

MAGIC BAKING POWDER



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A Child of Sorrow.

CHAPTER XXX.

As he spoke, the door of the women's room opened, and Lucy, followed by Mrs. Towser, came out. Lucy had evidently apprised the elder woman of her danger, for she was as white as a ghost, and was wringing her hands, after the manner of terrified women the wide world over; but Lucy herself, though very white, was perfectly calm and self-possessed. Her lips, her teeth also, were shut closely, and her eyes were glowing with excitement and something deeper.

"Go back to your room," whispered Heroncourt, sternly; but she shook her head and looked at him imploringly.

"Let me stand with you," she pleaded. "I can shoot, I can hold a gun, help load. Oh! let me stay!"

Heroncourt shrugged his shoulders with a gesture of reluctant assent.

"You may stay if you promise to keep away from the line of fire," he said. "Stand back there, don't move forward, and keep quiet."

She nodded, and her lips quivered with a smile as if in gratitude. The three men drew back beyond the line of sight of anyone coming up the stairs and waited. And waited in silence, for their hearts were beating too fiercely to permit of words; and, indeed, what was there to say? They meant to sell their lives dearly and like Englishmen they were quiet and self-contained.

Heroncourt glanced across at Lucy, but the girl's lips were still set tightly, her eyes were still glowing in the dim light which came from the lamp in his room, for he had left the lamp burning because he often sat up in his room before going to bed. They waited. No pen can describe the torture of that suspense; the moments

dragged into minutes as if each moment were an hour, each minute a day; under that terrific strain, Heroncourt grew hot and cold and the sweat broke out on his forehead in big drops. He had been in action in one of our little wars and had led a forlorn hope; that had been a delicious moment though death hung at the end of it; but this waiting, like oxen in the shambles for the oncoming of the butchers below, was a hundred times worse than any charge with the sword's point, any waiting in the line of fire; for there was no rush and whirl of battle, no sound of shot and shell to break the oppressive silence which seemed to weigh like lead upon his heart.

But even at that moment he thought of Maids, if he were to fall—and what could save him; it could only be a matter of time, for numbers must tell—what an end to their love-story! They had indeed parted forever! Who would carry her the news, how would she bear it? He could almost pray that she had ceased to love him; for he could picture his own agony and life-long misery if she were to die and he were left to mourn her. He glanced at the other two men. Gosford was standing with his rifle ready to be raised to his shoulder, a wooden, phlegmatic figure, the ordinary Englishman who faces peril and death with British phlegm. David Jones, on the other hand, was leaning against a partition, his hand on his rifle, his eyes fixed on the stairs; but there was a curious thoughtfulness in his pale eyes as if he were going over the past and regretting something that might have been done but had not been, some chance which he had lost.

Heroncourt, in a mechanical way, noted the different attitudes and expressions on the faces of the men; his ears were strained for an approaching footstep. At last he could bear the silence no longer, and he said, in a hoarse whisper:

"They're a long time coming."

David Jones nodded, then he jerked his head towards the lamp.

"Perhaps they're waiting for that to be put out, sir," he said.

Heroncourt stole swiftly and on tiptoe into the room and extinguished the lamp and then returned to his place and held his breath. They waited—how long? No one could have told if his life had depended on it. In the intense silence they imagined all kinds of noises, the sound of footsteps, the sibilant whisper of hushed voices; the whole air seemed full of mysterious, threatening sounds and presently all three men started and raised their rifles: a hand was fingering the latch on the outer door of the room below. Heroncourt had, actually succeeded in stealing within a few yards of the top. With a savage oath he levelled a revolver at Heroncourt; but even as he took aim, something flashed out from the other side of the gangway, the weapon dropped from his hand, and his arm fell to his side. Heroncourt glanced across and saw a smoking revolver in Lucy's hand.

She had, at any rate, for the moment, saved his life.

Black Jake fell back, stunned by the shot, and was roughly thrown from hand to hand into the room below; but the onrush was continued; and Heroncourt knew that the end was only a question of time.

CHAPTER XXXI.

Though the onrush was continued after the disablement of Jake, the beset were not daunted; Baxter, David Jones, and Gosford fired in a volley with such deadly effect that once more the mass on the stairs was broken and gave way; they fell back with their dead and wounded and rushed to get out of the terrible fire of the resolute men above.

Heroncourt sprang across to where Lucy stood, all unconscious that she was within range, and half-dragged, half-lifted her out of the line of fire. "That was a good shot of yours, Lucy!" he said, breathlessly; "it saved my life!" All unconsciously in lifting her he pressed her closely to him; it was just the little hug a man might bestow upon a child who had done something brave and unselfish; but the blood rose to the girl's face and she closed her eyes for a second or two. "But you must not get into the line of fire again; however much

looked down at Baxter at the bottom of the stairs, and Baxter looked up and saluted. No reply was vouchsafed to the man, and presently, as if they had expected a refusal, an axe crashed against the door: two blows were struck, and the door fell in. At the same moment Baxter fired, slipped in another cartridge, and fired again. The besieged heard, as Baxter ran up the stairs and joined them, an angry yell, and the cry of a man mortally wounded.

"Well aimed, Baxter," said Heroncourt.

He was calm enough now, now that the attack had begun and the first shot had been fired. The scent of battle was in his nostrils, the Berserker fever was heating his blood, his lips were as closely set as Lucy's, his eyes flashing.

The assailants fired a volley into the room which smashed the glass and shattered some of poor Lucy's ornaments; then, seeing that the room was empty, they rushed in, but kept clear of the opening to the stairs.

"Come down—come down!" yelled Jake, with an oath, and waving a lantern. "We won't hurt any of you—but we must have the boss, we must have Mr. Tudor; we want him. Hand him over, and the rest of you shall go scot-free."

Even in that moment Heroncourt saw Lucy shudder as if a cold wind had struck her. David Jones laughed a quiet laugh.

"If you want Mr. Tudor, you had better come and fetch him," he said in quite an ordinary voice.

"Oh, you're there, are you? You black traitor!" cried a voice. "We'll have you as well; we'll have all of you, the women included. Better give it up; you're in a trap."

David Jones laughed again.

"Come, boys!" cried Jake. "We'll make a rush for it!"

Heading about half a dozen men, he sprang forward. The four men on the landing fired, and three of the gang threw up their arms and fell backward. Black Jake himself would have fallen but his foot slipped on the stairs, and the slip saved him. Before he could rise there was a rush from behind; the besieger fired again, and the tide was stopped, and ebbed back. But though they were bad, they were brave, and their losses had made them desperate: for something like a minute the good men fired into a wall of men which was broken by the dead and wounded, and then made compact again by those who took their places.

In this determined onset it was inevitable that some should make some way up the stairs, and Black Jake, keeping as near the edge as possible, actually succeeded in stealing within a few yards of the top. With a savage oath he levelled a revolver at Heroncourt; but even as he took aim, something flashed out from the other side of the gangway, the weapon dropped from his hand, and his arm fell to his side. Heroncourt glanced across and saw a smoking revolver in Lucy's hand.

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you want to. We men will do all the fighting that is necessary. Keep up a good heart, Lucy; they have not got up to us yet, and they never may."

He tried to speak with hopeful assurance, and even smile, but his heart was heavy with grim foreboding, for he knew that sooner or later numbers must tell and that his ammunition would not hold out long enough.

"I am not afraid," she said, looking up at him with a brave little smile. "I am not afraid for myself; it is of you, Mr. Tudor, I am thinking; they have a spite against you."

Her eyes were fixed on his and something that shot through his, an expression of the dread on her account which had haunted him ever since the attack had commenced, suddenly enlightened her and showed her his danger. She shuddered, and her eyes closed for a moment or two, then she opened them upon his with a deep trustfulness, a child-like reliance.

"You will not let them get me?" she said. "If they force their way up, if we are beaten—you will—"

She glanced at the revolver in his belt meaningly, and her lips parted and the breath came quickly.

"Promise!" she whispered. "I would rather that it was you who did it—I should not mind if it was you who shot me. Promise!"

A lump rose in Heroncourt's throat, his lips trembled, and he could not speak; but he smoothed her hair, as he would have smoothed a little child's, and nodded the answer to her request.

"Now be a good girl and keep out of the fire," he said; "some of us may be hit and then we shall need you to look after us. You see?"

"Yes," she breathed, and slowly drew away from him.

This little scene, so full of pathos and grim tragedy, had only taken a moment or two. Heroncourt sprang back to his place beside the other men. They could hear the attackers talking amongst themselves in fierce undertones which were almost drowned by the cries and moans of the wounded.

"They are plotting something, sir," said Baxter, in a quick whisper.

"Some of them are going round to the back; they are going to try to take us in the rear," said David Jones quietly.

(To be Continued.)

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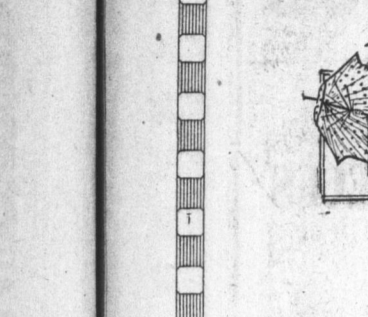
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