

ANOTHER CHRISTABEL.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "WEARHORN."

—"Is it the wind that moans black? There is not wind enough in the air To move away the cloud."

—Christabel.

She had been leaning in her window, in the moonlight, watching the shimmer on the lake, the shifting of the chequered shadows on the white walks, and on the grassy slopes that met the water.

Just a light splash in the water; just the gliding of a boat's keel on the grassy bank.

When Christabel turned her head, she saw a woman's figure in the stern, stooping and laying the paddle softly down in the bottom of the boat.

As in a dream, the girl looked on. It seemed to her a vision, that white, willowy figure, in the black clinging dress, the white face half shadowed by the long veil that fell from it.

She stepped out of the boat, and turned it round, bow outward, giving it with all her strength a push which left it at the mercy of such a breeze as might come to drift the light empty thing away across the lake.

Never, so long as Christabel lived, could she forget that moment and that scene. Mrs. Macpherson had turned a light and carried the candle to the bed.

The feeble ray, flickering in the gutlet in by the open door, seemed for an instant to give movement to the upturned features.

There was an earthly help to come to him—God's hand had taken him from their reach, he says, gently.

"My Christabel will take you away. I will not let that remain to do it done."

"Dead—dead—"

It is hardly a question, that one word that shudders through the shaven lips. She never turns her eyes once on that face upturned upon the pillow, she stands as she entered, her hand never trembling, that holds the candle, he had grasped, and, as one waiting sentence, she suffers Christabel to lead her from the room, and never seems to need when the girl opens one or two doors, into library and dining-room, before she finds another chamber, and half gropes her way until she puts her passive charge into an easy chair.

Not a tear, yet, not a word, save only that, "Dead—dead—"

And so it is, all night—half the next day.

Other neighbors had gathered by this time; two or three men to confer and act with Dr. March; and half a score of thoughtful women, and a half dozen, wives who watch the poor young creature's bearing of her troubles, and whose sympathy begins to waver of the strangeness of it all.

It is then that Dr. March, catching a breath of this, comes to his daughter in a sudden heat, and draws her from the room.

"Christabel, we must have that poor lady away from here, or all this will kill her."

The girl looks over her shoulder through the open door-way.

Mrs. Macpherson is lying in the easy chair, as she has lain almost without moving, since Christabel put her into it last evening.

Christabel watches, there is not a stir, but a mere change of expression, a tense line about the mouth, a closer folding of the hands folded together on the arm of the chair; and Christabel somehow feels she is in her turn watched.

The old, vague feeling of distrust comes over her again, and she says impulsively, under her breath,

"Do not come near me. Do not take her home!"

Could she have heard that smothered word? She has stirred, she has conched her head upon her breast, looking at the girl with a strange gleam in her eyes.

Christabel shudders—shrinks as if in pain; but it is as if she is under a spell, she who has no answer, when her father says, in slow wrath,

"This from you, Christabel! I could not have believed it. And this poor young creature sinking under the pressure of such calamity as this!"

The girl cannot answer, and he says again, sternly, after an instant's pause, "The boat will be ready in an hour. See that she is ready, too, to come with us."

And so it was, the beautiful, miserable woman found her home at Fawcett's.

For that she was miserable, no one could doubt. Christabel, at all, not even when a year and-a-half later, on a fortnight engagement, she became a second Mrs. March.

But Christabel was the only one who knew it. To others, this marriage seemed as fair a fate as could befall the young widow, to whom, when Nigel Macpherson's estate was settled, it was found that nothing remained save the homestead, which the law presented to her, secure from debts, but which she refused to keep, since still the creditors must lose. So she was going out penniless and friendless into the world, when Dr. March made her his wife.

Surely there was no cause why she should be miserable. She was young, she was beautiful, she was rich, she was free from debt, she was free from care, she was free from sorrow, she was free from pain, she was free from grief, she was free from all that could make a woman miserable.

It was not long, however, before she found that she was not free from all that could make a woman miserable.

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then closed them again. For was it any wonder if the poor creature were half dead with grief and horror of the deed she had done unwavering?

But it was not for wonder into the hand of death, that he heard vague dreams of her own future. Lost in these, she sat on her feet, her head bent back against the oak trunk, her happy heart unaltered of the moments as they went, unmindful of the music as it passed into silence, unmindful of anything about her, until with a start, she heard a voice close to her ear.

"You speak now, if you have anything to say to me. There is nothing to interrupt you here. But be brief; my husband will be waiting for me."

"Agnes, are you not nearly cruel? Did you bid me follow you here to say this to me?"

There was an instant's pause, and then her voice again:

"I bade you follow me here because if he saw you—he heard you—he has peace would be gone. And he has been so good to me, so good to me!"

"Am I here to listen to an eulogy of the old man you have jilted me to marry?"

"And is it you are here for?" she asked, in a low tone, cold as ice.

"Will it do you or me any good, this grand of yours? The thing is, I shall not do, so help me Heaven—it shall not spoil his life."

"How is it—how do you have no thought for any other, Agnes?"

"It is not too late for any other? I am the quivering voice, you and mine were spoiled so long ago. You—surely it may yet blossom out again—such things have been—but mine is dead!"

"Agnes!—my poor darling!—There is a light in that scrubby; and with the moving August is in sight of her step-daughter through the clustered long grass.

The shadow and the trailing moss kept the girl veiled, but the woman is in full moonlight. Christabel leans back motionless and breathless in the place, looks full into the white veil, and does not know what she says or does. To sit still and listen is hard enough, but to go out and confront those eyes!

And if harm is plotting for her father, ought she not to know, so that she should not go away and leave him to bear alone?

The woman is putting out her hand, but not to the dark figure standing in the shadow near her.

"Not yours, Douglas, no yours? Nor, if you could know all, would you ever call me that again? I am your daughter, but I am not your daughter."

What do you mean? What can you mean? I know you were entrapped into this marriage, thinking me dead."

"You are wrong there. You do not seem to know what you are doing. The first I was entrapped into believing you were dead; this second, I planned and plotted for you, for eighteen months, knowing you lived and might come back to claim me after all."

There was an instant's silence. Then the man fell her two hands which he had grasped, and, as one waiting sentence, she suffers Christabel to lead her from the room, and never seems to need when the girl opens one or two doors, into library and dining-room, before she finds another chamber, and half gropes her way until she puts her passive charge into an easy chair.

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