

The Bottom Drawer.

In the best chamber of the house,
Shut up in dim uncertain light
There stood an antique chest of drawers,
Of foreign wood, with brasses bright.
One morn a woman, frail and gray,
Stooped furtively across the floor:
"Let in," she said, "the light of day;
Then, Jean, unlock the bottom drawer."

The girl! In all youth's loveliness,
Knelt down with eager, curious face,
Perhaps she dreamed of find an elixir
(Of jewels and of rare old lace;
But when the summer sunshine fell
Upon the treasure hoarded there,
The tears rushed to her tender eyes—
Her heart was solemn as a prayer.

"Dear grandmamma," she softly sighed,
Lifting a withered rose and pin;
But on the elder face was naught,
But sweet content and peaceful calm
Leaning upon her staff she gazed
Upon a baby's half-worn shoe,
A little fruck of flimsy lawn,
A hat with tiny bows of blue

A bell made fifty years ago,
A little glove, a knitted cap,
A half-don't long-division sum,
Some schoolbooks fastened with a strap,
She touched them all with trembling lips,
"How much," she said, "the heart can bear!
Ah, Jean! I thought that I should die
The day that first I laid them there

"But now it seems so good to know
That throughout all these weary years
Their hearts have been untouched by grief,
Their eyes have been unstained by tears!
Dear Jean, we see with clearer sight
When earthly love is almost o'er;
Those children were in time the skies
For whom I locked that sacred drawer."

CUPIDITY AND CRIME.

CHAPTER XXV.—(CONTINUED.)

"Ho—Lord de Gretton—did not speak until we reached the cottage," Nora said, in a low frightened voice, as though the sound of her own words alarmed her; "and then—I cannot tell you; it was dreadful—it seemed as though some demon took possession of him. He pushed me into a chair, and stood over me, with his eyes,—he had such strange eyes Arthur!—sunk far back in his head, but very bright; and how they blazed as though a fire burned beneath his heavy lids. Oh, I see them so often in my dreams—I can see them now!"

She paused, with a strong shudder and a look of deadly terror. But the entreaty of Arthur's face was more potent even than the old haunting fear. Conquering the tremor, she went on bravely—

"He told me that I had deceived and entrapped him—I, who would have died far more gladly than marry him—that I was a false wife—a woman he could never trust again. At first I tried to answer him; but he would not hear me. He cut my explanation short with that bitter little laugh of his, and went on and on, in a cold, smooth, merciless voice, saying the cruellest things in the quietest fashion, till at last I really ceased to understand him. His words seemed to bruise and hurt my brain like so many blows, but not to convey to it any coherent idea. I suppose he saw this, for he suddenly bent forward, seized me by the shoulder, and shook me, bringing his face so close to mine that I could not keep back a startled cry.

"You are hysterical, my lady, worn out and exhausted by the fatigues and excitement of the day," he said, with grim, horrible mockery. "Your maid shall show you to your room. In your present state of excitement you had better keep it for the remainder of the evening."

"I understand; I am a prisoner," I said slowly.

"By no means," he answered, with an angry snarl. "We will not shock the servants with a key; you are indisposed—a fitting subject for strong tea and sal-volatile, as your maid will readily believe. You are by no means a prisoner—only understand—his hand closed again in a cruel grip upon my shoulder, and again my heart died within me in a chill deadly fear—only understand that I shall be on guard the whole evening in this room. So, if you have a fancy for any more stolen meetings with your lover—"

"In spite of the craven fear that paralyzed me, Arthur, I broke in then; the

mault was too cruel, the wrong too great for even cowardice to bear.

"I met Mr. Beaupre by accident, and we have parted for ever," I began; but he cut me savagely short.

"That is my business—I will see to that," he said, in a low grating voice that was in itself a threat. "With both of you I have a long account to settle; but not now—not now."

"Arthur, to this day I cannot tell what impulse moved me in that moment to do the last thing I should ever have thought of doing a second or so before. Until then I had hated him as a slave hates a hard and cruel master to whom he is hopelessly consigned. His look had never been more threatening, his words more cruel—and yet all in a moment a flood of light seemed to rush upon me. I saw things by its clear lustre no longer from my point of view, but from his—saw that he had wronged to complain of and disappointments to endure, that, where he trusted, he had—though, Heaven knows, most innocently—been deceived. The impulse was like a revelation, I obeyed it as unhesitatingly.

"Lord de Gretton," I said humbly, "try to believe me, try to forgive."

"But he snatched away his hand as though my fingers burned him, his eyes shone with their evil glitter, his voice literally trembled with passion, as he said between his teeth—

"Never, so long as we may live: I never trust a traitress; and, if you wish to know how I forgive the women who have wronged me, ask Lady Olivia Blake."

"They were the last words he ever spoke to me, Arthur. No wonder that they linger in my mind. I hardly understood them then; but afterwards, when all things were confused and misty in my thoughts, those words rang in my ears incessantly."

She paused again, her hands tightly locked, her eyes gazing into the deepening shadows of the night with a strained and painful intensity. Arthur did not dare to speak, to hasten in any way the disclosure that was so slow to come.

"The hours seemed long—horribly long, Arthur—and yet I must have passed them in a sort of trance. Long after my maid had left me for the night I sat by the open window, thinking, thinking in a maze of misery, till I fell into a dull heavy sleep—a sleep that left me no consciousness of my present surroundings—only an abiding sense of pain and fear. And, while I slept, Arthur, I dreamed a dream—such a strangely vivid, dreadful dream that I woke from it trembling from head to foot, and with great drops of perspiration on my forehead. I thought that, while Lord de Gretton sat writing in the room below, with his heart full of bitterness and anger, a shadow came noisier and noisier; and I knew that it came to do him harm. I saw its outline clearly in the moonlight, tall, black, and slender, a graceful woman's shape. The face was hidden; but I caught the glitter of fierce eyes, and in the small white hand another glitter that made my heart stand still. I tried to scream, to warn the man, who never raised his head, of the dreadful thing that drew nearer every moment; but horror had paralyzed my every faculty. I could not stir or cry. I heard a sharp cry of pain, a clear and cruel laugh, the sound of taunting voices, and a heavy fall. Then the spell that held me seemed suddenly to snap, and in an agony of terror I awoke!

"So it had been but a dream after all! I was still in the velvet chair by the open window. Stillness perfect and intense reigned around. Far up in the clear blue of the heavens the moon shone with full brightness, making each nook and corner of the garden distinctly visible; from terrace to terrace the lovely light passed down, till it lingered on the placid splendour of the sea—and, lo! where I would, no living figure was in sight. It was a dream, thank Heaven—a dream only!

"I sank back in my chair, ashamed to

find how intense was my feeling of relief, how strong a hold the vanished vision had had upon me. It was long before I could control the wild throbbing of my heart, or regain anything like composure, but it came at last; and, worn out and exhausted, I once more dozed off, to be once more roused by a long moan of pain.

"This time, however, the sound did not cease with my slumber, as I sat, cold and shaking, in the chill gray morning light. I heard it again, and yet again—a sound to freeze the blood in your veins, a sound like the moan of a wounded animal too weak to cry aloud.

"Almost mechanically, conscious in an unconscious way that that piteous sound had reached no ear but mine, I rose to my feet, and, obeying some impulse beyond my own control, descended the stairs and entered the little room in which Lord de Gretton had told me he should be 'on guard.' I found—Oh, Arthur, is it any wonder that the sight I looked on drove me mad?"

She broke down in a passion of hysterical tears; Arthur let her cry, restraining his impatience by a giant effort for her sake. In such tears lay the best medicine for the overwrought nerves and overtaxed brain.

He held one hand within his own strong clasp, in firm assurance of his sympathy; but it was not till the sobs had died away, and the girl tried to smile gratefully through her tears, that he spoke at all—then he said gently—

"Do not dwell on details that distress you, but finish the story, like my own brave girl. You found Lord de Gretton—dead?"

"Not dead, but dying," she said in a low shaking voice. "He still lived when I knelt beside him, but that was all. The blood ran like a river round him, it was on my dress, my hands—everywhere; and his face was white—oh, so horribly white! I should have thought him dead but for the dreadful glitter of his eyes and that broken cry—it was faint as the faintest whisper. Then I tried to raise his head, to cry aloud; but my voice failed, and he motioned me back. He tried to move, to speak, failed, and closed his eyes—tried again, and, by a supreme effort, jerked out one word—the word that had been the haunting key-note to my dream—'Olivia'; and so, with a brief convulsive struggle, he died."

"And you?" Arthur Beaupre asked, in tones of infinite compassion, as he laid his hand on the down-bent head, and thanked Heaven in his inmost heart that even this ray of light, faint and uncertain as it was, had pierced the darkness of the night and given promise of the dawn at hand.

"I"—the sweet voice was sharpened by keen pain, the sweet uplifted eyes were filled with self-reproachful light—"I was not brave, Arthur, I was not what you called me. I dropped like a dead thing by Lord de Gretton's side, and, when I awoke, it was broad day. It was too late to summon help, too late for anything. I think I went mad in that moment, Arthur! The sight of the rigid motionless figure, of the blood that lay around me, that stiffened on my dress, my hands, my feet, the hopelessness of my own future, a craven fear of the life that seemed so incomprehensibly cruel—all seemed to stir me to a sudden frenzy, and bid me take my fate in my own hands. I forgot all these things—conscience, religion, duty—all but the sweet and easy death that awaited me there at the cliff's foot, and, like a thing possessed, I rushed to meet it. You know the rest," she said, with a strained sob. "Heaven sent my better angel, Nettie, to my rescue, and for all the months that followed I remembered little more—nothing but the absolute devotion with which Vance and she have watched, and tended, and sacrificed themselves to me—me, whom they thought a murderer!"

The shade was gathered unnoticed round the young pair as they sat absorbed in their own conversation; only the

faint moonlight and the uncertain glimmer of the lamp across the street lighted the room now. Arthur stood by the window, looking out abstractedly, his whole thought engrossed by the story he had heard. Suddenly he turned to Nora—who, lost in a painful reverie, sat by the table—and spoke quickly, with a nervous jar in his voice—

"Nora, dearest, go away for a little while to your room. A lady has just come into the house, and I think—I fear—Go, dearest, to please me!"

A little surprised, but unquestioningly obedient, Nora rose at once and moved towards the door; it opened in her face, and disclosed Cristino Singleton!

Nora recognized her step-sister at once, but Cristine, whose veil of spotted net confused her vision, and whose eyes were not trained to the dusk, naturally concluded that the slender form was that of Mrs. Vance Singleton.

"My dear sister," she cried, with outstretched hand, and her most fascinating smile, "I have come, in spite of Vance's prohibition, to make acquaintance with Vance's wife. I know we shall love each other dearly."

She bent her fair head with the words, prepared to imprint the kiss that is the absolutely necessary seal of friendships feminine. Nora drew aside instinctively; the one clear line of light fell straight across the fair proud face, defining it with startling effect against the blackness of the surrounding shadows.

Cristino grew absolutely livid; a cry rose to her lips, but it found no utterance. Recognition was instantaneous, and as instantaneous was the paralyzing terror that seemed turning her to stone.

"Nora," she cried at last, in a hoarse broken voice—"Nora—or—"

She paused, trembling from head to foot, oppressed with the horror of a supernatural presence; then, as Nora neither moved nor spoke, she fell suddenly upon her knees, upraising both hands, with an exceeding bitter cry—

"Forgive me, Nora, cruel as I was!"

"Hush!" Nora said, with a grave sweetness that seemed half angelic to the conscience-stricken woman and the listening man. "It is for me to fear you now, Cristine; I am not dead, and you can give me up to justice with a word."

CHAPTER XXVI.

Lady Olivia Blake sat in the tiny luxuriously-furnished nest she called her own snugery, awaiting with some impatience the arrival of an expected guest. It was barely twilight—a rosy glow still lingered in the western sky; but her ladyship's curtains were all drawn, and the light of a dozen wax candles not being considered enough to illuminate the small room, a large moderate lamp upon a centre-table diffused a bright radiance around. Light was a craze with Lady Olivia; the sun could never blaze too fully into every corner of her house, and, when the sun retired, she could not supply his place with too many lights. Naturally her elder feminine friends wondered among themselves that "dear Olivia, with whom complexion was never a strong point," and who, since her disappointment, had grown quite too dreadfully pinched, and thin, and sallow, should care to throw such a strong revealing light upon her fading charms; and one especially intimate individual, who felt that such an absurd illumination was a wrong to her elaborate "make-up," ventured to remonstrate with her on the subject.

"I love the dark because my cheeks are evil perhaps," she said, with a deprecating smile; "but, though your conscience may be clear, my dear Olivia, you should have some mercy on your visitor's complexions."

"The sun that comes here will not scorch them," was the short and barely courteous answer.

"Search them! No; but—with a little shoulder-shrug and prettily affected laugh—"though you disdain them, there are secrets of the toilette, you know."