

ADVENTURE IN A TOWER.

BY EVELYN THROPE.

"Shut in?"

"If we can only make the workmen hear before they get away."

"Do you mean that if we do not we shall be imprisoned here indefinitely?"

The sudden storm raged about the high tower room in which Conrad Hammond, bachelor and clubman, and Virginia Redwood, prospective M. D. and missionary to native Hindu women, found themselves, by the crashing of a ponderous door, unexpectedly incarcerated. The tower belonged to an unfinished country residence; and that country residence—the ubiquitous reporter had already informed the county press that it was to be one of the finest in the country—was the property of Conrad Hammond himself. An hour before the slanting sun that had been shining out of an unclouded August sky had become abruptly obscured, and the young man, meeting Miss Redwood in one of the long walks she was wont to take for miles outside the sleepy old historic village with her huge blooded mastiff, had offered her the shelter of his tower during the impending storm. Great drops were already descending with an ominous accompaniment of thunder, and Virginia, after a brief hesitancy, had accepted the proffered hospitality, while Hammond, who had been riding, tied his horse to a tree. And this was the result? The tower stood on the farther side of a sweeping lawn that divided it from the house, in which the sound of workmen's hammers and saws had just ceased, and to make one's self heard from its windows in the tumult of the elements had become an impossibility. The wind which, suddenly pouring down the winding staircase that led to the tower-room, had violently flung the door, above its last step, in the lock, carried away Hammond's reiterated calls in ineffectual whispers. The lock was provisional and on the side of the stairs only. And when the entire situation dawned on the girl's bewilderment, she put this last question to her companion with a face that had grown a trifle white and rigid.

"The workmen will be early in the morning of course," replied the latter, endeavoring to speak lightly, but pulling nervously at his mustache the while, "and we can't starve in the interim. Still—"

"Are you certain that the door cannot be broken open?" Virginia inquired, controlling herself forcibly.

"Unfortunately I fear it cannot." He was a man of muscular build. He threw himself against the heavy plank, pushing against it with his shoulders until the veins showed on his face. A faint creaking of the wood was the only reward of his efforts.

"Then we must wave our handkerchiefs—make some sign," said the girl quickly. "Surely, some one in the country round must see us." But even as she spoke she knew that any such attempt would be futile. The house and tower were isolated in the midst of large grounds. Evening was coming on apace and they were three miles from the village. The thought of the anxiety that would be felt about her in her home added a fresh pang to her alarm. She was a young woman who was exceedingly proud of her self-control, of her equanimity in all eventualities of life. But she was conscious now of a distinct sense of painful discomfort. And of all men, to be placed in such an embarrassing position with this man. With this Conrad Hammond for whom she had so very small a measure of consideration or respect, and so large a measure of contemptuous dislike! With this idle man of the world, supposed to be so irresistible to women. Without knowing it—and indeed how could a young woman devoted to such lofty aims in life linger upon thoughts of her personal qualifications?—Miss Redwood had a face most expressive of her inner soul, an eye beam most eloquent of her condition of feeling and mind. Looking at her now her companion in imprisonment said:

"I think I need not tell you how deeply I regret that my carelessness in leaving that door unpropped in this terrific wind should have led you into so unpleasant a situation, Miss Redwood. Especially as I cannot but feel you could scarce have met with such a misfortune in the society of any one who would be more distasteful to you."

The rain had abated and the wind was sinking, but the clouds hung threateningly low and in these already shortening August days a crepuscular grayness was beginning to invade the tower-room. A rough wooden bench, used at some time by the workmen and half covered with shavings, occupied one side of the circular room and on it Virginia had seated herself, her fingers interlocked, her handsome young eyes turned sternly away. Although this Conrad Hammond, whose charms and good looks (and riches) women so liberally extolled and for whom she personally had always felt such an unaccountable aversion, had had the good taste to take up his stand at the further end of the small room, she was uncomfortably aware that his glance questioned her with strange insistence through the dark. Wrapped up in her desire for a useful and worthy career, she had always shown herself supremely indifferent both to her own severe, Diana-like young beauty and to any emotion it might arouse in the men with whom she came in contact. For this man her usual indifference had become accentuated into a latent and irritating sense of antagonism. All the Summer, though he had never shown any pur-

suit of her that could be construed into deliberate courtship, she had been conscious of a silent attention on his part, always centered on herself. She had resented it tacitly, at times with an undefined nervousness which filled her with anger against herself. She was fired with a constant wish to tell him how very poor was the opinion she had of him. Now, as he stood regarding her with folded arms, these indefinite feelings rolled up within her with a complex force that broke at last in articulate words. "Only he would not stare so how thankful she would be!"

"I don't know quite what you mean," she rejoined, tensely and coldly, upon his last speech. "No one could make this predicament itself anything but unwelcome. It is not a question of personal taste or distaste."

He laughed a little, shortly.

"Ah, you are begging the question, Miss Redwood." She flushed haughtily.

"I never do that. If you must know—will know—the truth, I have no respect for your views of life—no. And I judge a man by his life," announced this uncompromising young medical student.

"You are severe!"

"I don't think I am unjustly so." Her large eyes flashed upon him in the deepening darkness with indignant fearlessness. "I simply have no respect for men who live in luxurious indolence on this toiling, writhing earth, where countless millions work and suffer! Still less for men who cultivate the reputation of Don Juans and Lovelaces."

A silence fell between them. Hammond could no longer distinguish clearly the features of her face. The rain had cooled the air, and with the advent of night a certain chilliness had crept into the bare, high-perched tower-room. Now and again a sighing gust of wind circled the massive stone wall about them and died away in a murmur of trees. At the foot of the tower Virginia's mastiff barked shortly and insinuously.

"Poor Don!" murmured the girl softly.

She had seemingly almost forgotten the man across the room. But she started a little imperceptibly, when he spoke again. His face was quite shrouded from her now, and she could but just discern the outlines of his figure; but she was conscious of a tone in his voice that had never been there before.

"However scant your own respect may be for a man whom you think of as glorying in the final two epiphets you have used, I can prove to you that such a man is capable of greater respect for a good woman, on his side, than you seem willing to credit. I had not intended saying anything to you now. But before we were liberated from this mouse-trap to-morrow it was my determination to offer you my name and hand—to ask you to be my wife."

"And I would have refused both gift and request," answered the girl, slowly and distinctly. "I refuse now. I am not so afraid what the world may say. My life lines are to lie so far from the scandalous gossip of so-called society that I can afford to be very indifferent to any unjust blight that may be cast upon my name by reason of this miserable accident. As a man of honor you might offer to marry me—such are the artificial codes of the thing we call social life. But I, as a woman of honor, can marry no man in whatever unfortunate position I may have been placed who does not love me and whom I do not love in return." Her voice trembled.

"And who tells you that I do not love you?" asked Hammond, in compressed accents. She felt him draw a step nearer in the darkness. "That I should speak now is what I never thought, never desired. But since one word must be uttered the entire truth may as well follow. I love you, I have loved you exclusively, devotedly, passionately—since the first day I saw you. You have avoided me, heaped contempt upon me. I have but loved you the more. You are the one love of my life. I have wanted no other woman for my wife. I want you. You may treat me as you may now. The day will come when you will—when you must—love me. I tell you that—here—this moment. And there will come a time when you will remember my words. I am a man who is not afraid of the truth. When that door crashed to and I realized the position in which you were unavoidably placed I said to myself that this might be my opportunity—that you might now be shown what was in my heart and might consent to marry me. Was this wrong? Will you judge me as harshly for this as for all my other supposititious misdemeanors? Love such as mine for you makes its own law. Do you not realize that? I may have tasted too many of the bitter-sweet fruits of life, but I have never been a base man nor a dissipated one. And now I want to be a better one than I have been; to lead a more useful, a worthier existence. It is you who have inspired this wish. And if you will in time love me, you can make of me what you will."

She had heard him through to the final word, but now her voice broke upon the last passionate vibration of his with a vibration as passionate.

"And you call yourself an honorable man and take such an occasion as this to drive me to bay? You say such words to me now—now—when I am constrained to listen to anything you may choose to utter? Is this a time to force a love you have justly divined would be distasteful on a girl so defenseless against intrusion as I am at this instant? But you have already declared that you thought this a strangely happy oppor-

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tunity! At least you are candid in unmasking your soul and your views, Mr. Hammond! Let me be equally candid and assure you that even had I some feeling of a possible liking for you—which was never the case!—this scene, the unmanly and ungentelemanly advantage you have taken of my position, would be more than sufficient to kill outright not only such feeling, but the last lingering spark of respect I might have entertained of you in the bargain!"

She paused and she now for the first time perceived that she was trembling in every limb. Hammond had made no sound—had not stirred in his place. Only after what seemed an interminable pause she heard him move toward the window. When he spoke his voice had changed as much as though it were the voice of another man.

"You are entirely right. I beg your pardon, I acquiesce entirely in the opinion you have formed of me. I have labored under a great delusion. But it is still possible, perhaps, to save you in another way from the consequences of this unfortunate accident."

The scattered clouds had broken a little and projected against the pale square of night-light in the window. Virginia could see the vague outlines of his head and shoulders. Suddenly he seemed to swing himself upward. A sharp pang of undefined terror clutched her.

"What are you going to do?"

"Swing myself on to the top branches of that tree and trust to heaven to get to ground safely from there."

"Mr. Hammond!" She had started forward, her knees quaking under her. "It is not possible that you can be so insane, so foolhardy—"

Her words broke in a low cry. An evanescent ray of moonlight had filtered palely through the clouds and Virginia saw the mad leap—heard a sharp creaking snapping of boughs. Then the moonlight disappeared. The clouds closed again over the place where it had been.

Virginia had sunk on her knees.

The next thing of which she had a consciousness was of a bright light from a lantern that had been swung upon her face. Don was licking her hands and face in a canine transport of joy and alarm. Voices resounded around her and she recognized the kindly accents of a gardener's wife whose cottage a mile off, she had frequently passed in her walks.

"It's faintest she has poor dear! And no wonder. Shut up here in the dark alone, and how do you expect she ever got up here? Mr. Hammond was right then when he said he thought he heard a voice calling for help from the top of the tower as he rode by down by the entrance of the grounds."

"It was pretty far off to hear," answered the voice of the woman's husband. "Still, when the night is so quiet.*** But the funny thing is Mr. Hammond didn't stop to see what it was himself, instead of riding on so far as our house."

"He said he wasn't sure, Caleb. Only when he come to think of it he suspicioned more and more that something might be wrong. But he didn't have time to go back then."

Virginia had aroused herself then, her bewilderment all gone. He had shielded her carefully then to the last!

"Heaven be thanked, miss!" exclaimed the gardener's wife. "Are you feeling better? And how did it ever happen ma'am?"

"I will tell you later. Could you get me home now? I seem to have little strength."

Before the two worthy people retired definitely for the night the woman said to her husband: