

A QUEEN UNCROWNED

THE STORY IN THE LONE INN.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"I will leave you alone," he said gently. "When this man comes I will send for you."

As he passed from the room, he met Norma ascending the stairs.

"Has anything happened? You sent for me?" she said, with a startled look. "Jacquetta—"

"Is quite well, but an important matter has come to light, in which you are closely concerned. Perhaps I had better tell you before you go in. Captain Tempest is dying in the next room, and it was he desired to see you."

"Captain Tempest! Oh, my lord! does he know—"

"No, he does not know your secret. But, my dear Norma, what will you say when I tell you that you and Jacquetta are sisters?"

"Sisters! How? What do you mean my lord?"

"That you had the same mother—Captain Tempest's wife. Do you know your mother's name, Norma?"

"It was Lella. I do not remember her; but I saw it written in one of her books. But, oh, Lord Earncliffe! what have you told me? Captain Tempest's wife!"

"You father was never married, Norma, and now you know why he would never speak of your mother. You and Jacquetta are sisters. A dying man affirms it. Do you doubt it, Norma?"

She covered her face with her hands, for a moment; and when she took them away she was deathly pale.

"No, my lord, strange as it seems, I yet do not doubt it. And this is why he wanted to see me? Oh, Alfred! I am glad—I am glad that I am Jacquetta's sister!"

"And so am I. Shall we go in now?" They entered together. Captain Nick still slept, but even the slight noise of their entrance aroused him; and as his eyes fell on Norma, he uttered a faint exclamation.

"Ah! you have come! Come close and let me look at you. Yes, yes; you are Lella's daughter. You look more like your dead mother than she does. Are you willing to acknowledge Nick Tempest's child as your sister, young lady?"

"Willingly, joyfully!" And the fervent clasp in which she held Jacquetta told how truly she spoke.

"Tell your father—tell Randall Macdonald—I forgive him at last. He was not so much to blame as the devil who forced them both to it. Will you shake hands, young lady, for your mother's sake?"

She laid both her white, delicate hands in his large, brown palms, and a bright tear fell with them.

"For me!" he said, with a look of wonder. "Ho! what noise is that? I ought to know that step."

A shuffling sound of feet was heard

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"She is here. Now, my man, what is it you know concerning this young lady?" said Disbrowe.

"You may as well make a clean breast of it Till, for I have told already," said the captain. "Out with it!"

Still Till scowled at them in dogged silence from under his villainous brows.

"Tell, and you shall go free and unharmed—I pledge you my word and honor. Refuse, and the walls of Newgate will hold you before an hour."

Old Till was, as Captain Nick said, a very white-livered hero, so he forthwith—rather sullenly, though—began the recital, adding that the father of young Durand was still alive, one of the wealthiest and most eminent lawyers in New York. And having made a deposition to that effect, and further informed them that he might be known by a peculiar tattooing in India ink on his arm, done when he was a child, he was allowed to take his departure.

Captain Nick was sinking fast. He had exerted himself to speak and listen while Till was present; but now he felt back exhausted on his pillow, a cold perspiration oozing over his face, a dark livid ring encircling his mouth. His eyes wandered slowly over the faces gathered around him, and rested at last on that of Jacquetta.

"Going!" he said, with a faint smile. "It is getting dark and cold, Lella. Don't cry so. I will bring you no more squirrels to play with, as I used to do long ago—you were a child then, Lella; now you are—"

"Father, father!" cried Jacquetta, through her fast-falling tears, as the hand she held grew cold, and a dull glaze crept over his eyes.

"My little Lella!"

A strong shudder passed through his powerful frame, one arm was heft raised, and then dropped heavily by his side.

"Gone!" said Disbrowe, as he bent over him. "Come Jacquetta, let us go; all is over now!"

And now, reader—my dear reader—draw a long breath of relief, as I do, for our tale is at an end. Perhaps though, you would like one final peep behind the scene before the curtain descends to rise no more.

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