



The Web;

OR, TRUE LOVE'S PASSION.

CHAPTER XXXI.
Haunted.

Then, with an oath, he pulled himself together, and, resolutely turning his eyes away from the heap, went to the shed and got some wood.

When he got back to the house he felt in his pocket for his matchbox and found it, but suddenly missed his keys.

This staggered him, and he stood staring at the fire vacantly, then he forced a smile.

"I am a fool," he muttered. "I've left them in the gate."

With the lantern in his hand he went down the garden, and found that, as he had thought, he had left the key attached to the bunch sticking in the keyhole of the wall door.

Cursing himself for his stupidity, he locked the door, and, with the keys in his hand, returned to the parlor.

The fire was burning up, and he drew his chair close and sat huddled over the blaze, and went over the scene with Nora. But every now and then there came a ghastly pause in his reflections, and in that pause the ghost of his crime stalked across his mind, and made the silence of the cold, damp little room truly hideous.

He got some more brandy at intervals, and at last succeeded in producing the exhaustion which is the ghastly imitation of wholesome sleepiness.

Then he rose, and with a final drink went heavily upstairs.

But, exhausted as he was, he instinctively pulled aside the blind and stared through the window at the heap in the garden, just as he used to do before he left for London; but the night was too dark for him to see anything, and, with an oath, he dropped the blind and began to undress.

"Curse the place and everything in it!" he muttered, as he got into bed. "I wish it were burnt down."

Then he succeeded in distracting his mind from the one haunting fear, and forced himself to think of Nora, and so fell into an uneasy, restless doze. He had not been asleep more than an hour when he woke suddenly with the dim consciousness that he had been awakened by some kind of noise.

He sat up and listened, and for a time all was silent, and he was about to throw himself back, when he heard a faint noise, which seemed to come from the room beneath, the room in which Becca had died.

The cold sweat gathered upon his face, and he sat shivering and quaking, with his ears strained painfully, trying to persuade himself that it was only fancy. But as he listened with an agonized acuteness he distinctly heard the noise again. It was the sound of footsteps, muffled and cautious, of some one moving in the room below.

He got out of bed, and, slipping on some clothes, stole to the door. Then he smiled a ghastly smile of reassurance; the noise no doubt was made by the old woman, who was paying a visit to the sideboard on the chance of his having left the brandy decanter not locked up.

"I'll give the hag a fright," he muttered, and he went to a drawer and took out an old-fashioned pistol, and, loading it with a blank charge, crept, with it in his hand to the stairs.

All was silent again now, but he knew that he had heard the noise and not merely dreamed that he had done so, and slowly and cautiously he descended the stairs.

Although he was prepared for it, the sight of a thin streak of light coming through the partly open doorway of the sitting-room gave him a start, and, with a stifled oath, he moved forward on tiptoe, and softly pushed the door more widely open and peered round it.

Then he fell back and clutched the pistol tightly, for it was not the bent, decrepit figure of the old woman he saw within the room, but that of a man.

Now, Guildford Berton was not altogether a coward, and the shock to his over-strained nerves, weakened by the copious draughts of spirits, could not be set down entirely to fear.

After a moment or two he collected himself, and peered round the door again, and this time the start that followed was one of recognition.

A man was kneeling beside the table prying open a desk with a clasp knife, and by the light which fell from an ordinary candle stuck into a piece of wood Guildford Berton saw that the thief was the man with the rugged face and bushy eyebrows who had lain on the bench outside the inn on the day he had been making inquiries into Becca South's disappearance.

Guildford Berton drew back and pondered, clutching the pistol hard and fast, and holding his breath.

That the man was a thief or an ordinary housebreaker he had no doubt, but he was puzzled to account for his presence there. No burglar worthy of his salt, he thought, would break into so mean and unpromising a place as the cottage, unless he were sure of finding valuables, and it was not likely that any burglar would imagine that a sensible man would trust his money or jewels to a crazy old desk.

Why had he broken into the cottage to-night of all nights—the night of the owner's return—when he might have done so during that owner's absence?

He could find no solution to the enigma. Suddenly the suspicion swept over him like a breath of ice that the man had come to find out something about—about Becca South, and the sweat broke out upon his forehead.

But he thrust the suspicion from him. Even if he had done so he would not have taken the trouble to break open a desk. What was there in it? He tried to think, but could remember nothing but some papers, of no importance, referring to business of the estate, which he had flung in carelessly from time to time. There was absolutely nothing there which could repay any burglar, however hard up, for his trouble.

By this time a period of only a few minutes had elapsed—the man Furlong, for it was he, had opened the desk, and was turning over the contents. They were, as has been stated, papers of no interest to any one, except to a stranger, but suddenly Guildford Berton saw the man start, and catching up something—a piece of cardboard it looked like—held it near the candle.

Whatever it was he seemed absorbed in it, and Berton seized the suspicious moment, and quietly slid round the door and presented the pistol at the man's head.

"Move a step and I fire," he said. The man raised his head and did not move, but his hand slid into the

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pocket of his coat, and remained there as he said, quietly and slowly: "Don't fire, Mr. Berton. I've got you covered by a revolver in my pocket, and I'm a dead shot."

The next instant he had whipped out a revolver and presented it at Guildford Berton. "Now," he said, deliberately as before, "we are on all fours, and I fancy my weapon is rather a better one than that horse affair of yours. Shake your finger on the trigger, and you are a dead man."

Guildford Berton lowered his pistol, and confronted his adversary with a white face. "What are you doing here?" he demanded, not loudly, but in a suppressed voice.

Mr. Furlong kept his revolver pointed with deadly precision. "Put that thing down," he said, "and keep quiet, and I'll tell you."

Almost mechanically the pistol was laid on the table. Still keeping the revolver pointed, Furlong took up the pistol and thrust it into his pocket, then he laid his revolver on the table within reach of his hand, and looked at Guildford Berton steadily.

CHAPTER XXXII. A Deal With a Burglar.

The two men faced each other, Guildford Berton quivering with rage intensified by his impotence, the man Furlong calm and coolly watchful.

Guildford Berton would have liked to spring upon him, but there was something in the eyes shining from under the bushy brows which warned him that at his first movement its owner would without hesitation put a bullet into him.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, finding his voice at last. Furlong smiled grimly, and nodded to the desk.

"That's rather an unnecessary question, isn't it?" he said, coolly. "I was looking for—curiosities, when you came in and interrupted me."

Guildford Berton's face grew red with wrath. "You are an impudent scoundrel!" he said, "and if you think because I am unarmed that you will get off scot-free you are mistaken."

Furlong eyed him with an almost scornful amusement. "Talk talk won't count for much, seeing how matters are fixed between us," he said, quietly. "It's waste of time to threaten me, Mr. Berton. Come, you're a sensible man; just face the music and take things easy. Just try and think I'm a friendly visitor dropped in unexpectedly; it's rather late, it's true—"

Berton pointed to the door. "Take yourself off!" he exclaimed, sternly. "That you may follow me and raise a hullabaloo!" remarked the man. "Not exactly."

"If you think I am going to permit you to escape, you are mistaken," retorted the other. "Whether you go now, or wait till daylight, and are

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