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Under False Colors

Lord Somerton's Ally.

CHAPTER XII. A DREAD FOE.

"I am not likely to forget this path," Colin Ernscliffe said, when they were within a stone's throw of the nymphet's dismal home. "It was here I encountered Lord Somerton, and it must have been fate that guided my steps this way, for I had wandered a long distance out of my course. By Jove! so this is your ancient nurse's cottage. She must be fond of the dark!"

Elsie tapped at the door, and on the instant there was the distinct "clink, clink" of coins, as though money was being hastily secured.

"Will you not open the door to me, Zeba?" "It is I—it is Elsie," the girl called.

"One minute, dearie—one minute," was the rather hoarse response, but the minute lengthened into five before the bolts were withdrawn, and the door was opened.

The sudden glare of daylight dazzled Zeba's eyes, and she looked anything but pleased to see that Elsie was accompanied by a man—and that man a stranger.

"Who is this?" she demanded, suspiciously. "Ah, my pretty lamb, trouble has crossed your path. Send him away at once—send him away! Why take your greatest enemy within your doors?"

"Silence, Zeba!" Elsie sternly commanded, her cheeks flushing with anger, for Ernscliffe's face had suddenly grown as white as death. "If your prophecies come so glibly, why do you not discover who it is—what man it is that haunts the vicinity of your cottage? To me it is a standing terror, just some harm befall you."

The Indian's eyes glistened with cunning. "None but friends ever come to see me," she replied. "Why should they? What is there—who is there to hurt Zeba? I will tell the gentleman's fortune for a silver coin," she added, suddenly.

Elsie was about to interpose, but Ernscliffe had already thrust his hand into his pocket, and produced, not a silver coin, but a bright gold sovereign.

"Perhaps this will wear the strange woman into regarding me with less disfavour," he whispered. "Gold! gold!" Zeba croaked hoarsely, snatching at the coin with her clawlike fingers. "Gold is bright and beautiful, but nothing can glid lies until they shine like the truth!"

She took Ernscliffe's hand between her own, and he watched her with a strange fascination.

"Zeba, you must be able to see in the dark," shuddered Elsie. "This face grows more uncanny every day!"

"I cannot tell your name, sir," Zeba began. "I know not from whence you

came, but you are my young mistress's bitterest enemy! You are her father's most dreaded foe! and I curse you—curse you!"

She uttered the last words with a shrill shriek, and Elsie angrily bade her be silent.

"Zeba," she said, "this nonsense proves to me, conclusively, that your fancied prophecies are utterly false. Poor old nurse, who used to be so loving and good to me! Why will you not come back to the house, to your own bright rooms?"

"No—No!" was the sullen response. "Zeba, I do not wish to unnecessarily alarm you, but I fear for your safety, and I have come to plead with you to leave this horrid place."

"No," replied Zeba. "I will never leave it! It is mine! Sir John gave it to me! It contains my secrets!"

She whispered the last words, and stared from side to side.

"Ha! ha! Money will not buy them—my secrets and yours! The secrets of Blairwood. I have fooled him! I have fooled him!"

"Fooled whom?" demanded Ernscliffe, interested in spite of himself.

"The man with much gold—hundreds of beautiful pieces of gold. Ha! ha!"

"She is losing her reason," Colin said, in a low voice to Elsie. "It is a sin that she should be left here in loneliness and dith. I am afraid that you will be accused of cruelty, of inhumanity, if this gets to the ears of those people in authority who interest themselves in the well-being of the unfortunate."

"Do you think so?" asked the girl, in sudden terror. "Oh, how disgraceful it would be! What am I to do?" she added, piteously.

"Have the surrounding trees cut down, if she insists upon staying here, and send in workmen to clean and repair the place. I believe that she has hoarded a few coins—"

"You lie!" hissed Zeba. "I have no money—I have nothing! You are my darling's enemy—curse you! curse you!"

"Let us go," Ernscliffe said, nervously.

"One moment," responded Elsie, firmly. "I am convinced that papa has no knowledge of the real state of things, and I shall take your advice, Colin. I am mistress of Blairwood! Papa placed its conduct in my hands, under the guidance of the rector. In a case like this, where the well-being of my poor old nurse is at stake, I need not consult Mr. Vallance."

She turned to Zeba, who was seated on a low stool, her head between her hands, her bead-like eyes shining with a phosphorescent kind of glow in the sun-gloom—saying sharply and decisively:

"I will not permit this sort of thing to go on another day, Zeba. Your cottage shall be taken from you, but it shall be made wholesome, clean, and brightened by sunshine. To-morrow the trees shall be cut down, so you had better prepare."

At first the Indian woman uttered a hiss like that of an angry snake, then she clasped her arms about her young

mistress, and begged piteously that her home be in no way interfered with.

"I am determined upon it, Zeba, for your own good," Elsie said, grimly. Ernscliffe led her by the arm from the cottage into the fresh, sweet air, and for many a yard they heard the moans and curses of the ayah.

"I have done right, have I not, Colin?" the girl whispered, with white lips. "It grieves me bitterly to cause Zeba pain, but it is all for her good."

"Of course, it is," the artist told her; then both relapsed into silence, until the park was left behind, and the turrets of Blairwood church were visible beyond the top of a hill nearly a mile away.

Securing the church keys from Mr. Vallance, the rector, they hurried up to the gallery, and while Colin hustled himself at the bellows, Elsie selected her music and began to play.

Never before had the young man heard such masterly music, and several times he found himself pausing in his occupation, and listening like one entranced. There were songs of sadness, mad melodies, the thunder of battle, and fairy numbers, and then Elsie paused, half laughing, half crying, for at times like these her soul went out to the music.

"Beautiful, my clever little woman!" Colin said, enthusiastically. "If you are not tired, will you play and sing once more to me?"

"Anything you like, darling," she replied, her eyes shining with gladness. "I am pleased that you like my music. I fly to it in every mood, and find relief. It is too me a kind of confessional, a medium through which I communicate my joys and sorrows."

Ernscliffe caressed her shining hair, and looked into the misty blue eyes that were turned up to him with ineffable tenderness.

"There is one melody of which I am extremely fond," he said, "and if you like I will sing with you. I think I can manage to do that as well as blow the bellows!"

"I have not heard my lover sing!" murmured Elsie.

"And you must not be too critical, young lady," smiled Colin.

He turned over the music, and their heads came very close together, so close that Mr. Vallance, who had quietly entered the church, and was standing in the chancel below, was horrified.

"This is my favorite I alluded to," continued the artist, pausing with the book open at "She Walks in Beauty."

He turned back to the bellows, while Elsie played the prelude; then, as the organ pealed, their voices rose in unison, and the rector listened like one transfixed.

"She walks in beauty, like the night Of cloudless climes and starry skies; And all that's best of dark and bright Meet in her aspect and her eyes, Thus mellowed to that tender light Which heaven to gaudy day denies."

"One shade the more, one ray the less, Had half impaired the nameless grace Which waves in every raven tress, Or softly lightens o'er her face, Where thoughts serenely sweet express— How pure, how dear, their dwelling-place."

"And on that cheek and o'er that brow, So soft, so calm, so eloquent, The smiles that win, the tints that glow, But tell of days in goodness spent, A mind at peace with all below, A heart whose love is innocent."

The organ ceased its music, and the voices became still, but Mr. Vallance saw that Colin Ernscliffe and Sir John Sterne's daughter were dangerously near to each other again. Dim and religious as the light was, he felt assured of this. He heard faint whispers in tones of endearment, and awoke to the fact that they were lovers in an advanced stage. He could not understand it. He had known Miss Sterne from babyhood, and never once had he reason to even suspect her of anything but truth and candor in all things. She had held in his estimation a high place for her goodness—her sweet charity—her almost angelic qualities—and now!

He shivered with dread. This Colin Ernscliffe was a stranger, by her own confession. Sir John was away, and had left Elsie to him as a sacred charge. He slipped quietly out of the church, for he could hear that the lovers were preparing to leave. He walked to a tombstone, and leaned against it, faint and sick at heart. He knew not why, but the air seemed filled with impending trouble—trouble for poor Elsie.

(To be continued.)



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A good gun, practically speaking, lasts for ever. For that reason royal orders are few and far between. When the King orders a gun, however, he does so a year before he requires it, for it takes a whole year to make—or "build"—the perfect weapon used by his Majesty.

The type of gun supplied to the King has now been standardized, and is known throughout the world. It costs a hundred and thirty guineas, and bears the royal crown in gold inlay on the lever.

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