

THAT WOMAN'S SECRET.

CONTINUED.

"WE WILL consider the matter.— Is it not possible that she is in the power of that villain, Ralph Marsden?"

"Very possible and very probable; such was my first thought."

"I fear it was Marsden who abducted her. Still we have not a particle of proof that such is the case. But calm yourself, Henry, or you will be fit for nothing in the work before you. Do you think it likely that this Mrs. Van Dyke is guilty of complicity in the affair?"

"I think not—yet it is possible—I do not like the woman's looks."

"Is she related to Miss Sydney?"

"She is her aunt?"

"Then it is not likely that she would put the girl in that man's power."

"No, Walter," the young man exclaimed, with a sudden burst of feeling, "I will be frank with you. In the few short weeks I have known Mara Sydney I have learned to love her with the whole strength of my being. My every ambition is centered in her; I care for her above all else on earth. And now that she has grown so dear to me can it be that I am to lose her thus; that she is to be taken from me and consigned to—Heaven alone knows what; perhaps death, perhaps a fate worse than death?"

"Hope for the best, my dear Oakley," said Walter, grasping his friend's hand; "and call on me for any assistance I can possibly afford."

"I thank you from my heart, Walter," the young physician replied. "And now advise me what to do. It is criminal in me to be idle a moment while Mara is in, I know not what peril."

"The only thing you can do now," said Elmore, "is to place the matter in the hands of the police, or make it known to some reliable detective, acquainting him with your suspicions of Marsden and all the particulars of the abduction."

"I will do so once, Walter. There is a private detective on Eighth street, Stoner by name, of whose skill I have heard much. I will go to him instantly; and the young physician left his friend with a hurried farewell, and hastened, half-distracted, out into the night and the storm."

Ralph Marsden was ushered by the servant into a magnificently furnished parlor. Seating himself before the open fire-place, the inanimate form of Mara still in his arms, he addressed the servant.

"Send Mr. Percival to me at once."

"Yes, sir."

For a few minutes the young man sat steadily gazing into Mara's pallid face which rested on his arm.

"At last," he muttered, "she is mine, and no human power can take her from me."

A tall, dark, elegantly dressed man, whose handsome face bore unmistakable marks of dissipation, entered the room, and sauntering with an easy grace to where Mr. Marsden sat, extended his hand, saying:

"Ralph, my boy, how are you? So this is the girl of whom you spoke this morning?"

"Yes, Jared; is she not lovely?"

"By Jove! she is," said the gambler, for such he was. "Marsden, you're a lucky fellow."

He gazed down into Mara's innocent face, with an expression of undisguised admiration.

"Well, my dear fellow," he continued, "she will be safe here. She shall have every luxury our bachelor's hall can afford, and I doubt ere long you will succeed in winning her undivided affections; and why should you not? You are young, handsome wealthy—"

"No compliments, Percival, I beg of you," interposed Marsden, with a slight laugh. "And now send for a servant to take this young girl to her apartment."

Percival touched a bell, and a moment later a man entered.

"Take this young lady to room No. 9," directed Jared Percival.

The servant manifested no surprise—he was too well trained—but lifting the girl in his arms bore her from the apartment.

"How is our little biz in the other part of the house?" asked Marsden, as the man left the room.

"Flourishing, my dear Ralph, flourishing," was the reply; "it's without doubt the biggest game in the city just now, thanks to my experience, and the influence and cash of my esteemed partner, Ralph Marsden, Esq. Suppose you go and take a look at it."

"I believe I will, just to pass away the time; but don't fail to send for me as soon as the girl recovers consciousness."

"I will do so."

Marsden proceeded to an elegantly furnished room situated in the rear of the house, which was fitted up in the most expensive style as a faro bank.—

This was the "biz" which he referred to in his conversation with Percival, and of which he was one of the proprietors. It was crowded with men, most of them evidently belonging to the upper walks of New York society. As he passed through the room Marsden was familiarly greeted on every side; but his mind evidently was elsewhere as he talked but little. He stepped to a side-board and drank heavily of brandy; then stood anxiously and uneasily awaiting the summons which he momentarily expected. Presently a servant approached him.

"Mr. Percival desires to see you, sir."

Marsden hastened to the drawing room where Jared Percival awaited him.

"The girl has recovered consciousness," Percival said, as he entered.

"Where is she?"

"John will conduct you to her," and he motioned the servant to lead the way.

The man preceded Marsden up the thickly carpeted staircase to the second floor. At the head of the stairs he paused.

"Yonder is her room, sir," pointing to a door.

"Very well," said Marsden, and he slipped a bank note into the man's hand.

Gently opening the door, he found himself in the presence of Mara Sydney. She was seated upon a sofa in a luxuriously furnished apartment, her face buried in her hands. As he entered she started up and a cry escaped her lips.

"Do not fear, Mara," he said, "I would not harm you for the world."

"Villain, how came I here?" the girl exclaimed.

"You were brought by myself in a carriage an hour ago."

"Ah, I see it all, now! I have been shamefully deceived and entrapped!"

"Let my love be my excuse," said Marsden, approaching her.

"Your love!" she exclaimed, with scorn, as she shrank from him.

"Yes, Mara, my love, as strong and true an affection as ever man felt."

"And you prove it by this outrage?"

"Your coolness forced me to this extremity."

"Coldness! You basely insulted me."

"If in the past my excessive love rendered me forgetful of the right rules of etiquette, let my future devotion and tender care prove my regret. I confess, Mara, I did not injudiciously the other evening. I now ask your pardon."

"Injudiciously! Yes; because you revealed your true character to me."

"You wrong me."

"Release me at once, sir, from this place!"

"Impossible."

"I will call for help."

"It will be useless; there is no help near."

"Merciful Heaven! Sir, what place is this?"

"What you choose to make it; a home where your every wish may be gratified; a prison, if you insist upon it."

"Oh! have you no pity?" exclaimed the poor girl.

"Pity!" cried the wily villain, changing his tone. "Mara, you wrong me deeply if you believe I would for a moment think of harming you. I have loved you truly and devotedly since I first saw your face. But you scorned my affection. Perhaps, as I have said, my attentions to you were injudiciously offered; but, dear Mara, I was thoughtless and inconsiderate. The advances I made prejudiced you against me; I saw that unless I made some decisive move you would be lost to me; and I would rather die than give you up. So I brought you here. Believe me, I love you passionately and mean you no harm."

"Then why have you brought me to this place?" cried Mara, wildly.

"Simply to ask you one question."

"And that is—"

"Will you be my wife?"

"Your wife?"

"And it is to ask me this that you brought me here?"

"Yes."

"Then you shall have your answer, which is firmly and decidedly, no. Now, sir, release me."

"By no means," coolly.

"You still detain me?"

"Most assuredly; I have not been to all this trouble to secure you to let you go so easily."

"And when will you release me?"

"As soon, Mara, as you consent to become my wife."

"Which I will never do."

"A few weeks of solitude in this room will materially alter your views of the matter, I fancy."

"Weeks! Oh, you will not dare!"

"Will I not?" sneeringly.

"I will throw myself from yonder window before I will consent."

"You cannot," with a smile. "It is barred."

"Help—help!" cried Mara, in desperation.

"You are wasting breath," Marsden said. "There is no help at hand."

"Heaven will not prosper such villainy!" the girl exclaimed; "and I will trust in it for relief!"

"As you like," Marsden said, with a sneer.

"You will do well to set me free. My friends will find me, and you will pay dearly for this."

"I will risk it," replied the villain.—

"But," he added, "I will waste no time in idle talk. I will give you two weeks in which to consider my proposition.—During that time you will remain in this room; and I trust reflection will alter your resolution."

"It will not, sir."

"For your sake I hope it will," returned Marsden, significantly; "and now I will leave you. You will, during your stay here, be provided with whatever you desire by mentioning your wishes to the servant who will bring you your meals. For a short time, farewell. I shall pay you another visit tomorrow."

He pressed, unseen by her, a secret spring in the floor, and the door, which had no lock on the inside, flew open, as if by magic. He left the room and bolted the door on the outside.

The fortitude which had sustained Mara during the interview now deserted her, and, sinking into a chair, she wept bitterly for some time.

At last she arose and carefully examined the doors and windows, but there seemed no means of escape.

Presently a servant entered and inquired if she wished any refreshments. She replied in the negative, but endeavored to move the man to compassion for her situation. But in vain.—The only answer she could obtain was:

"That's not my business, Miss. I can't do anything about it."

"Alas!" Mara murmured, when the man had gone. "Heaven alone can help me!"

And sinking upon her knees, she offered a fervent prayer for aid. She then threw herself upon the bed, and despite her surroundings and her consciousness of peril, her weariness overcame her, and she sank into slumber.

"Ah!" Ralph Marsden exclaimed, as the door of the gaming-house closed behind him. "I have her in my power at last, and it will be my fault if she escapes me. Heavens! what a storm!" drawing the collar of his great coat closely about his neck. "I'll lose no time getting to a place of shelter. Ha! What is this? A woman?"

Yes, a woman; the same who had seen him enter Jared Percival's. She approached him, and touched his arm.

The fitful light of a street-lamp illumined her features; and Ralph Marsden suddenly recoiled.

"Laura!" he exclaimed, with a bitter oath.

Not once during Marsden's stay in Jared Percival's house, had this woman, standing there in the pelting storm, removed her eyes from the building. Regardless of all, save the one idea which filled her soul, she had stood waiting in the tempest for Marsden.

This woman had, evidently, once possessed great beauty; but it was almost gone now. Her face was pale and emaciated, her eyes deeply sunk in their sockets, her form reduced to a mere shadow of what it once had been. Lines which, with sad eloquence, told of her misery indeed, impressed upon her brow. And yet this woman had scarcely passed her twenty-fifth year. She was thinly clad, and shivered, as the chilling wind swept past her. Yet, though drenched with rain and benumbed with cold, she watched and waited until Marsden stood by her side and uttered her name, coupling it with an oath.

"Ralph Marsden!" she cried, in tones of hopeless misery.

"Forgive me, Laura, for those words," he said, "but you startled me strangely. You are but the ghost of your former self, and for a moment I—ha—ha—I almost thought you were a spirit."

"Go on, Ralph Marsden," bitterly, "those were not the first oaths I ever heard from your lips, and they do not wring my heart as they once did. I am past that."

"You are looking wretchedly; what ails you?"

"I am but reaping the harvest I sowed long years ago."

"Pshaw!" he exclaimed, emphatically; always harping on the old string.— "But I can't stand here in the rain. Have you anything to say to me?"

"I have; something of great importance."

"Then, follow me;" and he strode on until he reached the next corner, where, under the shelter of an awning, he confronted her.

"What brings you out to-night?" he asked, harshly.

"I earn a scanty living by sewing; to-night I took home some work to a

lady in this street; on my way home I saw you."

"You are miserably poor, Laura, I see."

"No matter; my welfare is nothing to you, Ralph Marsden; what little I have I earn honestly."

"I will assist you."

"Assist me! No; I'd sooner die of starvation in my miserable home than accept one favor from you."

"Indeed!" sneeringly; "you have accepted them in the past."

"Before I knew you to be a heartless villain. Then I was happy in the belief that I had a wife's claim to what I received. But I was long since undeceived."

"Well, if you do not want help, for what purpose have you addressed me?"

"I saw you enter that house—Jared Percival's."

"Well?"

"You bore in your arms an insensible woman."

"Well?" Marsden repeated.

"It was for no good purpose that you took her to that place. Oh, Ralph Marsden, if you ever cared for me (and once, I know, you loved me, though that was long ago), release her from that accursed house."

"You rave, Laura."

"Oh my knees, Ralph, I beg this one boon!" and the wretched girl sank at his feet and grasped his hands in hers.

"Laura," he said, raising her up, "this is folly."

"Oh, Ralph, by your hopes of happiness in this world and in the next, I beg you to spare this girl the suffering which I have endured."

"My happiness in this world is secured," he replied, coldly; "and I do not trouble myself about the next."

"There will come an hour, your last on earth, when you must think of the future; and you will be spared a bitter pang if you have not this crime upon your conscience."

"Laura, it is useless to prolong this interview."

"Oh, do not say so, Ralph; you surely will not doom this poor creature to a fate far worse than death!"

"Have you done?" coldly.

"Oh, Ralph, say that you will free her, and I will freely, gladly forgive your baseness to myself, and will pray for you night and morning."

"You will forgive me!" with a bitter, mocking laugh. "Girl, I want neither your forgiveness nor your prayers. I can't wait here any longer. If you want money, say so; if not, go your way, and I will go mine; and I sincerely hope we shall never meet again."

"Oh! false villain!" the woman exclaimed, with sudden energy; "why does not Heaven, in just wrath, strike you down, and rid the earth of one whose presence on its surface is pollution!"

"I care as little for your curses as for your blessings," said Marsden. "But, with a sudden suspicion, "what do you know of this girl, in whom you seem so interested?"

"Nothing, save that she is a woman; for this reason alone have I interceded in her behalf."

"No intercession can save her. Percival is faithful, and will consider my interests now, as he has in the past. In two weeks' time, Laura, two short weeks, this girl will be my wife; I have given her that time to consider my proposal of marriage."

"Your wife!"

"Yes—married by a particular friend of mine."

"Oh! false villain!"

"Laura, you have said enough, I warn you not to go too far with me."

"Coward! you threaten?"

"I do not care to be thus addressed by such a thing as you—an outcast from society; or, indeed, to be seen much longer in your company; so we had better part now."

"My God!" the girl exclaimed, "are not these words unworthy of one who calls himself a man! He who made me what I am by basest falsehood and treachery, now taunts me with my shame! Ah!" fiercely, "Ralph Marsden, there is a power in New York which could release the wretched woman in yonder house and expose your villainess. And there are those on your own high level of society to whom the story of your double life would be a revelation, indeed."

Marsden's thoughts at once reverted to the lady to whom he was engaged; a pure young girl, whose hand he was unworthy to touch. A sudden fear seized him; and, grasping Laura's arm, he exclaimed:

"What do you mean? Tell me, I say! Would you say ought to harm me in the eyes of society? If I thought so—"

"Go on; but you need not; I see murder in your eye; and I know that but for the fear of the law, you would silence me forever. But have no fear; I shall say nothing to harm you."

"You had better not."

"Not because I fear you shall I re-

main silent, but because (Heaven alone knows why or how), a lingering remnant of tenderness toward you exists in this poor bosom still. Once more, I ask you, Ralph, will you release this poor girl?"

"Once more I tell you I will not; and, by Heaven!" with sudden fierceness, "if you do not leave me now, without another word, I shall be strongly tempted to harm you."

He would have moved away, but her hand detained him.

"Oh, Ralph!"

"Release me."

"Listen to me."

He raised his hand, and with a quick blow felled her to the earth. And there she lay motionless, while the tempest raged with redoubled violence and the rain swept in upon her. Marsden hastened away, half-fearing, half-hoping that she was dead; but not daring to remain long enough to assure himself whether such was the case.—To be continued.

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