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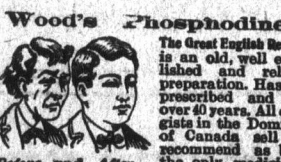


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Old Hagar's Secret

BY MRS. M. J. HOLMES

Author of "For a Woman's Sake," "Love's Triumph," "Purified by Suffering," "A Grass Widow," "Woman Against Woman," Etc.

"Yes, dreadful, dreadful, and yet, Maggie, I have sometimes wished you knew it. You should forgive me, perhaps, if you knew how I was tempted," said Hagar, and her voice was full of yearning tenderness, while her honey fingers, parted lovingly, the shining hair from off the white brow of the young girl, who pleaded again, "Tell it to me, Hagar."

There was a fierce struggle in Hagar's bosom, but the night wind, waiving through the hemlock boughs, seemed to say, "Not yet—not yet," and, remembering her vow, she answered: "Leave me, Maggie Miller; I cannot tell you the secret. You of all others. You would hate me for it, and that I could not bear. Leave me alone, or the sight of you, so beautiful, pleading for my secret, will kill me dead."

There was command in the tones of her voice, and, rising to her feet, Maggie walked away, with a dread feeling at her heart—a feeling which whispered vaguely to her of a deed of blood; for what, save this, could thus affect old Hagar, who had lived home led near the little burying-ground, and impelled by something she could not resist, she paused at her mother's grave. The moonlight was falling softly upon it, and seating herself within the shadow of the monument, she sat a long time thinking, not of the dead, but of Hagar and the strange words she had uttered.

Suddenly, from the opposite side of the graveyard, there came a sound as of some one walking, and looking up Maggie saw approaching her the bent figure of the old woman, who seemed unusually excited. Her first impulse was to fly, but knowing how improbable it was that Hagar should seek to do her harm, and thinking she might discover some clue to the mystery if she remained, she sat still.

While kneeling on Hester's grave, old Hagar wept bitterly, talking the while, but so incoherently that Maggie could distinguish nothing save the words, "You, Hester, have forgiven me."

"Can it be that she has killed her own child?" thought Maggie, and starting to her feet she stood face to face with Hagar, who screamed: "You here, Maggie Miller! Here with the others who know my secret. But you shan't wring it from me. You shan't never know it, unless the dead rise up to tell you!"

"Hagar Warren," said Margaret, sternly, "is murder your secret? Did Hester Hamilton die at her mother's hands?"

With a short, gasping moan, Hagar staggered backward a pace or two, and then, standing far more erect than Margaret had ever seen her before, she answered: "No, Maggie Miller, no murder is not my secret. These hands," and she tossed in the air her shivered arms, "these hands are as free from blood as yours. And now go! Leave me alone with my dead, and see that you tell no tales. You like secrets, you say. Let what you have heard to-night be your secret. Go!"

Maggie obeyed, and walked slowly homeward, feeling greatly relieved that her suspicion was false, and experiencing a degree of satisfaction in thinking that she, too, had a secret which she would guard most carefully from her grandmother and Theo. "She would never tell them what she had seen and heard—never!"

Seated upon the piazza was Madam Conway and Theo, the former of

whom chided her for staying so late at the cottage, while Theo asked what queer things the old witch-woman had said to-night.

With a very expressive look, which seemed to say, "I know, but I shan't tell," Maggie seated herself at her grandmother's feet and asked: "How long has Hagar been crazy? Did it come upon her when her daughter died?" she inquired; and Madam Conway answered: "Yes, about that time, or more particularly, when the baby died. Then she began to act so strangely that I removed you from her care, for, from something she said, I fancied she meditated harm to you."

For a moment Maggie sat wrapt in thought; then clapping her hands together she exclaimed: "I have it! I know what ails her. She felt so badly to see you happy with me that she tried to poison me. She said she was sorely tempted—and that's the secret which is killing her."

"Secret! What secret?" cried Theo, and, womanlike, forgetting her resolution not to tell, Mag told what she had seen and heard, adding as her firm belief that Hagar had made an attempt upon her life.

"I would advise you for the future to keep away from her, then," said Madam Conway, to whom the suggestion seemed a very probable one.

But Maggie knew full well that whatever Hagar might once have thought to do, there was no danger to be apprehended from her now, and the next day found her as usual on her way to the cottage. Bounding into the room where the old woman sat at her knitting, she exclaimed: "I know what it is! I know your secret!"

There was a gathering mist before Hagar's eyes, and her face was as deathly white as she gasped: "You know the secret! How—where? Have the dead come back to tell? Did anybody see me do it?"

"Why, no," answered Mag, beginning to grow a little mystified. "The dead have nothing to do with it. You tried to poison me when I was a baby, and that's what makes you crazy. Isn't it so? Grandma thought it was, when I told her how you talked last night."

There was a heavy load lifted from Hagar's heart, and she answered, calmly, but somewhat indignantly: "So you told it. I thought I could trust you, Maggie."

Instantly the tears came to Maggie's eyes, and, coloring crimson, she said: "I didn't mean to tell—indeed I didn't, but I forgot all about your charge. Forgive me, Hagar, do," and, sinking on the floor, she looked up at Hagar's face so pleadingly that the old woman was softened, and answered, gently: "You are like the rest of your sex, Margaret. No woman but Hagar Warren ever kept a secret, and it's killing her, you see."

"Don't keep it, then," said Mag.

"Tell it to me. Confess that you tried to poison me because you envied grandma," and the soft eyes looked with an anxious, expectant expression into the dark, wild orbs of Hagar, who replied: "Envy was at the bottom of it all, but I never tried to harm you, Margaret, in any way. I only thought to do you good. You have not guessed it. You cannot, and you must not try."

"Tell it to me, then. I want to know it so badly," persisted Mag, her curiosity each moment increasing.

"Maggie Miller," said old Hagar, and the knitting dropped from her fingers, which moved slowly on till they reached and touched the little snow-flake of a hand resting on her knee. "Maggie Miller, if you knew that the telling of this secret would make you perfectly wretched, would you wish to hear it?"

For a moment Mag was silent, and then, half laughingly, she replied: "I'd risk it, Hagar, for I never wanted to know anything half so bad in all my life. Tell it to me, won't you?"

Very beautiful looked Maggie Miller then. Her straw hat sat jauntily on one side of her head, her glossy hair combed smoothly back, her soft, lustrous eyes shining with eager curiosity, and her cheeks flushed with excitement. Very, very beautiful she seemed to the old woman, who, in her intense longing to take the bright creature to her bosom, was for an instant sorely tempted.

"Margaret!" she began, and at the sound of her voice the young girl shuddered involuntarily. "Margaret!" she said again, but ere another word was uttered the autumn wind, which for the last half hour had been rising rapidly, came roaring down the wide-mouthed chimney, and the heavy fireboard fell upon the floor with a tremendous crash, nearly crushing old Hagar's feet, and driving for a time all thoughts of the secret from Maggie's mind.

"Served me right," muttered Hagar, as Maggie left the room for water with which to bathe the swollen foot. "Served me right, and if ever I'm tempted to tell her again, may every bone in my body be smashed!"

The foot was carefully cared for. Maggie's own hands tenderly bandaging it up, and then, with redoubled zeal, she returned to the attack, pressing old Hagar so hard that the large drops of perspiration gathered thickly about her forehead and lips, which were white as ashes. Wearied at last, Mag gave it up for the time being, but her curiosity was thoroughly aroused, and for many days she persisted in her importunity, until at last, in

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self-defence, old Hagar, when she saw her coming, would steal away to the low-roofed chamber, and hiding behind a pile of rubbish, would listen breathlessly, while Margaret hunted for her in vain. Then, when she was gone, she would crawl out from her hiding-place, covered with cobwebs and dust, and muttering to herself: "I never expected this, and it's more than I can bear. Why will she torment me so, when a knowledge of the secret would drive her mad!"

This, however, Maggie Miller did not know. Blessed with an uncommon degree of curiosity, which increased each time she saw old Hagar, she resolved to solve the mystery, which she felt sure was connected with herself, though in what manner she could not guess. "But I will know," she would say to herself when returning from a fruitless quizzing of old Hagar, whose hiding-place she had at last discovered. "I will know what 'tis about me. I shall never be quite happy till I do."

Ah, Maggie, Maggie, be happy while you can, and love the secret alone. It will come to you soon enough—aye, soon enough.

(To Be Continued.)

Cholly—Did he really say I had more money than he? How ridiculous! Why, so? Didn't you borrow a dollar of him to-day?

There are sixty-six languages spoken in New York. I wonder if that includes the one spoken by the quick-lunch waiters.

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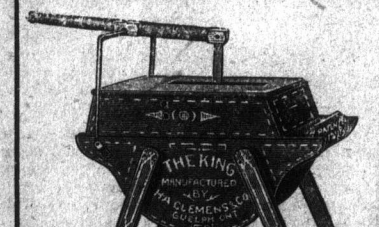
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