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**The Die is Cast For Better or For Worse.**

CHAPTER XXX. The Deed of a Coward.

Kittie reached Herondyke in exactly the same mental condition in which she had started. She could not think clearly, could make no plan of what she should say or do when she reached the house. The past was still as if enveloped in a mist, the future was formless; she could only grasp one fact—that Harry was in danger and in need of her. The station-master, with a rather curious glance at her, directed her to the great house, and she went on her way quickly, steadily, like a dreamer making for a visionary goal.

The woman at the lodge, as she opened the gates, regarded the slim, graceful figure with curiosity and a trace of suspicion.

"You go straight on, miss, through the avenue," she said in answer to Kittie's inquiry.

Presently she came in sight of the vast place; but its grandeur did not affect her, she scarcely raised her eyes, and she went straight up the stone steps flanked by the huge heraldic monsters—the memory of the crest she had seen on the match-box at Quirapata flashed across her mind—and entered the hall by the open door. Yule was crossing the hall and stopped and stared at her with surprise; but he saw that she was a lady, and came forward respectfully.

Kittie sought for her voice and found it at last; it sounded hollow, expressionless, but it was quite firm. The pluck with which Mr. Levison had credited her rose within her and sustained her.

"I wish to see Lord Herndale," she said.

"His lordship is out, ma'am—miss," said Yule. He did not know which designation was right; there was the dignity and nobility of maturity in her white face and solemn eyes; but the figure, the soft and tender lips were those of a girl. "His lordship has just strolled out. I don't suppose he has gone far. Will you come in and wait for his lordship?"

Kittie hesitated for a moment only; it would be better that she should meet him out in the open, that she should explain her presence, make her bitter confession with no one to hear but him.

"Can you tell me by which way Lord Herndale has gone?" she asked.

Yule was touched by the sad, gentle voice.

"His lordship would doubtless go into the park, miss," he said; "in fact, he must have done, or I should have seen him about the terrace. Right

across the lawn; that path will take you to it. What name shall I say if his lordship could come in?"

"It will not matter," said Kittie. "I shall find him." And indeed, she felt that she could not fail to do so, that she would be drawn to him.

She crossed the lawn and entered the park. As she did so, she glanced behind her to see if Lashmore was in sight, and the long, stretching line of the great house, with its marble terraces and steps, smote her with a vague sense of its grandeur and magnificence. Amongst the trees, with no path opening to her, she did not know which way to take; and all ignorantly she took the direction of the preserves. The trees were closer, the undergrowth thicker here; she made her way with difficulty, and she was about to turn back, thinking that Lashmore would be more likely to be strolling in the open spaces of the park, when she heard the report of a gun.

She stopped dead short and both hands flew to her heart. "Danger!" And Harry was out here!

With almost superhuman strength she forced her way through the bracken and bramble, which tore at her skirt as if to detain her with human hands, and she went in the direction of the fateful sound.

Herndale stepped backward, his eyes still fixed on the upturned face, to the shelter of a tree, and leant against it, shaking in every limb; but presently through the stupor of his terror there crept the coward's first instinct, that of self-preservation. In a moment or two his brain grew clear, had never been more acute. Poachers were in the wood; firing had been heard; what more likely than that Lashmore had been shot by one of the scoundrels? What more likely, than having shot him, they should rob him? If he only had the courage, he could make the evidence against them complete. With a shudder of loathing and supernatural fear, he crawled slowly toward the motionless form, and, advancing his hand three or four times before he could dare the contact, he tore Lashmore's watch and chain from their place, and, with shaking hands, took some gold from

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the waistcoat pocket in which he knew Lashmore carried it.

The sweat stood in icy drops upon his forehead, his livid lips were twitching, his heart seemed so swollen that he could scarcely breathe.

"Curse you!" he said between his teeth, "you've made me do this!"

In an impotent, maddening rage, he actually raised his hand to strike the white face; but his arm was arrested above his head by a strange sound; the rustling of the undergrowth, the panting and gasping of a human breath. Still kneeling, he gazed, as if spellbound by terror, in the direction of the sound. Some one was coming; he would be caught here by the body, the gun in his hand. And yet he could not move, was held incapable of movement, like a man in a nightmare. The fumes of the spirit, of the wine, cleared away and he realized the stupendous folly of which he had been guilty. Fool, fool that he was to have let his passion carry him away! He had become a murderer, like a ruffian in his slums! And yet all would be well, if he could only move! No one would know, no one would even suspect him—the poachers, they would get the credit of it. He was a rich man, Eva would be his wife, he would be rich, would become distinguished! If he could only move!

The sound came nearer, nearer. Its proximity broke the horrible spell. He sprang upright, flinging the gun from him as he did so. He could see that he had been alarmed by the sound of the gun, and hastened to the spot. The bushes in front of him parted, a girlish figure stood before him, as if rooted to the spot, transfixed by the horror of the scene. A mist was before his eyes, he tried to chape his lips to speak; the moon came from behind the bank of clouds and shone full upon the girl's face, and at the same moment the mist cleared from his eyes and he saw her plainly.

With a cry, an awful cry, he flung up his arms and staggered back. "Eva! Eva!" came hissing through his livid lips. He staggered back, his eyes still fixed on her, and, turning like a drunken man, he flung himself into the wood and disappeared.

Kittie had stood there for one moment only; then she threw herself down beside Lashmore, and the silence of the night was riven by her screams.

CHAPTER XXXI. The Crisis. An intense stillness brooded over the great house, for its master was fighting for life in the darkened room which overlooked the park and the headlands, which he might never see again. Beside his bed, upon which he tossed with fever or lay like a man already dead from exhaustion, Kittie

watched him with eyes which seemed scarcely ever to close; the nurses hovered about, the doctor was in close attendance, sometimes alone, sometimes accompanied by a famous physician from London.

All the countryside was in suspense, and London itself was watching the issue with an intense interest; for this new turn, this climax to Lashmore's romantic history, had excited and touched all England and the England beyond the seas. Owen Osborne, who had arrived with Levison, within an hour or two of the tragedy, had remained at Herondyke, though he could do little but step into the room noiselessly, gaze at the unconscious man who had won his heart, and murmur words of encouragement and comfort to his anguished wife. Sometimes Kittie heard them and responded with a wan smile, at others she was deaf and did not remove her eyes from Lashmore's face.

The police had, of course, appeared on the scene, but they were baffled in their attempts to fix the guilt upon one of the poachers. The man who owned the gun had been able to prove conclusively that, after setting his gun down, he went to a different part of the wood when the shot was fired which had laid the stalwart form low. And Kittie's lips remained closed. Owen Osborne had a suspicion of the truth, and the suspicion was grounded on the fact that Herndale had disappeared.

He had written to Lashmore saying that he had been called abroad suddenly; and everybody, save Osborne, had thought it only natural that the displaced man should want to get away. It should be said that Levison also shared his suspicion; but though Levison came frequently to Herondyke, he uttered no word. He was waiting to see if Lashmore would win through the valley of the shadow of death; if he did not, then Herndale could be tracked down and brought back.

Forbes also was at Herondyke, and his eyes found as little sleep as did those of his mistress; he was always at hand, not nervous and trembling now, but calm with the devotion of a faithful servant whose master may need him at any moment. Strangely enough, though very few words had passed between them, there was already a tacit understanding and confidence between Kittie and the old man; each recognized in the other the great love they bore toward the unconscious man, and Kittie's tearless eyes were turned, with a perfect comprehension, to Forbes whenever he stole into the room.

To Kittie the past was still a blank. All her mind and soul were concentrated on the helpless man beside whom she watched and on whose fate seemed to hang her reason and her life itself. Not a movement, a sigh, a delirious word of his escaped her; and it was she who, one evening, saw the signs of a coming change in him, though neither the doctor nor the nurse, who had just left the room, had observed it. Her hand closed still more tightly over Lashmore's burning one, and she knelt so that her face touched his. She waited, almost breathless, while the clock ticked its lagging moments; then her reward came; Lashmore, who had been lying quite still, drew a long and painful breath and opened his eyes with a glimmer of returning intelligence in them; his brow knit and he stared at her with a puzzled, questioning gaze; then his lips moved, and he whispered feebly:

"Eva!"

She pressed her face to his, even as she winced as if a knife had struck her.

"Yes, dearest; I am here!" she murmured.

He gave a ghost of a laugh and closed his eyes for a moment.

"I've had a bad dream," he managed to say. "I thought we were separated, that you had left me, been gone ever so long—ridiculous things, dreams! Is it time to get up? Why, you're up already! And I'm lying here!" He looked round the darkened room, back at her; then tried to sit up, but fell back again. "Why, what's the matter with me?"

(To be Continued.)

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