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CHAPTER XLXII.

THE WHEELS OF FATE.

But when she came to the illness of the squire her voice grew broken and troubled, and at last she got excited and spoke rapidly, until, with her last words, she covered her face with her hands and shuddered with horror.

"He was ill—dying, they told me. I ordered the carriage. William drove me to the front gate. As we came up within fifty yards of it I heard—I was watching the light in the sick-room window—a cry and a shriek, repeated twice or thrice. It was the squire's voice. I can swear—the squire's voice raised in entreaty, horror, and rage. I trembled like a leaf, and thought of stopping William to ask him if he had heard it, but remembering that he was nearly dead let him go on to the gates. He got down there and asked me if he should drive up to the hall-door. Now, I had intended to stop him at the gates and go up the shrubbery way to avoid the noise of the carriage on the front drive; but the dreadful shrieks had driven it from my head.

"However, I told him to wait there; and, pursuing my original intention, got out and walked hurriedly through the shrubbery. It was quite dark and I had on my light boots. No one could see or hear me. When I had reached the end of the shrubbery and was about to turn into the terrace something moved at my right—a dog or a cat, I thought at first—but keeping close to the shrubs I peered anxiously and saw Reginald Dartmouth. He was leaning against the terrace with something white in his hand. It was

not a handkerchief—that I could swear to—but it was like—only like, mind you; I could not see distinctly—a folded sheet of paper. Well, I waited—waited until I heard him mutter something and walk slowly down the steps of the terrace to the old well. Still I waited until he came up again, and then saw, by the reflection of a light carried past one of the windows at the moment, that the paper, or whatever it was, was gone. Hush! I have not finished. I turned back, terrified and trembling; but, tilling nothing of all that I had seen—William, made my way to the hall-door and found—the squire was dead.

"Dead! How did he die?"

"Screaming, shrieking, and struggling—so Reginald Dartmouth says, who, according to his own account, had fallen asleep on the chair beside the bed, and was awakened by the last terrible struggles of a weak and aged man. Oh, Charlie, when I think of it all—and when do I not?—my brain seems on fire! Could it be possible for the old man at the last gasp to shriek as I heard him shriek? Could it be possible? He was weak, very weak. If he had been at his last breath he would not have cried so loudly, so vigorously, so fiercely. No! Dying he might have been; but depend upon it that the man whose interest his death advanced cut short his last hours by foul play."

Sir Charles Anderson started from the couch but to sink on it again with white face and quivering lips.

"Oh, it is too horrible—too horrible!" he exclaimed. "And yet—the will!"

"Ay, the will!" broke in Rebecca. "I tell you all this has changed me utterly. It has taken possession of my soul, absorbed my whole life, and made me what you see me. The will—that is the most important point. The squire disinherits his only and well-beloved son; disinherits the girl—my poor, darling Grace—whom he had declared his heiress, and leaves all—all to this fair-faced, false-hearted man, who plotted, as you admit, to snare the poor girl for gold, and failing in that staid his hands with a darker crime."

Sir Charles rose and paced the room.

There was silence for some minutes, Rebecca staring before her with white face and fixed eyes.

"What is to be done?" asked Sir Charles, presently.

Rebecca shook her head, then rose, and, walking to the window, pointed to the new Hall, rearing its proud head from among the trees, and said:

"I know not. I am working quietly, slowly. To no one have I divulged the secret of that night; but I am working silently. Night and day that hideous palace gives me no rest—it is hideous to me, for it is built of the old squire's blood—and night and day it reminds me that two innocent beings, whom I loved, are wandering helpless and homeless about the earth, and the villain who wronged them both is basking in the living and gold, sipping his ill-gotten wealth broadcast, and mocking Heaven's justice with brazen defiance."

"The first thing to be done is to



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and Hugh and Grace," said Sir Charles, thoughtfully. "Has anything been done? Have they been advertised for?"

Rebecca shook her head.

"Mr. Reeves, the lawyer, told me that Reginald Dartmouth had promised to advertise for them; but, though I dared not say so, I could not hope that he would do so."

"And did you not?"

"No," said Rebecca. "At one time I should have done so as the first step; but these terrible events have sharpened my wits. I knew they would come to Reginald Dartmouth's knowledge and render him suspicious of me. And that, of all things, must be avoided if punishment is to be dealt him."

"Ay, I see," mused Sir Charles, sinking onto the couch again; then he continued:

"You speak of the old well: there is none now—at least, that I have seen."

Rebecca smiled significantly.

"That is the repository of some secret, trust me. Think you, Charlie, that he would leave it in existence? No; it was filled up the day after the quire's funeral."

"Ah! Oh, Rebecca, that there is something wrong grows more evident each moment. What is to be done? Shall I go and grasp him by the throat and extract the vile secret from him?"

And he clinched his hands.

Rebecca shook her head sadly.

"No, that would not do at all. Craft must be met by craft, cunning—by cunning. You were his friend, Charlie; you must go to the Hall and play the part of one still."

"What!" exclaimed Sir Charles, looking troubled. "I—do you think I could, Rebecca? You know what I am. The chances are that I should forget my part, and get up at breakfast or dinner, in the smoking-room or on the lawn and, unable to bear it any longer, clutch him by the throat and out with the whole of it."

"No, no," said Rebecca, laying her hand on his, which was pulling impatiently at his collar. "You will go back, Charlie, and play your part—for my sake."

She flushed a little only for a moment—but the words had the desired effect.

"Your sake, Rebecca? Well said. You were always good to me—always. I'll do this, and more, for you."

Rebecca's eyes shone with tears.

"Oh, Charlie," she cried, "years ago I did poor Hugh Darrell, unintentionally, a grievous wrong! Oh, if by any chance I could restore to him his rights!"

CHAPTER XLXIII.

A DANGEROUS TASK.

My fate cries out,  
And makes each petty artery in this body  
As hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve.  
—SHAKESPEARE.

It was a strange and somewhat dangerous task that Reginald Dartmouth's secretary had undertaken; but there was nothing of doubt or fear in the dark eyes which, through their sheltering spectacles, watched the beautiful countess as, leaning on the arm of his master, she glided across the magnificent saloon, or seated between the count and the duchess, rested on one of the fauteuils of the grand drawing-room.

He had been told to watch, and John Stanfield, the secretary, was

watching—watching—with keen, all noting, never-resting eyes, that would have done even a woman, the keenest of all watchers, credit.

No minute of the evening upon which he had undertaken his task did he let the countess from his sight.

He stood, shrouded by curtains, watching her as she brushed past him; he walked on the terrace with bent head and slouching gait while she read on the lawn; he stood by the carriage with absent gaze, waiting for it to pass, still keenly noting her very look.

And the result was a strange one. Alone in his room that night, waiting with the keys in his hand, till all the great place should be still, he murmured:

"Through her I shall reach him—ay, through her; for Reginald Dartmouth, after his own selfish fashion, loves this beautiful, high-born countess."

And the silent secretary sighed.

At last all was still; the lights in the saloon and drawing-room, were extinguished, the last of the men from the smoking-room had exchanged tobacco for bed, the servants had closed and barred the house—the new Hall was asleep.

The strange secretary sat in the small, well-furnished room that had been allotted to him, his red head resting upon his hands, and the rusty keys lying on the leather-covered writing-table before him.

"All are asleep by this time, and now to my task. Strange what uses time and circumstance make of us! Who would have thought that I should have turned the spy and supposed tool of Reginald Dartmouth?" he murmured, with a sad but meaning smile.

"Ah, what a world this is! What a world of treachery, plotting, and scheming is going round beneath this roof, and I—and I," he continued, with a burst of excitement and clasping his hands with a gesture of bewilderment, "am caught upon the wheel and whirled round with it. Where will this end? Whether am I drifting? To what discovery—to what climax? Oh, but when I look back at the past I can hardly persuade myself that I am not dreaming—that I am awake! I have lost my identity. At one moment I am one person, at another some one else, and yet some distinct individuality still; then confused, bewildered, still dream on to the end. I seem all three commingled in a confused one. Oh, let me be calm! To-night I am John Stanfield, quiet, determined, astute—Reginald Dartmouth's spy—and so to my task."

Calming himself, or hardening himself, as it were, the strange youth smoothed his red hair over his forehead, settled his spectacles, and took up a small hand-lamp which was standing on the table.

Turning the flame down till it looked no larger than a star, he stole on tiptoe from the room and stood in the grand corridor, listening intently.

After ascertaining that all was quiet he proceeded in the direction of Reginald Dartmouth's apartments, shielding the lamp with his small hand, so that the light should not be extinguished.

(To be continued.)

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