

THE PANGS OF REMORSE
— OR —
A COMPLICATED TANGLE.

CHAPTER XVI.

The servants suddenly found themselves possessed with high-strung nerves. White-faced maids and weak-kneed men crept about the house, and peered in corners at dusk as if they expected to see ghosts in every cobweb and crevice.

Indeed, the villagers began to rattle up the old ghost stories. One old lady remembered when wicked Sir George, etc., etc., and other old ladies with equally good memories kept her company.

Rivershall was haunted, that was certain.

One person alone seemed to set ghosts at defiance and laugh at weak nerves, and that was Miss Lucas.

At all hours of the night she would go about the Hall grounds consistent with propriety. The great hall had no terrors for her; the picture gallery would not daunt her. She had once even gone so far out of her usual self as to fly into a passion with one of the maids who had set her seal to a ghostly apparition at the far end of the bedchamber corridor, and threatened to send her out of the house, box and baggage, characterless, if she ventured to repeat her nonsense.

The girl was indignant, pert, and at last melted into tears, and sobbed so loudly that the noise reached her ladyship, who was sitting in the small drawing room, brooding, as usual, over the great fire.

She rose and walked into the kitchen, and found the whole of the servants, including Jack Drutt, with the weeping one and Miss Lucas as centerpieces.

At sight of their pale-faced mistress standing in her deep mourning in the doorway, the woman gave a slight shriek, and Miss Lucas turned sharply.

"What is the matter?" asked Lady Melville, in her low, tremulous accents. "What has happened?"

"Nothing, my lady," said Miss Lucas, "the toothy girl has given way to some ridiculous fancies."

"Fancies! That they beant!" said the girl, indignantly. "Oh, my lady, I did see 'em, as true as you is standing there! I did! I did!"

"Saw what?" asked Lady Melville, stepping into the kitchen and the center of the group.

"I see 'em, a-lying on the ground, both together, dead and white!"

"Ah!" said Lady Melville. "And every eye noticed that she had gone still whiter."

"Be quiet!" said Miss Lucas to the girl, in a harsh undertone.

Then, aloud, to Lady Melville. "Pray, do not listen to her, my lady; she will only distress you with her nonsense."

Lady Melville looked before her dreamily for a moment, and turned to leave the kitchen.

"Where was—where does she say she saw this?" she asked.

"In the upper corridor, my lady," sobbed the girl.

"Where poor Sir Ralph and missis did lie in their coffins," added Jack Drutt, in his coarse, harsh voice.

Lady Melville swung round and confronted her for a moment, then whited and seemed about to fall.

Miss Lucas caught her and half dragged her back to the drawing room.

Then she shut the door sharp and almost threw her mistress upon a sofa.

"Idiot!" she hissed; "would you ruin us?"

It was the first time that she had thrown off the pretense that had been set up between them, and Lady Melville covered, and rocked herself to and fro at the sudden reminder of the woman's power.

"Would you ruin us?" continued Miss Lucas. "Your white face and wadded ways will tell tales in time; what does it matter to you if the girl should see the two of you?"

"Hush, for Heaven's sake!" breathed Lady Melville, and she held up her hands to shut the words of the speaker out. "Hush, I am quiet now, I am—strong. Never—never speak to me like that. Oh, Heaven, have mercy on me!"

The thinster face looked down upon her where she crouched with a fendish smile, for a moment, then it smoothed into its old, impassibility,

and the savage voice said, with its usual deference: "Your ladyship has been frightened. Pray, be calm. I will ring for Marie."

Lady Melville looked up at the changed voice, and fixed her eyes suspiciously upon the smooth, fendish face.

"What are you?" she asked, fearfully.

"A woman," said Miss Lucas, with a strong mind and nerves, my lady. I am very much shocked to see how greatly these idle servants' tales distress you. Indeed, you distress yourself too much."

"I want change of air, I think," said Lady Melville, averting her eyes with a shudder. "This large place makes me melancholy. I think I shall go on the continent."

"Your ladyship had better remain here for the present, I think," said the low voice.

Lady Melville started and looked at the gray eyes fixed upon her with a contemptuous glance of power.

"I—I shall start to-morrow," she said, looking at the fire.

"Your ladyship had better remain, I think," said Miss Lucas.

This time she spoke with such a dictatorial tone that the tortured woman could not pretend to have not noticed it.

"You think!" she said, lifting her eyes. "I am mistress of Rivershall, remember!"

"And I am mistress of you!" said Miss Lucas, quietly.

Lady Melville rose, and the two stood confronting each other.

But Lady Melville had the weaker nerves—Miss Lucas' were of iron.

The mistress of Rivershall quailed before her mistress and sank back to the chair.

"I am ill!" she gasped; "I—"

Before she could finish the house resounded with the clanging of the hall bell, and Miss Lucas held up her finger.

"Hush!" she said. "I know who this is. Collect your senses, and regain your composure. There is work for you to do—work."

Lady Melville rose trembling, and looked at the glass.

"Who is it?" she asked; "and what do you mean?"

"It is Lord Harcourt," replied Miss Lucas.

Lady Melville uttered a cry of repugnance and drew back.

"Hush!" said Miss Lucas, taking her by the wrist and whispering in a low voice, "Be calm. He comes for money. I know his bargain. Oh, spare your ejaculations, there is no time for them. I know your bargain with him, and I know that he comes to demand payment."

"Alas! and he must have it!" said Lady Melville.

"Alas! and he must not!" retorted Miss Lucas, mocking her. "Listen. Refuse him. When he bullies, like the coward he is, and threatens, like the ruffian that he is, tell him this:"

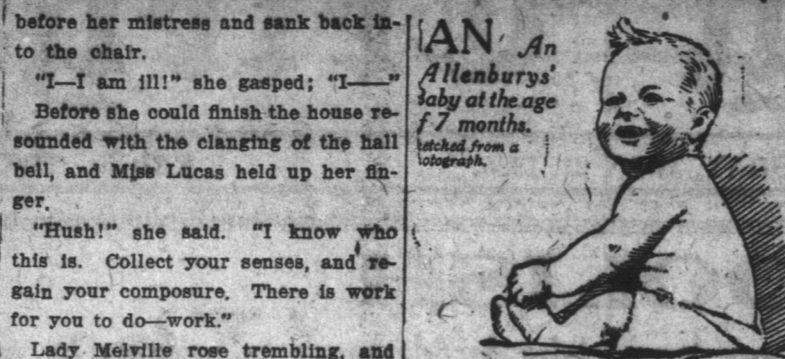
And she whispered in her ear. Lady Melville drew herself up, and the color came hotly, while her eyes flashed.

"I can almost forgive you," she breathed, "for that thought. Go, I am ready to meet him."

As the words left her lips the door opened and the servant admitted Lord Harcourt.

Miss Lucas passed him with downcast face as he came forward with his hand outstretched and a conversational:

"How do you do, Lady Melville?" But directly she had closed the door his hand dropped to his side before Lady Melville had taken it, and in a suspicious voice he said, sharply: "Who was that?"



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"By what right, however, do you ask?" "Oh!" he said, sinking into the dainty chair, and staring at her. "So you are altered, Leonora. Black does not suit you, or you have grown decidedly old. You look—well, fifty; what have you been doing?"

She remained silent, looking at him with a face upon which aversion, distrust and hate struggled for predominance.

"Sit down," he said, "I am not used to tragedy queens. Is this the way you welcome an old friend to your parental halls?"

"How do you do, Lady Melville?" But directly she had closed the door his hand dropped to his side before Lady Melville had taken it, and in a suspicious voice he said, sharply: "Who was that?"

"Miss Lucas, my companion," said Lady Melville, drawing herself up.

"The same old Leonora," he said, with a sneer. "So devoted to the heroics, never losing a chance of practicing them. By Heaven! how old you look! Will you sit down?"

She sat down and so got a full view of his face. For the life of her she could not refrain from giving him a return thrust.

"I am not the only one that has changed, Harcourt. Time has laid his hands on you. Cain's brand is deeper now, and so plain that all who run may read"—and she pointed her white finger at his forehead, upon whose whiteness there were long, deeply cut lines.

He started angrily for a moment, but the next laughed his low, malicious laugh.

"Well, it is only fair," he said, "blow for blow; we are both old and ugly now, my Leonora, but there the similarity ceases. You are rich, the mistress of Rivershall, and I am poor."

"You are poor!" she said, sternly and distinctly. "In debt?"

"Ay, to the neck. And you are mistress of Rivershall. Well, I congratulate you. I don't ask you how it came to pass; you were always a clever woman, Leonora, and I admire clever women! Mistress of Rivershall!"

He stopped to poke the fire, then leaned back and gazed round him with an insolent complacency.

"It is a grand old place. I like it better than Devonhill, which, by the way, I am longing to see again. A grand old place, but it wants a master! Splendid! And, ahem! a beautiful mistress it has—we will say beautiful still—but it wants a master. Really, beautiful still," he continued, showing his white teeth; "really, beautiful still. My Lady Melville, I have a proposal. What do you say to matrimony?"

(To be continued.)

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