered, with a grim smile; "a wonderful discovery. Now, my good Becca, just let us have Mr. Cyril Burne's letter." He took it from her dress, and, leaving her lying on the ground as if she were no consideration whatsoever, he carried the letter to the lantern and read it.

"Gone for months, perhaps!" he muttered. "What a chance for me! Leaves the field open for months. What could I not do in that time! If—I could keep her from hearing from him, and silence this silly little fool! Heaven and earth, what a chance!" He stood with the letter in his hand for a minute or two, staring before him, then he put it in his pocket, and almost with a start, as if he had forgotten the presence of the unconscious girl, turned and knelt down beside her.

"Almost time she came to," he muttered; "and when she does? The little fool is like a wild cat, and will carry out her threats. Good-by, then, to all my hopes and ambitions! Oh, Gulldford, my friend, what an insensate ass you were to be led away by a fancy for a pretty face! What shall I do to persuade her to hold her tongue? If I could only keep her quiet for, say six or eight weeks, while this fellow was out of the way—"

While he was muttering and musing he was fanning the face of the unconscious girl, and suddenly a change swept over the moody expres-

sion of her face, and he bent lower and placed his ear to her lips. Then he started to his feet, and, snatching the lantern from the table, knelt down and held the light close to her face. He peered into it keenly for a couple of minutes; then, with an inarticulate cry, shrank back, and, still staring down at her, with horror imprinted on every feature, gasped:

"My God! She's dead!"

CHAPTER XXII.

The Murderer and His Victim.

Dead!

In the first moment of the discovery the sensation of horror seemed to turn Gulldford Berton to stone, and as he knelt, leaning, shrinking as far back as he could from the still body, it almost looked as if the hand of death had touched him too.

The silence was terrible; the very dimness of the room, in which the only light was that of the murky lantern, lent an additional terror to the moment.

He had not intended to murder her; he told himself so over and over again in those first dreadful minutes. He had intended stupefying her only, and so preventing her leaving the house until he had hit upon some plan for stopping her from carrying out her threat of denouncing him. At college he had dabbled in chemistry, and the science, especially in its relations to subtle poisons, had a strange fascination for him. He loved power, and to possess a drug the very effluvia of which should be sufficient to overpower an adversary had a strange, weird charm for him. He was proud of the discovery of the drug which could do its horrible work so swiftly, silently, and surely.

He had not meant to kill her, and now she lay dead at his feet! Gradually the benumbed feeling passed away, and he began to shake in every limb, and a terrible craving to look at her face possessed him.

Crawling on his hands and knees, he lifted her head—shuddering as his hands touched her—and looked at her.

Her face—the face which he had once thought so pretty, which he had once, and so short a time ago, almost persuaded himself that he loved—seemed to look up at him reproachfully. It was white with the whiteness of death, but so placid, so peaceful that it might have been the face of a person asleep.

With a cry that was scarcely a cry so much as a wail, he put the head down and staggered to his feet.

No man is born bad, no man is wholly wicked. At that awful moment Gulldford Berton would have relinquished all his ambitions, if by so doing he could bring Becca to life again. He threw himself into a chair, and, flinging his arms out upon the table, let his head fall upon them, and surrendered himself to the demon of remorse. Remorse, not penitence, which is a very different thing.

Presently the dead, heavy silence began to weigh upon him like a heavy weight; a ghastly desire to leap to his feet and break the stillness with a yell assailed him; and, feeling that his reason was going, he staggered clumsily to the decanter, and, lifting it to his lips with his shaking hands, drained it to the last drop.

The wine steadied him a little, and he tried to think. For some time his brain spun round to the dull, sickening tune of "She's dead, she's dead!" but presently his mind grew clearer.

How long she had been lying there he did not know—it seemed hours to him; but he knew that the daylight would be peering through the holes in the window shutters directly, and that the old woman who waited upon

him would be coming down.

Fear lent him a fictitious strength and calmness.

The deed was done beyond all undoing, and if he did not want to be caught like a rat in a trap he must get rid of the body.

He got to the further end of the room, as far away from it as possible, and, clasping his forehead, which was cold as ice, with his hands that burned with fever heat, he tried to think.

What should he do? For one moment a wild idea occurred to him of sounding an alarm, and accounting for the presence of the dead girl by saying that she had fallen down in a fit. But the strange odor still clung about the room, and even the village doctor would be possessed of sufficient knowledge to contradict such an assertion.

He tried to recall all the stories he had read of men who had been placed in a similarly dreadful position, but he could think of no case parallel with his own.

At last he seized the lantern, and carefully avoiding the still form, he went out of the house by the back way, and crossed the garden. He felt better, more composed, in the open air and away from the silent reproach of his dread handiwork, and he could think.

At the end of the garden was a heap of leaves which had been swept up in the preceding autumn and allowed to remain. He got a spade from the toolhouse, and, screening the lantern behind some bushes, he carefully scraped the leaves aside and began to dig.

And all the while he was at work—and he worked with the furious frenzy of a man digging for gold—he planned out his precautions against detection. All sorts of possibilities tortured him, and turned the sweat that rolled down his face into drops of ice. Some one might have seen her standing outside the gate, and when she was missed that some one would come forward with the clew. She might have told some one where she was going; she had been talking, evidently confidentially, with Cyril Burne, and might have told him. Her footsteps might be tracked in the dusty road. These and a hundred other suggestions tortured him, and drove him almost mad; so that when his task was done he staggered out onto the brink of the grave and shook like a man in a palsy.

Then he went back to the house—slowly, as if every step were leading him to his own grave. In an incredibly short time he had accomplished his dread task, and he stood once again in the silent room, with something clinched in the palm of his hand.

It was Cyril's ring, which he had taken from Becca's finger. He held it so tightly that its pressure hurt him and reminded him that he was holding it. He opened his hand as if the ring had turned to an asp and stung him, and let it fall upon the table.

And there he stood and stared at it, at first dully and vacantly, but presently with a more conscious gaze. He had hidden his victim from mortal eyes, but more, much more, was required of him.

In a few hours Becca would be missed and inquiries would be made. The first question that would be asked would be: With whom was she seen last?

He covered his eyes with his hands, and thought keenly, acutely. Could he not invent some story based upon facts which would account for her absence?

If any one had seen her standing at the gate he was lost. But he remembered that as he stood talking to her with the key in his hand, he had looked up and down the lane, and had seen no one. The lane led directly to no other house than the cottage; it was unlikely that any one should have been passing. The persons who were out were making the best of their way to the village. It was unlikely, too, that she should have told any one of her intended visit to him and its purpose. If she had told Cyril Burne, for instance, she would have been almost sure to tell him, Gulldford Berton, that she had done so.

Probably no one had seen her after she had left the park. In that case almost the last person with whom she would have been seen was Cyril Burne

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himself.

If he could—his dark eyes began to flash—if he could only contrive to saddle Cyril Burne with the murder!

But an instant's reflection showed him the futility of the idea. Cyril Burne would be traced, and be able to clear himself, and— Suddenly the idea he had been searching for flashed upon him.

Why should the murder be discovered? Why should she not have disappeared? Why should she not have gone off with Cyril Burne himself?

The blood rushed to his face, and he raised his head and drew a long breath.

As a child puts into its place a picture puzzle, his acute brain set to work at once at fitting the incidents of the night into a consecutive shape to correspond with his hypothesis.

He took Cyril's letter from his pocket, and, spreading it out on the table, pored over it word for word.

He would be absent for months; he had gone without a word—other than this letter—of explanation with Norah. They were virtually separated, with this letter—while he held it!—as the only link between them.

Let Norah be convinced that Becca had fallen with Cyril Burne, and the separation would be complete.

She would be too proud to write to Cyril for an explanation, and he, Gulldford Berton, must by hook or by crook intercept any letter from Cyril to her.

The mental exertion served to dispel something of the horror that possessed him. He was fighting now, not only for Norah and the Arrowdale wealth, but for his own life. He must guard every look, every word of his own, must watch and weigh every look, every word of others. Was he equal to the task, or should he seek safety in flight?

As he asked himself the question, the next one, "Where should he fly?" arose to answer the first.

There was no place now where a murderer would be beyond the reach of the dread arm of the law.

No, he must remain and fight the battle to the end. If he could divert suspicion for two months, much might happen to render discovery impossible. In two months he might even succeed in winning Norah. In two months Cyril himself might be dead. He shuddered as he remembered how the longing to kill Cyril had come over him the last time Cyril was in the cottage. Was he a homicide by instinct?

The hours crept by as he sat in the silent room in the tomb-like house, scheming and plotting, and at last, unable to think any longer, he took the lantern and went upstairs to his bedroom.

The room was at the back of the house, and instinctively he walked to the window and peered down into the garden.

How long he looked at the heap of leaves which hid its awful secret, he did not know, but presently he felt the room spin round, and, staggering, he fell full length across the bed.

(To be Continued.)

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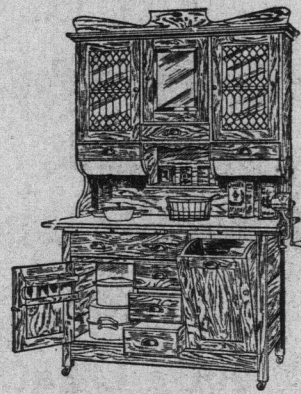
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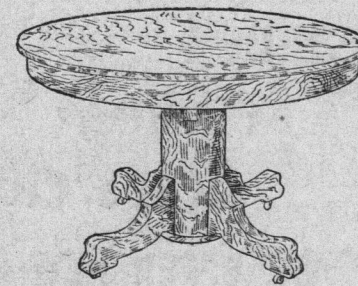
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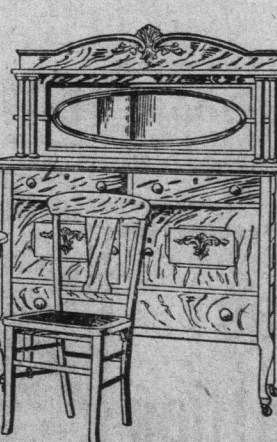
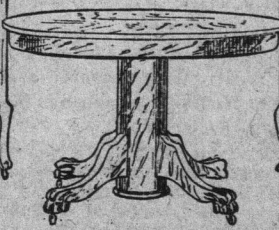
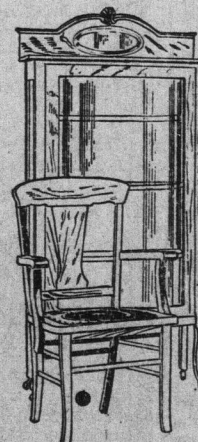
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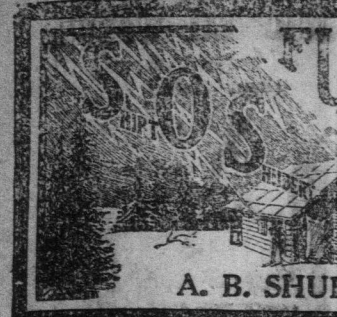
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War News

Messages Received Previous to 9 A.

APPOINTMENT DEFERRED

LONDON, Dec. 5.—Replying to a question with to the appointment of a Food tor, Premier Asquith said he to all questions as to personnel ter be deferred, until the pro reconstruction—if this should o was completed.

HUN AGENTS AT WORK

NEW YORK, Dec. 5.—The steamships blown up in Russian harbor of Archangel weeks ago with the loss of of dollars worth of munition other supplies, were destroyed bombs placed in the cargo of the at the piers of the Bush Tea Company in this city, it was to-day at police headquarters commercial agent here of the Russian Embassy.

GREEK OFFICIALS RESIGNED

LONDON, Dec. 5.—The Greek Minister at London the Greek Consuls at London Manchester have resigned, that they were unable further to tify themselves with the poli King Constantine.

EXPLANATION NOT FORTHCOMING

LONDON, Dec. 5.—The cabinet expectation that a planation of the Cabinet crisis a solution would be forthcoming the House met to-day, was not ed. The Premier simply announced that King George had approved proposal for a reconstruction was forced by the demands of Secretary Lloyd George and ministers for a smaller war ce with powers independent of the met. The Premier suggested the House adjourn after to-day's bu which was not controversial Thursday. Statements by Sir Henry Dalziel, Liberal, that re tions of the ministers had been to the Premier was not denied, was taken as an indication the details of the reconstruction h

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