

# A PRECIOUS INHERITANCE.

CHAPTER XIX.

The Telling of the Secret.  
(Continued.)

Alone in the deep woods, with the darkness falling around her, she gave way to the mighty sorrow which had come so suddenly upon her. She could not doubt that she had heard. She knew that it was true, and as proof after proof crowded upon her until the chain of evidence was complete, she laid her head upon the rain-wet grass, and shudderingly stopped her ears, to shut out, if possible, the memory of the dreadful words, "I, the shriveled, skinny hag who tells you this, am your grandmother." For a long time she lay there thus, weeping till the fountain of her tears seemed dry; then weary, faint and sick, she started for her home. Opening cautiously the outer door, she was gliding up the stairs, when Madam Conway entering the hall with a lamp, discovered her, and utter an exclamation of surprise at the strangeness of her appearance. Her dress, bedraggled and wet, was torn in several places by the briery bushes she had passed; her hair, loosened from its confinement, hung down her back, while her face was so white and ghastly that Madam Conway in much alarm followed her up the stairs, asking what had happened.

"Something dreadful came to me in the woods," said Maggie, "but I can't tell you to-night. To-morrow I shall be better or dead—oh, I wish I would be dead—before you hate me so; dear grand—No, I didn't mean that—you ain't; forgive me, do," and sinking to the floor, she kissed the very hem of Madam Conway's dress.

Unable to understand what she meant, Madam Conway divested her of her damp clothing, and placing her in bed, sat down beside her saying gently, "Can you tell me now what frightened you?"

A faint cry was Maggie's only answer, and taking the lady's hand she laid it upon her forehead, where the drops of perspiration were standing thickly. All night long Madam Conway sat by her, going once to communicate with Arthur Carrollton, who, anxious and alarmed, came often to the door, asking if she slept. She did sleep at last—a fitful feverish sleep; but ever at the sound of Mr. Carrollton's voice a spasm of pain distorted her features, and a low moan came from her lips. Maggie had been terribly excited, and when next morning she awoke, she was parched with burning fever, while her mind at intervals seemed wandering; and ere two days were passed, she was raving with delirium brought on, the physician said, by some sudden shock, the nature of which no one could even guess.

For three weeks she hovered between life and death, whispering oft of the "horrid shape which had met her in the woods, robbing her of happiness and life." Winding her feeble arms around Madam Conway's neck, she would beg of her most piteously "not to cast her off—not to send her away from the only home she had ever known—for I couldn't help it," she would say. "I didn't know it, and I've loved you all so much—so much! Say, grandma, may I call you grandma all the same? Will you love poor Maggie?"

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a little?" and Madam Conway, listening to words whose meaning she could not fathom, would answer by lying the aching head upon her bosom, and trying to soothe the excited girl. Theo, too, was summoned home, but at her Maggie's refusal to look, and covering her eyes with her hand she whispered scornfully, "pinned and pale, and pale; that's the very look, I couldn't see it when I called you sister."

Then her mood would change, and motioning Theo to her side, she would say to her: "Kiss me once, Theo, just as you used to do when I was Maggie Miller."

Forward Arthur Carrollton shied from the first manifested fear, shuddering whenever he approached her, and still exhibiting signs of uneasiness if he left her sight. "He hated her," she said, "hated her for what she could not help; and when, as he often did, he came to her bedside, speaking to her words of love, she would answer mournful, 'Don't Mr. Carrollton; your pride is stronger than your love. You will hate me when you know it all.'"

Thus two weeks went by and then with the first May day, reason returned again, bringing life and strength to the invalid, and joy to those who had so anxiously watched over her. Almost her first rational question was for Hagar and if she had been there. She is confined to her bed with inflammatory rheumatism," answered Madam Conway, "but she inquires for you every day, they say; and once when told you could not live, she started to crawl on her hands and knees to see you, but fainted near the gate and was carried back."

"Poor old woman!" murmured Maggie, the tears rolling down her cheeks as she thought how strong must be the love that half-crazed creature bore her, and how little it was returned, for every feeling of her nature revolted from claiming a near relationship with one whom she had hitherto regarded as a servant. The secret, too, seemed harder to divulge, and day by day she put it off, saying to them when they asked what had so much affected her, that "she could not tell them yet—she must wait till she was stronger."

So Theo went back to Worcester as mystified as ever, and Maggie was left much alone with Arthur Carrollton, who strove in various ways to win her from the melancholy into which she had fallen. All day long she would sit by the open window, seemingly immovable, her large eyes, now intensely black, fixed upon vacancy, and her white face giving no signs of the fierce struggle within, save when Madam Conway, coming to her side would lay her hand caressingly on her in token of sympathy. Then, indeed, her lips would quiver, and turning her head away, she would say, "Don't touch me—don't."

To Arthur Carrollton she would listen with apparent composure, though often as he talked, her long tapering nails left their impress in her flesh, so hard she strove to be indifferent. Once when they were left alone together he drew her to his side, and bending very low, so that his lips almost touched her marble face, he told her of his love, and how full of anguish was his heart when he thought that she would die.

"But God kindly gave you back to me," he said; "and now, my precious Margaret, will you be my wife? Will you go with me to my English home, from which I've tarried now too long because I would not leave you? Will Maggie answer me?" and he folded her lovingly in his arms.

Oh how could she tell him "No," when every fibre of her heart thrilled with the answer "Yes!" she mistook

him—mistook the character of Arthur Carrollton, for though pride was strong within him, he loved the beautiful girl who lay trembling in his arms better than he loved his pride; and had she told him then who and what she was, he would not have deemed it a disgrace to love a child of Hagar Warren. But Margaret did not know him, and when he said, "Will Maggie answer me?" there came from her lips a piteous, wailing cry, an enduring her face away, she answered mournfully, "No, Mr. Carrollton; no, I cannot be your wife. It breaks my heart to tell you so; but if you knew what I know, you would have rather thrust me from you, for indeed I am unworthy."

"Don't you love me, Maggie?" Mr. Carrollton said, and in the tones of his voice there was so much of tenderness that Maggie burst into tears, and involuntarily resting her head upon his bosom, answered sadly, "I love you so much, Arthur Carrollton, that I would rather die a hundred deaths could that make me worthy of you, as not long ago I thought I was. But it cannot be. Something terrible has come between us."

"Tell me what it is. Let me share your sorrow," he said; but Maggie only answered, "Not yet, not yet. Let me live where you are a little longer. Then I will tell you all, and go away forever."

This was all the satisfaction he could obtain; but after a time she promised that if he would not mention the subject to her until the first of June, she would then tell him everything; and satisfied with promises which he knew would be kept, Mr. Carrollton waited impatiently for the appointed time, while Maggie, too, counted each sun as it rose and set, bringing nearer and nearer a trial she so much dreaded.

## CHAPTER XX.

### THE RESULT.

Two days only remained ere the first of June, and in the solitude of her chamber, Maggie was weeping bitterly. "How can I tell them who I am?" she thought. "How bear their pitying scorn when they learned that she whom they called Maggie Miller has no right to that name?—that Hagar Warren's blood is flowing in her veins—and Madam Conway thinks so much of that! Oh, why was Hagar left to do me this wrong? Why did she take me from the pine-board cradle, where she says I lay, and make me what I was born not to be?" and falling on her knees the wretched girl prayed that it might prove a dream from which she would ere long awake.

Alas for thee, poor Maggie Miller! It is not a dream, but a stern reality and you who oft have spurned at birth and family, why should you murmur now when both are taken from you? Are you not still the same, beautiful, accomplished and refined, and can you ask for more? Strange that theory and practice so seldom should accord. And yet it was not the degradation which Maggie felt so keenly, it was rather the loss of love she feared; and without that, the blood of royalty could not avail to make her happy.

Maggie was a warm-hearted girl, and she loved the stately lady she had been wont to call grandmother with a filial, clinging love, which could not be severed, and still this love was naught compared to what she felt for Arthur Carrollton, and the giving up of him was the hardest part of all. But it must be done she thought; he had told her once that if she were Hagar Warren's grandchild, he should not be riding

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with her—how much less, then, would he make that child his wife! and rather than meet the look of proud disdain his face would wear, when first she stood confessed before him, she resolved to go away where no one had ever heard of her or Hagar Warren. She would leave behind a letter telling why she went, and commending to Madam Conway's care poor Hagar, who had been sorely punished for her sin. "But whither shall I go, and what shall I do when I get there?" she cried, trembling at the thoughts of a world of which she knew so little. Then, as she remembered how many young girls of her age went out as teachers, she determined to go at all events. "It will be better than staying here where I have no claim," she thought, and nerving herself for the task, she sat down to write the letter, which, on the first of June, should tell to Madam Conway and Arthur Carrollton the story of her birth.

It was a harder task than she supposed—writing that farewell; for it seemed like severing every hallowed tie. Three times she wrote "My dear grandma," then with a throbb of anguish she dashed her pen across the reversed name, and wrote simply "Madam Conway." It was a rambling, impassioned letter, full of tender love—of hope destroyed—of deep despair—which she shadowed forth no expectation that Madam Conway or Arthur Carrollton would ever take her to their hearts again. It begged of them most touchingly to think sometimes of "Maggie," when she was gone forever. Hagar was then commended to Madam Conway's forgiveness and care. "She is old," wrote Maggie, "her life is nearly ended, and if you have in your heart any feeling of pity for her who used to call you grandma, bestow it, I pray you, on poor old Hagar Warren."

The letter was finished, and then suddenly remembering Hagar's words, that "all had not been told," and feeling it her duty to see once more the woman who had brought her so much sorrow, Maggie stole cautiously from the house, and was soon walking down the woodland road, slowly and sadly, for the world had changed to her since last she trod that path. Maggie, too, was changed, and when at last she stood before Hagar, who was now able to sit up, the latter could scarcely recognize in the pale, haggard woman the blooming, merry-hearted girl once known as Maggie Miller.

"Margaret," she cried, "you have come again—come to forgive your poor old grand—No, no," she added, as she saw the look of pain flash over Maggie's face, "I'll never insult you with that name. Only say that you will forgive me, Miss Margaret!" and the trembling voice was choked with sobs, while the aged form shook as with a palsied stroke.

Hagar had been ill. Exposure to the damp air on that memorable night had brought on a second severe attack of rheumatism, which had bent her nearly double. Anxiety for Margaret, too, had wasted her to a skeleton, and her thin, sharp face, now of a corpse-like pallor, contrasted strangely with her eyes, from which the wildness all was gone. Touched with pity, Maggie drew a chair to her side, and thus replied: "I do forgive you, Hagar, for I know that what you did was done in love; but by telling me what you have, you've ruined all my hopes of happiness. In the new scenes to which I go, and the new associations I shall form, I may become contented with my lot, but never can I forget that I once was Maggie Miller."

"Margaret," gasped Hagar, and in her dim eye there was something of the olden fire. "If by new associations you mean Henry Warren, it must not be. Alas, that I should tell this! but Henry is your brother—your father's only son. Oh, horror, horror!" and dreading what Margaret would say she covered her face with her crumpled, distorted hands.

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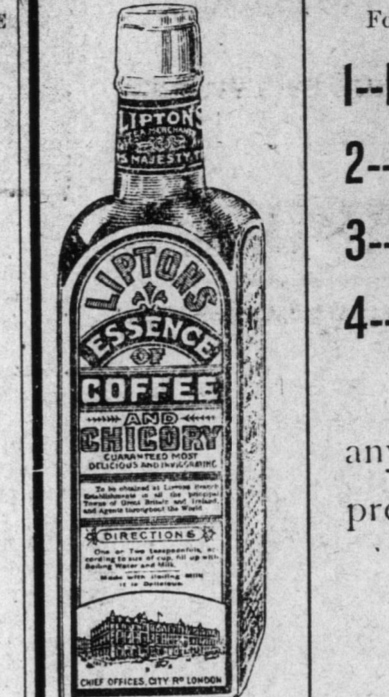
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