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ES OF WIT AND HUMOR

st returned from board-
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 le term, came back with
 ce this:
 take it from me, gram-
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 I don't know. You can
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Won By Devotion

- BY -

Mary A. Fleming

Night closed over the gloomy house, wore away and a second morning dawned. There was little change in Vera. They could not force her away, but she had fallen heavily and exhaustedly asleep at her post, and Dr. Vanderhoff lifted her and laid her on her bed. The guests departed, glad to be gone. An officer or two were down from the city, and search had begun for the burglar. As yet little trace had been found. In the soft gravel and clay footprints had been discovered, but so many had come and gone that that amounted to very little. A man had spent the night in the summerhouse, for the stableboy, looking out about seven o'clock from his attic window, saw him hastily depart. But burglars do not, as a rule, for fear of a wet jacket, take shelter in the grounds of the place they have robbed. Still, a note was made of it, the summerhouse searched, and nothing found. The inquest was to be on the third day; something would come to light then. The robbery and the death alone were talked of every-where. Who was to inherit Mrs. Fanshawe's fortune?

And then it leaked out—no one knew how—that the last Mr. Carlton's stepson, Richard Firench, was sole heir. Some one had seen him, and told some one else. Richard Firench was here, and for the first time in six years. What was he doing there? No one knew. Was he—was he—a friend of Mrs. Fanshawe? Not likely or he would have been at the house. But he was at the house, late last night, though he was not at the ball. How this last fact got wind it was impossible to say—one might as well hope to wring secrets from the tomb as from Harriet. The very birds of the air seemed to carry news. He was at the house last night in secret and uninvited. He and Mrs. Fanshawe were not good friends. He was the heir—sole heir, the only one to pro-

fit by her death! Men looked at one another. Men stared at him in the street as he passed by. Silence fell on talkative groups when he appeared. Suspicion—that most awful thing that can look out of human eyes—suspicion looked at him out of all the eyes he met. In what manner the truth came to him it is difficult to tell, but it did come in a slow, creeping amazement and shock that turned him cold. It was not the shock of physical fear—that he had never known; it was something quite different and unspeakably more terrible. It took to itself wings, the breeze carried it, the birds sang it—it penetrated every corner of St. Ann's. And on the evening of the second day it reached Carlton Place and was breathed in the ear of Harriet Hart. Who the audacious tale bearer may be was unknown—Harriet's glance of wistful scorn must have annihilated him forever. But she set her thin lips and marched straight to Vera. She must know this.

The dark, hopeless eyes looked up at her pathetically. If only for one hour they would leave her alone!

"Miss Vera," said Harriet resolutely, "you must rouse yourself and listen to me. It is time. Captain Firench is here, and—"

"Again!" Vera broke in with a tired sort of cry. "Oh, I cannot see him! Why do you torture me? I thought he had gone."

"He is not gone—he is going—he will not let go mebbe, if he wants to. Are you so took up with the dead that you have no feelin' left for the livin'?" I tell you a horrid thing is goin' about, and you've got to hear it if you should take on ever so. The man's your husband when all's said and done, and a live husband is more'n a dead sister. I reckon, any day, Captain Dick is here, and—look at me, Miss Vera—listen to me—the folks is sayin' as he is the thief that broke in and stole Mrs. Fan-

shaw's diamonds."

CHAPTER XIII In the Dark Hour.

It was the third day, and the inquest was about to begin. Very many people were present—it was rumored that Miss Martinez was to testify, and that the suspected man would be there. It was rumored too, that Colonel Firench and Miss Martinez were more to each other than the world knew, and it was to see her that he had visited Carlton on the night of the robbery. The interest in the tragedy deepened with every hour. The military rank and romantic history of the dashing soldier of fortune intensified it; the rumor that he was positively the husband of Miss Martinez, and had been so for many years, added a zest beyond belief. It would be curious to see them together—to hear her testify against him, it might be. She was hardly likely to spare a husband she would not live with, where a sister, beloved beyond the love of sisters was concerned. Mr. Dane Fanshawe had not yet been notified of his bereavement. Vera did not know his address, it appeared, and fired up with sudden passion at the bare mention of his name.

"It is his fault!" she cried out vehemently; "it is his doing! If he had been here it never would have happened!" More than this she declined to say. "I hate him!" she broke forth when the question was pressed. "I never want to see his face or hear his name again! I would not tell you if I knew!"

So Mr. Fanshawe was still absent, and people were a little shocked at Miss Martinez's vehemence. It was all the more striking, as her general manner was all that there was of high-bred repose. Still, she was, perhaps excusable, poor thing; she had lost everything, and apart from that, she really loved her sister very dearly. They stood quite alone in the world, and poor Mrs. Fanshawe had been a mother to her. What a singular will that of old Mr. Carlton was! Still, considering how infatuated he had been about Dora, and how very fond of Dick in those days, natural! Humph! said the gossips, and looked at him curiously—it was hoped he would clearly account for every hour of that fatal night, from the time he had parted with Miss Martinez until after the discovery in Mrs. Fanshawe's room.

The jury and coroner took their places, looking uncomfortable; they were rustic gentlemen, and the coroner had known and liked Dick Firench ever since he first came to Carlton. The officers of the detec-

tive force and the local constabulary were also present. The crowd was great; it filled the long ballroom where the inquest was held. Every one stared about curiously. It was in this room she had danced away the last hours of her life. The serious-minded shuddered; that was a dance of death, indeed, a dreadful way to go down to the grave—one's last act a crazy cotillion. But up-stairs, in her silver mounted, satin-lined casket, Dora lay, with face of marble and frozen eyes, and heard nor heeded not. And into the long, thronged apartment Miss Martinez came presently, and there was a flutter, a "hush-h-h!" from all, and every eye turned upon her.

How white she was in her long, straight black dress, with its great folds of crape; how tall, how solemn. She had grown thin, and her big eyes looked unnaturally large and weird. She went straight to where Captain Firench sat, and held out her hand.

"I am glad you are here," she said steadily. "It is kind of you to stay."

A dark flush mounted to his forehead—he rose and took in both his the hand she extended, and did not quickly let it go.

Greeditly the crowd strained eyes to see, and ears to listen. They were friends, then, these two, after all. But Richard Firench understood—she had heard the truth, the suspicions afloat had reached her. This was her vindication. It was the same true, brave instinct that had sent her to his side that morning at Shadlock Light, with her head thrown back, her eyes flashing, and her defiant "Captain Dick is not to blame!" God bless her! She was the same dear little Vera, after all!

Miss Martinez was giving her testimony with wonderful clearness and conciseness, considering the effort it cost her to be there at all. Harriet's words had roused her, thoroughly and effectually; she would relapse into stupor no more. To suspect Richard Firench of so ignominious a crime, of so dastardly a deed! Richard Firench, brave as his namesake of old, without fear and without reproach, to steal in and rob a woman! How dared they! Her splendid eyes blazed on these people—if looks were lightning it would go ill with some of the St. Ann's gossipers. She told her story without breaking down once, and was allowed to depart. On her way out she turned to Colonel Firench again.

"Come back this evening," she said; "it is so lonely!" Her lip quivered. "Come and share my watch—my last."

"I will come," he answered, more moved than he dared show, and he clasped her hand once more a moment, and saw her go.

Doctor Vanderhoff gave his testimony; he was positive no violence had been used. Mrs. Fanshawe had died of heart disease. The shock of seeing the robber, and struggling with him, as she evidently had, was the cause, but on any act of violence on his part—no. The hair and crape were produced; they went to prove that the thief was masked and wore whiskers, either real or false. All eyes at this point turned instinctively to the Mexican Colonel, sitting with folded arms and coldly resolute face. He wore no beard, a heavy, dark mustache alone shaded his mouth, but it did not conceal its fine determined contour, nor the shapely, well-rounded, obstinate chin. A man whose reputation was not lightly to be trifled with; a man not to be too quickly or easily accused; a man who knew how to defend his own honor and good name, or that mouth and chin, those dark, determined eyes, belied him.

Doctor Vanderhoff went, and the servants were examined. Had any of them seen tramps or suspicious characters lurking about lately? And then it came out that the stableboy had, Johnny, the stableboy, appeared looking frightened and irresolute. He tampered a great deal, and what he had to say was not easily got at. Got at, however, it amounted to this—at seven on the morning of the death, he had seen a man coming out of the summerhouse in the grounds and hurrying away toward the gates. Did he know the man? No, Johnny did not know him, but—more frightened than before—he broke off and looked askance at Colonel Firench.

"'Twas him!" Johnny said with a burst.

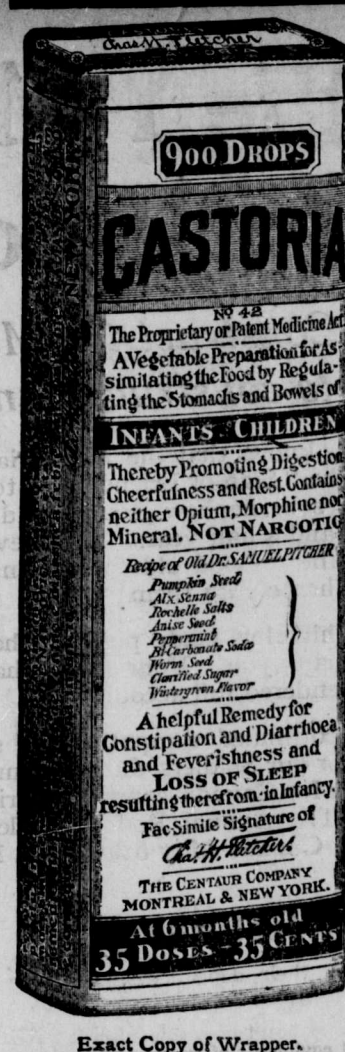
Then there was a thrill and a hard drawn breath, and a sensation through the crowd, if you like! And in the midst of it Colonel Firench rose, as calm as he was wont to be when he led his men to the hottest of the fight, but perhaps a trifle more pale.

"The lad is quite right," he said. "It was I he saw. I left the summerhouse about seven on that morning."

"You are not obliged, Colonel Firench—" began the coroner nervously, but Colonel Firench went quietly on.

I had been here about ten the preceding night. Private business concerning myself and Miss Martinez, brought me. It was not necessary to disturb Mrs. Fanshawe by my presence so I did not see her. I remained conversing with Miss Martinez over half an hour. Then I left. It was raining heavily, and blowing a gale. I did not care about facing the two mile walk to St. Ann's in the teeth of the storm, and knowing the place well, I went to the summer house. I sat there for some hours, but the storm did not abate, and fin-

(continued on page 8)



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