

"Sweetheart!" repeated Donovan with a hoarse chuckle. "No, miss, I never had no sweetheart. I never was fond o' no young woman like as your young man is fond o' you. He'd do anything for you, I expect. I'm sure," went on Mr. Donovan with odious gallantry, "that if I was a gentleman, an' you was my young lady, I'd do anything for you."

My cheeks burned hotly at his tone, but I dared not show any resentment; and Donovan, evidently under the impression that he was making himself highly agreeable, went on speaking.

"Yes, I'd do anything for you if them was the circumstances, an' no doubt your young man feels the same. If you was to lose that ring, he'd be glad enough to buy you another. I'll be bound."

"But no other ring could ever be the same as this," I answered smiling. "This ring was put on when I first promised to be his wife, and it has never been off since."

"In spite of the gravity of the situation a faint sense of the humorous struck me as I said the words. I had never been a girl who discussed her love-affairs, always holding that such matters should be kept sacred between the two chiefly concerned, and it seemed so strange speaking on such a topic to an ignorant laborer, my father's servant.

But all thoughts save of the present were quickly dispelled as the man rose to his feet and came towards me.

"It has got to come off now, miss, if it has never come off afore," he said. "I've had my eye on that ring ever since I first see you, and now the time has come for you to pass it over to me."

He put his hand towards me, and I grasped it frantically. Apart from the actual value of the ring I had another reason for my reluctance to part with it. Let me confess that I am not a little superstitious, and that Tom had said to me: "Whilst this ring remains on your finger nothing can come between us. Never take it off, my darling, until it has to give place to your wedding circlet." I had always felt—foolishly enough, as the sensible reader will no doubt remark—that if ever the diamonds left my finger some misfortune would come either to my lover or to myself, something that would prevent that "wedding circlet" from ever being worn.

"Oh, do not take it from me, Donovan!" I cried wildly. "I would part with anything rather than that!"

"Now, miss," said Donovan, his deliberate manner contrasting strongly with my excitement, "you're a good-looking young woman, an' a pleasant-spoken young woman, an' I should be very sorry to hurt you in any way. But I'm a-goin' to have that ring, an' if you don't give it me quiet-like I shall have to make you, that's all."

"Wait till my father comes home," I said desperately; "he will give you some money instead."

"No doubt," answered Donovan with a sarcastic laugh. "He'd give me something handsome, an' be pleased to do it. What a pity you didn't mention it afore he went, miss. Come!" with a sudden threatening change of tone, "hand it over here while it's well with you!"

Did my ears deceive me, or did I really hear faint murmurs of voices in the yard? I sat for a moment absolutely still, every nerve strained to listen. Oh, if Basil were really there, and, unconscious of my danger, should turn back again without coming nearer to the house!

With one intense prayer for Almighty aid I suddenly flung aside Donovan's hand, and had got across the room and had flung open the door ere he had recovered from the astonishment that my energetic action had inspired.

He was after me in a moment, but not before I had screamed "Basil! Basil!" and the sturdy blacksmith, recognizing the desperation in my voice, was by my side in an instant. Then I heard a muttered oath as Donovan rushed past me, and was lost in the darkness.

Basil was about to dart after him, but I clung to him tremblingly. "Oh, do not leave me—do not leave me!" I gasped. "Let him go, he cannot hurt me now. Come in," and realizing that the peril was past I burst into a fit of hysterical weeping.

When I grew calm enough to talk I told Basil and Sally the whole story. Basil was wild to go and seek the author of my terror, in order that he might be duly punished, but in my state of shaken nerves I could not bear the idea of being left, even with the companionship of Sally and the security of bolted doors.

So Basil stayed all night, occupying one of the beds left vacant by the absence of the men-servants. Sally slept on the sofa in my room, for I felt too unstrung to remain entirely by myself.

The next morning Donovan was nowhere to be found, and we have never seen or heard of him since. My father on his return was horror-stricken to hear of the danger to which I had been exposed, and said that he would never again leave me so unprotected.

As for Tom, when I wrote and told him about the affair, he speedily came over and said that it was clear to him that a plain gold ring would be better than diamonds for ordinary wear. So I suppose the exchange will shortly be effected.

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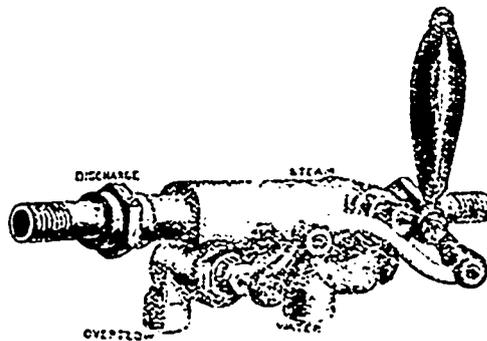
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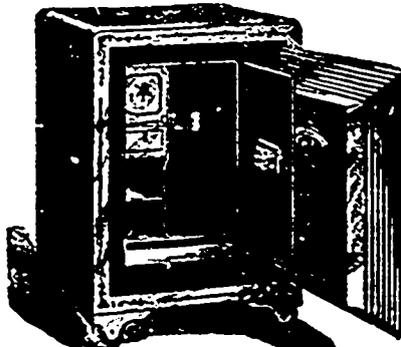
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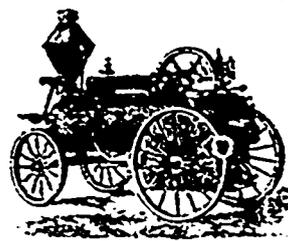
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