

Tainted Gold.

BY MRS. C. N. WILLIAMSON. Author of "The Bar Stormers," "Fortune's Sport," "Lady Mary of the Dark House," "Queen Sweetheart," "The House by the Lock," etc.

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS:

The tale opens at the Duke of Clarence's theatre, by the stage-door of which a young man, looking remarkably handsome, but looking as if he had just come from the Wild West, is waiting to see the manager. He is noticed by Winifred, who is a young actress, and also by the manager, but of repulsive appearance and infamous character. The stranger, whose name is Hope Newcome, introduces himself as a friend of the manager's, and the initials strangely affect not only the manager, Mr. Anderson, but also Macaire, Newcome, who announces that he has come to England for the purpose of "finding something," asks Anderson for an engagement, but the manager, prompted by the millionaire friend, finds an excuse for refusing. "Dunstan's presence," says Winifred, "is sent for to the theatre, where she sees Macaire. The millionaire informs her that he has now a magnificent interest in the theatre, and offers her an engagement as Rosalind, Winifred, who has been playing small parts, is at first dazzled by the offer, and on a declaration of love from Macaire she rejects the millionaire's advances with loathing. Macaire allows her to go for the moment, but declares that he will break in on her peace of mind, and she, still lounging at the stage door, sees a stranger of powerful physique mount the box of Winifred's cab beside the driver. Macaire places Newcome soon disposes of his opponent, and receives the thanks of the young actress, who, however, hardly realises the danger she has escaped. One day Winifred is sent for by Anderson, and, evidently with great regret on the part of the manager, told that she is not suitable for the role she is to assume in a forthcoming production, and that "if she prefers to leave the company at once she will receive salary for the next fortnight. Winifred sees she has no option but to go, and she knows also from what quarter she expects to go, for she leaves the manager's room. Macaire enters with an unmistakable expression on his face. She visits all the theatrical agents and is aware that strong influences are working against her.

CHAPTER XXI. A Backward Glance.

When Winifred Gray had cried out her broken prayer for help on the night of her great trial at the theatre, Mrs. Purdy had honestly striven to comfort the girl. The old woman thought that the young one made far too much of the order, through which she was expected to pass, and bluntly said so. "What's an extra petticoat here or there?" she had scornfully demanded. "There's many a girl just as good as you, and I'm one of the best, and she plays the boy in pantomime, my dear, whenever she can get the job, and I wish she was out now. It'd be a wonder if she wasn't should it your mother?" "There was a difference, but perhaps too subtle for Mrs. Purdy's comprehension. Winifred, quivering and panting still, did not attempt to go into it, but a few words which the woman had spoken made her turn wet, wistful eyes up to the common old face. "You've a daughter of your own," she said. "For her sake, and for my mother's, help me. It isn't only this scene that is so dreadful. There is far more than that. A man—a very rich man—has persecuted and plotted against me. My playing the boy, and being here at all to-night is part of the trick. He would spoil my whole life if he could—I think he has nearly spoiled it now. This is to bring me into the dust under his feet; and he would be glad if the shame of it killed my mother, who is very ill, for then I should have no one on earth to care for or protect me. Think how you would feel if your daughter—your good daughter—were in such trouble and danger. Do for me what you would have my mother do for her if our places were changed. Help me to get away—to hide myself from this man." She caught the woman's skirt with her hands, when Mrs. Purdy half turned away. Eyes, and shaking voice, and falling tears all did their part in pleading. "Dear me, if you ain't suddenly the image of my own beautiful lady, the first and dearest I was ever dresser to," exclaimed Mrs. Purdy. "It's your eyes—I think—and the look of your face now. I'll never forget till the day I die, seeing her cryin' because of a trouble a bit like yours. Why, if there was anything I could do for you, I'd do it and be glad, for my gal's sake, and the look on you like my lady. But what could a body like me do that would be any use? In fifteen minutes you'll be on the stage, and you'll be there." "But there are those fifteen minutes first. Somehow, if you would, you might smuggle me out of the theatre, and then, if you could, tell me what to do just for the night." "Hist!" whispered the old dresser, holding up a finger of warning. "Someone is coming to the door." Winifred was hushed into instant silence, her wet eyes large and shining, her lips parted for hurried, uneven breaths. "Knuckles rapped out a summons on the door. It was then that the stage manager had asked Mrs. Purdy how she was getting on. With a quick, meaning glance at Winifred, her answer had been that she was "getting on as well as could be expected." "Then he has been induced to go away, and the parley had begun again where it had been so abruptly broken off. "Supposing I could get you out—just say I could, but supposing"—the dresser went on, "you couldn't go to your lodgings, could you? This rich man you're talkin' about, he's sure to go where you lodge, ch? "They have my trunk here at the theatre. He could easily have found it." "Then he has found out. You may see on that, miss. The search for you would begin the minute they discovered you'd given 'em the slip. And if you was to try and get to London, the railway stations would be the worst places there'd be for you."

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to be directed to Salt street. So a clever detective might be put upon her track, and Mrs. Purdy was as anxious to avoid such a mischance as Winifred could be; for the lies she must tell at the theatre would put her in a peculiar position, if they should be found out. Mrs. Purdy had been at the Theatrical theatre as dresser since it had been built a few years ago, and she did not wish to lose her place. Suddenly Winifred heard the lively music of a banjo. A man's voice was singing a dapper song. Not one of the songs known in London music halls as "gentle plantation ditties" warbled by shapely young ladies in broad white collars, knickerbockers, and silk stockings, attended by black faced "siceantines," but the real thing, invented by Southern darters, for darkies—sensual, tuneful, contagious of melody. It was that quaint bit of Kentucky gibberish known as "Hotter than Chickens-Pie," and the people who had crowded round the singer to listen were laughing and patting their feet, some of them joining in the chorus. They were collected at a well-lighted street corner, and Winifred had begun to wish that she could find a quieter thoroughfare when the song came to an end. "Give us 'Linger Longer Loo,'" suggested someone. "Can't think you. Shop's shut up for to-night," laughed the man who had been singing, with a slight American accent, while, might or might not be affected. Something in the voice caused Winifred to pause at a distance outside the radius of the nearest lamp, and try to obtain a glimpse of the speaker. He was tall, and wore a black mask which completely hid his face; but Winifred hoped, so she could be nursed at home, she cried so at the thought of going into hospital. She's better now, but she's laid up yet. Ain't you afraid?" "No," answered Winifred. "I'll take my nurse here. I'm a good nurse—my mother says so." "There's someone helpin' me now—a lodger. But we can make room for you anyhow, only you may get the disease."

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"I'd rather die than stay here," cried Winifred. "Well, then, this is what I've been thinkin' of. Look enough, when I come to see you, I'll put in my pocket a hood I was knittin' for my gal. It's finished, all but the strings. And this worried shawl I've got on for my rheumatism, you could have that. No one would notice. I'd took it off. And I could spare you a few things. I've a petticoat on, was a dress skirt once, only made a bit shorter. Then you could leave all your clothes as they are, and I'd make 'em think you'd gone out for your scene—that you couldn't have left the theatre whatever you did. I'd keep 'em 'neath my long dress, too. If only you had a thick veil now, to hide your face, you could slip out of this room while Jeffrey's back was turned; peep first and make sure you'd a chance. You might pass by even stage hand about the place, and the door-keeper too, before anybody dreamt you weren't behind the scenes. In here for your black chifon, Miss Emmet—the one of the ballet girls—wears a hood like this; I knitted it for her myself, and you're out in pantomime, my dear, whenever she can get the job, and I wish she was out now. It'd be a wonder if she wasn't should it your mother?"

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her with a wistfulness that would not be concealed. Winifred guessed that she must be mild and weary-looking after all she had gone through, and fancied that her white face had suggested his stammering offer. There was something curiously comforting and helpful in his manner, though he had made no offer to help or hinted his suspicion that she might need it. While he was gone from the room Winifred listened attentively to the sound of his footsteps in the passage, his low-toned conversation with the sick girl, and was glad when he came back again—a warning, protected glances as if one who had found safe haven after storm. "I always make myself a cup of tea or cocoa when I come in about this time," he said, when he had returned to the kitchen sitting-room. "Mrs. Purdy has given me permission, and I feel myself very much at home. Won't you have some tea? Or do you like cocoa better at night?" "I should like tea very much, thank you," Winifred answered. She leant back in the chair, "old custom" and "washed him. There was something wonderfully restful about it, after all she had passed through. He seemed to understand by instinct that she was too weary and worn to do anything but quietly about his work. In this little household were lumps of coal and kindling were luxuries, so the fire had not been lighted. Hope Newcome got up, and poured a spirit lamp, and before the kettle had begun to sing he cut thin, tempting slices of bread and buttered them. He knew nothing of everything, and performed his self-appointed task with the skill of one who has cooked himself many a meal at times and in place when otherwise he would have had none. There was a glass of milk for the sick girl in the next room, and when it had been carried to her the tea had stood long enough to be good. A plate of toast was laid on the table, and Winifred ate bread and butter and sipped strong tea. It was a very strange thing, but nothing on earth had ever tasted so good. "What nice tea you make!" she said. "Do if I'm glad," he answered. "I used to make it for my mother."

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