

The proud lip curled scornfully—a gleam of satisfaction shot from the keen black eyes, and Marie went on. 'He would say—nay, does say I was the most to blame—that I aggravated him beyond human endurance—but he provoked me to it. Think of his swearing at me, Rosamond—calling me a she devil and all that. Think, too, of his telling me to my face that he was driven into the marriage wholly by his sister—that he regretted it more than I, and to crown all, think of his boxing my ears!—he, a poor, insignificant Northern puppy, boxing me—a Porter, and a Southern heiress!'

She was terribly excited, and Rosamond, gazing at her face, distorted with malignant passion, began to fancy that the greater wrong might perhaps have lain with her.

After a moment's pause, Marie began again. 'When we had been three months man and wife, he wrote to the old man, confessing his marriage, and saying sundry things not wholly complimentary to his bride; but I intercepted it, read it, tore it up, and taunted him with it. I believe I called him a low-lived Yankee, or something like that, and then it was he struck me. The blow sunk deep into my soul. It was an insult, an unpardonable insult, and could not be forgiven. My Southern blood was all on fire, and had I been a man, he should have paid for that blow. I feel it yet; the smart has never for a moment left me, but burns upon my face just as hatred for him burns upon my heart!'

'Oh, Miss Porter,' cried Rosamond, as the former ground her teeth together, 'don't look so terrible. You frighten me. He struck you, but he asked your pardon sure?'

'Yes, he pretended to, but I spat at him and bade him leave me for ever. His sister tried to interfere but she made the matter worse, and as my father was on the eve of embarking for America, I determined to go home, and when he came, tell him the whole truth and ask him to seek satisfaction from one who had dared to strike his daughter. Richard made a show of trying to keep me—said we had better live together and all that, while his sister called us two silly children who needed whipping. But I did not heed it. I went home to Uncle Bertram and waited for my father, who never came. He died upon the sea, and I was heir of all his vast possessions. Then Richard made overtures for reconciliation, but I spurned them all. You've heard of woman-haters, Rosamond—I am a man-hater. I loathe the whole sex, Uncle Bertram excepted. My marriage was of course a secret in Florida. My servant, who knew of it, died soon after

my father, and as Uncle Bertram kept his own counsel, more than one sought my hand, but I turned my back upon them all.

'Four or five years ago he wrote me a letter. He was then master of Sunnyside, for the old man left it to him after all. He was lonely there, he said, and he asked a reconciliation. Had he never struck me, I might have gone, for his letter was kindly enough, but the blow was a barrier between us, so I refused to listen, and exulted over the thought of his living there alone all his days, with the secret on his mind.

'The sweetest morsel of all in the cup of revenge was, however, for a time withheld, but it came at last, Rosamond. It came at last. He loved a beautiful young girl, loved her all the more that he could not marry her.'

She drew nearer to Rosamond, who though still unsuspecting, trembled from head to foot with an undefinable emotion of coming evil.

'I saw her, Rosamond; saw this young girl with his name upon her lips when waking—saw her, too, with his name upon her lips when sleeping, and all this while she did not dream that I, the so-called Marie Porter, was his wife, the barrier which kept him from saying the words her little heart longed so to hear.'

There were livid spots on Rosamond's neck—livid spots upon her face, and still she did not move from her seat, though her clammy hand clutched nervously her bridal dress. A horrid suspicion had flashed upon her, but with a mighty effort she threw it off as injustice to Mr. Browning, and mentally crying, 'It cannot be,' she faintly whispered, 'Go on.'

'The summer I met her,' said Miss Porter, 'I was at Cartersville, a little out-of-the-way place on a lake—'

'You're telling me true?' interrupted Rosamond, joy thrilling in her tones.

'Yes, true,' returned Miss Porter.

'Then bless you—bless you for those last words,' rejoined Rosamond, burying her face in her companion's lap. 'A terrible fear for a moment came over me, that it might be I. But it isn't. I met you at the Springs. Oh, if it had been me, I should most surely die.'

'But she did not—the young girl,' resumed Miss Porter. 'She had a brave, strong heart, and she bore up wonderfully. She felt that he had cruelly deceived her, and that helped her to bear the blow. Besides, she was glad she knew of it in time, for, had he married her, she would not have been his wife, you know.'

Rosamond shuddered and replied, 'I know,