

A MEMORABLE NIGHT.

(Continued.)

Astonished at his appearance, and exceedingly irritated at his words, I stepped back as he offered me my watch, and bluntly cried:

"If it is my society only that you want, you have certainly taken very strange means to procure it. A thief could have set no neater tray, and if it is money you want, state your sum and let me go, for my time is valuable and my society likely to be unpleasant."

He gave a shrug with his shoulders that in no wise interfered with his set smile.

"You choose to be facetious," he observed. "I have already remarked that we have no use for your money. Will you sit down? Here is some excellent wine and if this brand of cigars does not suit you, I will send for another."

"Send for the devil," I cried greatly exasperated, "what do you mean by keeping me in this place against my will. Open that door and let me out, or—"

I was ready to spring and he saw it. Smiling more atrociously than ever, he slipped behind the table, and before I could reach him, had quietly drawn a pistol, which he cocked before my eyes.

"You are excited," he remarked, with a suavity that nearly drove me mad. "Now excitement is no aid to good company, and I am determined that none but good company shall be in this room to-night. So if you will be kind enough to calm yourself, Mr. Atwater, you and I may yet enjoy ourselves, but if not—the action he made was significant, and I felt the cold sweat break out of my forehead through all the heat of my indignation."

But I did not mean to show him that he had intimidated me.

"Excuse me," said I, "and put down your pistol. Though you are making me lose irredeemable time, I will try and control myself enough to give you an opportunity for explaining yourself. Why have you entrapped me into this place?"

"I have already told you," said he, gently laying the pistol before him, but within easy reach of his hand.

"But that is preposterous," I began, fast losing my self-control again. "You do not know me, and if you did—"

"Pardon me, you see I know your name."

Yes, that was true and the fact set me thinking. How did he know my name? I did not know him nor did I know the house or any reason for which I could have been beguiled into it. Was I the victim of a conspiracy, or was the man mad? Looking at him very earnestly, I declared:

"My name is Atwater, and so far you are right, but in learning that much about me you must also have learned that I am neither rich nor influential, or of any special value to a blackmailer. Why choose me out then for your society? Why not choose someone who can talk?"

"I find your conversation very interesting."

Baffled, exasperated almost beyond my power to restrain myself, I shook my fist in his face, notwithstanding I saw his hand fly to his pistol.

"Let me go," I shrieked, "let me go out of this place. I have business, I tell you, important business which means everything to me, and which, if I do not attend to it to-night, will be lost to me forever. Let me go, and I will so far reward you that I will speak to no one of what has taken place here to-night, but go my ways, forgetful of you, forgetful of this house, forgetful of all connected with it."

"You are very good," was his quiet

reply, "but this wine has to be drunk." And he calmly poured out a glass while I drew back in despair. "You do not drink wine?" he queried, holding up the glass he had filled between himself and the light. "It is a pity, for it is of most rare vintage. But perhaps you smoke?"

Sick and disgusted, I found a chair and sat down in it. If the man were crazy, there was certainly method in his madness. Besides, he had not a crazy eye; there was calm circulation in it and not a little good-nature. Did he simply want to detain me, and if so, did he have a motive it would pay me to fathom before I exerted myself further to insure my release? Answering the wave he made me with his hand, by reaching out for the bottle and filling myself a glass, I forced myself to speak more affably as I remarked:

"If the wine must be drunk, we had better be about it, as you cannot mean to detain me more than an hour, whatever reason you may have for wishing my society."

He looked at me inquiringly before answering, then tossing off his glass, he remarked:

"I am sorry, but in an hour a man can scarcely make the acquaintance of another man's exterior."

"Then you mean—"

"To know you thoroughly if you will be so good; I may never have the opportunity again."

He must be mad; nothing else but mania could account for such words and such actions; and yet, if mad, why was he allowed to enter my presence? The man who brought me here, the woman who received me at the door, had not been mad.

"And I must stay here—" I began.

"Till I am quite satisfied. I am afraid that will take till morning."

I gave a cry of despair, and then in my utter desperation spoke up to him as I would to a man of feeling.

"You don't know what you are doing; you don't know what I shall suffer by any such cruel detention. This night is not like other nights to me. This is a special night in my life and I need it, I need it, I tell you, to spend as I will. The woman I love—it seemed horrible to speak of her in this place, but I was wild at my helplessness and madly hoped I might awake some answering chord in the breast which could not be void of all feeling or he would not have that benevolent look in his eye—"The woman I love," I repeated, "sails for Europe to-morrow. We have quarreled but she still cares for me and if I can sail on the same steamer, we will yet make up and be happy."

"At what time does this steamer start?"

"At nine in the morning."

"Well, you shall leave this house at eight. If you go directly to the steamer you will be in time."

"But—but," I panted, "I have made no arrangements. I shall have to go to my lodgings, write letters, get money. I ought to be there at this moment. Have you no mercy on a man who never did you wrong and only asks to quit you and forget the precious hour you have made him lose?"

"I am sorry," he said, "it is certainly quite unfortunate, but the door will not be opened before eight. There is really no one in the house to unlock it."

"And do you mean to say," I cried agitated, "that you could not open that door if you would, that you are locked here as well as I and that I must remain here till morning, no matter how I feel or you feel?"

"Will you not take a cigar?" he asked.

Then I began to see how useless it was to struggle, and visions of Dora leaning on the steamer rail with that serpent whispering soft entreaties in her ear came rushing before me till I could have wept in my jealous chagrin.

"It is cruel, base, devilish," I began. "If you had the excuse of wanting money and took this method of wringing my all from me I could have patience, but to entrap and keep me here for nothing, nothing, when my whole future happiness is trembling in the balance, is the work of a fiend and—" I made a sudden pause, for a strange idea had struck me.

CHAPTER II.

What if this man, these men and this woman, were in league with him whose rivalry I feared, and whom I had intended to supplant on the morrow. It was a wild surmise, but was it any wilder than to believe I was held here for a mere whim, a freak, a joke, as this bowing, smiling man before me would have to believe?

Rising in fresh excitement, I struck my hand on the table. "You want to keep me from going on the steamer," I cried. "That other wretch who loves her has paid you—"

But that other wretch could not know that I was meditating any such unusual scheme, as following him without a full day's warning. I thought of this even before I had finished my sentence and did not need the blank astonishment in the face of the man before me to convince me that I had given utterance to a foolish accusation.

"It would have been some sort of a motive for your actions," I humbly added, as I sank back from my hostile attitude, "now you have none."

I thought he bestowed upon me a look of quiet pity, but if so he soon hid it with his uplifted glass.

"Forget the girl," said he, "I know of a dozen just as pretty."

I was too indignant to answer.

"Women are the bane of life," he now sententiously exclaimed. "They are ever intruding themselves between a man and his comfort, as for instance just now between yourself and this good wine."

I caught up the bottle in sheer desperation.

"Don't talk of them," I cried, "and I will try and drink. I almost wish there was poison in the glass. My death here might bring punishment upon you."

He shook his head, totally unmoved by my passion.

"We deal punishment, not receive it. It would not worry me in the least to leave you lying here upon the floor."

I did not believe this but I did not stop to weigh the question then; I was too much struck by a word he had used.

"Deal punishment?" I repeated. "Are you punishing me? Is that why I am here?"

He laughed and held out his glass to mine.

"You enjoy being sarcastic," he observed. "Well, it gives a spice to conversation, I own. Talk is apt to be dull without it."

For reply I struck the glass from his hand, it fell and shattered, and he looked for a moment really distressed.

"I had rather you had struck me," he remarked, "for I have an answer for an injury

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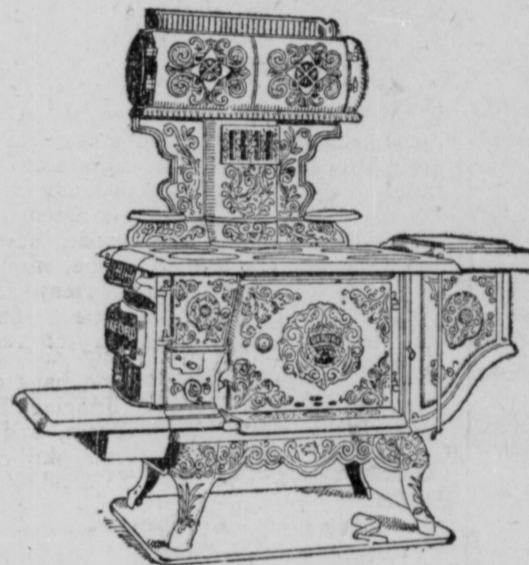
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