

# A Christmas Incident

## at Santa Domingo

By Anna O'Hagen

Not until she was fifty-five years old did Frederica Carey experience an overwhelming emotion. More than half a century of prosperity and dignity, of worthy affections not too vehemently cherished, and of meritorious activities, had left her a graciously handsome woman. Her gray hair had the luster of its dark youth, her brown eyes the clearness of their early years. The few delicate lines on her face had not marred its wholesome charm of pink and white.

Daughter of the leading citizen of Elmburg in the days when it was a mere town, she had married the leading citizen of the days of its young cityhood. Her husband had made unfortunate investments, and she had been left a widow without wealth, yet with sufficient means to maintain the simple and unostentatious elegance of living to which she had been bred.

It was on the evening of her wedding anniversary that her heart was pierced to its centre for the first time in all her years. She sat alone in her library, the light from the reading-lamp glowing about her. The letters of her two married daughters, decorously tender, lay in her lap. She had been looking back—over her life with a grateful satisfaction very slightly tempered by the grief of her fifteen years of widowhood. Always she had known upright and distinguished men and women and had been of them; always she had known orderly affections and—had experienced them. In her sorrows there had been no remorse, in her separations no shame. Surely, she thought, the world is very good to the same and the deserving!

And then her son Theodore came in. She stirred from the review of her blessings and glanced at him. "Have you had your dinner, Ted?" she asked. "I was sorry you were detained to-night." There was a scarcely perceptible reproach in her emphasis of the adverb.

Theodore repeated heavily after her: "To-night?"

"Yes. It is our wedding anniversary—your dear father's and mine. I could have wished that one of my children might have been with me."

Theodore sank upon the sofa beyond the circle of light from the lamp. "Your wedding?" he mumbled. Then suddenly he buried his face in his hands and groaned. "God!" he said. "Your wedding anniversary."

His mother spoke sharply, fright making her voice almost strident. "Theodore! What is it? What do you mean?"

He made no answer, but sat huddled against the end of the sofa, his face hidden in his hands.

She rose and went toward him. "I insist upon knowing what the matter is," she demanded, trying to force his fingers down.

He dropped them limply enough and looked up at her. His forehead was wet, his dark hair streaked upon it. In his gray eyes there was a look of agony and appeal such as had never been in any eyes turned toward her before. Mystified and terrified, she found herself suddenly angry. She shook his shoulder. "Tell me! Tell me!"

He made an ineffectual effort to speak, but no sound came. Then he buried his face in a cushion. When he raised it again there was determination on it. "Mother, mother," he cried, "I'm ruined! I've got to go away, to run away!"

"Ruined? Run away?" Frederica Carey was exasperated at words so meaningless in her vocabulary.

"Yes. I've been—all the money passed thru my hands—all the stock certificates—"

"Of course. You were the assistant treasurer of the company."

"Can't you understand? I've been stealing—speculating. Of course, I always thought—mother!"

She had drawn away from him and was staring at him with utter unbelief and loathing, as one looks at a monster too hideous to be true. Her face was as ashen as his own.

"Mother!" he cried again. "Don't—don't look like that!"

Her hands went out in a gesture of utter repudiation. She stumbled away from him and sank into a chair. The sight of her collapse, the quick understanding of her self-absorbed sense of outrage, gave back to Theodore himself something of poise. He sat up and his voice had a new ring.

"It seemed to me better that you should know, mother," he said, and at the title she struck out toward him with her hand, forbidding it. He drew his breath sharply. "Very well," he said. "At any rate, I thought it best that you should hear it from me. Lincoln—it's no excuse, I know—but he advised the speculations. At first I made some money; then I lost; then I borrowed—no, I stole. And now I am ruined. It's all gone, and I'm suspected. I know they've sent for some experts. I'm going to run away."

She raised her head at that, a sudden light in her eyes. For the first time since the revelation she spoke.

"Do you think you can get away?" she whispered.

The boy nodded. A piteous little

The boy looked at her helplessly for a second. "I was afraid," he began haltingly, "that you would want me to stay and take my punishment like a man. If you had wanted that I would have done it. I thought maybe that it would accord with your ideas of right and wrong. But I am going. I can escape. I shall. And I shall pay them back. And, mother—"

Again the gesture of repudiation. His mother was looking at him with hard and unforgiving eyes. But this time he was blind.

"Mother," he repeated brokenly, desperately, "Beth?"

"You did not think of Beth when you were disgracing your name. Why do you speak of her now?"

"I want you to see her," he begged. "I cannot. Make her understand that I was a fool, a weak rascal; but can't you make her see that there was something decent in me? Don't let her utterly—" He broke down.

"I wish that I might never see her again," answered his mother slowly.

"You do not understand what you have done. You have made me a reproach, my name a dishonor. I wish that I

of an upright race in a sudden burst of longing for her son.

### II.

Not until three or four days had passed did publicity come. Then the officers of the County Traction Company, journeying to the substantial dwelling set upon its stately terrace, asked Mrs. Carey for information of her son. She replied, with some appearance of alarm, that she had supposed him absent on a business trip in the interest of the corporation.

Then followed the revelations. That Mrs. Carey fainted was due to no power of hers as an actress, but to the sudden collapse, from sheer relief, of nerves strained to the utmost for three days. She would never have to wait again for these words, never have to live in expectation of this scene! She need brace herself no longer; and so she fainted. The next morning's papers referred to her most gently and respectfully when they chronicled the embezzlement and escape of her son.

She had read the papers, each word a knife in her heart. She had telegraphed to her daughters. She had left word with her maid that no one could see her, and that she had nothing to say to reporters. She sat alone and fed her soul on bitterness.

There was an imperious ring at the door-bell. There was a swift flow of words, a flurry of skirts, and past the palpitating maid a girl flew down the hall and into the dining-room. It was Elizabeth Darrell. Her face was white save where two disks of excited red burned high on her cheeks. Her fair hair was disordered beneath her big hat.

"It isn't true!" she cried disdainfully all preliminaries. "It isn't true. I know that. But where is he?"

"I don't know," said his mother woodenly.

"Don't know? Why do you look so, Mrs. Carey? Why do you—you don't believe this—this absurdity?"

Something in her young disdain angered the older woman.

"I know it is true," she announced briefly.

Elizabeth's wrath flamed. "How do you know?" she demanded furiously.

"He told me."

The girl looked at the woman for a full minute with no change of expression; then she walked slowly to a chair and sat down. She remained quite still for another minute.

"Where has he gone?" she asked dully.

"I do not know."

They faced each other again; then the older woman leaned forward. "Do you care so much?" she asked curiously.

"How can you ask me?" replied the girl. "You who must love him beyond all words! Am I never to know where he is?"

"I do not desire to know."

"And I," said Elizabeth, "would give everything to know where he is, to go to him, to bring him back here for his expiation, to wait thru it, and to make him happy at the end."

"He has not disgraced your name, and you are young, and heroics are for you."

"You are his mother."

"That is it. My son, flesh and blood of me, is a thief and a fugitive. You can know nothing about it."

Elizabeth sat, the youth frozen out of her face as if it were a flower blighted by the first frost. But by and by her indomitable spirit came back, melting the hardness of her look, almost dissipating its misery.

"Dear Mrs. Carey," she said gently, "you are right, I do not doubt; I cannot understand your feelings. But neither can you mine. I loved him. We were waiting, playing with our certain knowledge of ourselves and of each other, enjoying our love better because we had never used the words. It was like—it was like—ah, just before the orchards

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The Housekeeper of the Mansion Hotel was pained to see him positively gloating over a bank book

smile trembled for a second on his lips. After all, his mother cared for his safety! "Thank God for that! At least one disgrace will be spared me."

The glimmer of yearning hope faded from his face, but to hers returned something of its normal color.

"I should die," she went on, "to think of a child of mine, a Carey, a Townsend, in jail, in those clothes! Ah!" She shuddered and closed her eyes against the vision. Opening them again she was shaken with passion as she looked at him. She had always been a correct mother, affectionate, sufficiently indulgent; but at that moment she had no sentiment save outraged honor. And in the inexpressible fury she felt was the strongest emotion of her life.

"I am going," he said. "I shall take a new name. I shall pay them back every accused cent before I die. I had thought of—quitting. But I couldn't."

"Quitting?"

"Yes. Suicide."

"How much have you—taken? Is there no way of saving your name?"

"Fourteen thousand. There's no way of saving me now."

"If the house were mortgaged—sold? And I still have a few shares of Pennsylvania."

Theodore stopped her with a gesture. "You know it can't be done. All your little money is in trust, and I am glad of it. I couldn't have you homeless in your old age."

"Better leave me homeless than dishonored," said his mother bitterly.

might never see a living soul again, much less that girl whom I thought distinguished—distinguished—by you! I wish that I might die before I have to face the world. You, who have known only good things all your life; you, your father's son; your grandfather's—yes, mine! I am glad that you are going away. I am glad that I shall know nothing of your further disgrace, for you are weak and wicked at the core, and dishonor will be your portion."

"Everything you say is probably true," answered the boy, standing and looking down at her with a queer look of misery and defiance, "except the last. I shall not go down. I shall live to pay this back, and then—it is nobody's business what I do."

He waited a while standing beside her. Hope was not quite dead in him yet. He ventured another appeal.

"Somehow," he said—"of course it was silly—but I had expected you to pity me. Oh, not much, but a little!" He waited for a second after that, but in the white wretchedness of her face there was no relenting. Her proud lips were tight shut, her eyes directed straight before her.

"All right," he said finally; and in another minute she heard the door slam behind him and the ring of his footsteps on the flagging. It was not until they had died away down the street that she was stabbed with any sense of loving loss. Then, when the inexorable silence closed about her again, for a breathing space she forgot the outraged pride of a daughter

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