



A

Dead Man's Vengeance.

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this kind was eagerly and longingly expected. Louis' appearance and deportment were meanwhile dejection itself. He showed no longer a sign of fondness toward Natalie, and Brenda perceived that her sister-in-law labored under visible annoyance or worryment, it was hard to tell precisely which.

"I—I can't believe this," faltered Louis when she had finished. He looked steadily into his sister's face for an instant. "And yet, Brenda, I have always known you to be so truthful!"

"I swear to you," said Brenda, "that I have told you nothing but the absolute truth!"

He caught her hand in his own thin and feverish one. "Oh, forgive me!" came his response. "I have been unjust to you! Perhaps your fears, your doubts were, after all—but no, no!" he suddenly broke off, and then for a moment he covered his face like a man in very great agony. "Ah, my God!" he soon pursued, "if it were possible that she is faithless to me! But, Brenda, not a syllable to her! Promise me this! It may be that she is altogether innocent. And yet she has told me so much—everything, in fact—about her past, and I have never even heard her mention the name of 'Archibald'—yes, I am certain of it. And pray, Brenda, keep silent. Say nothing whatever, leaving all to me, and—and forgiving me, I hope, as I—I do not deserve to be forgiven!"

For answer Brenda impetuously threw both arms around her brother's neck. "Oh, Louis," she cried. "Heaven knows that I've hated to tell you these things! I have no wish to quarrel with your wife. I should so have loved her, Louis, if only—but never mind. You have my promise. And yet if Natalie should attack me I can't be sure just how calmly I shall receive her."

But Natalie made no attack. Whatever soon passed between herself and Louis was spoken behind closed doors.

"She will tell him some falsehood, no doubt," mused Brenda. "and he will believe it and turn once more against me." For two or three days poor Brenda waited some such development, but none came. Louis failed to give her the slightest confidence on the subject of his wife's avowals, though an interview of

Shortly after dinner time one sultry, lifeless evening a servant came to Brenda and told her that Mr. Bond had suddenly been taken very ill. Hurrying to her brother's apartment Brenda found him stretched on a sofa near one of the windows, looking pale as death. His wife sat beside him, chafing one of his hands between her own, and seeming to be overwhelmed by distress.

"It's his heart," she whispered to Brenda. "He has had one or two illnesses like this before. They are usually followed by faintness, just as you see, though this is no more severe than any other that has yet visited him."

"I shall send at once for Dr. Southgate," said Brenda, with decision. She promptly went toward a bell and rang it. Natalie looked at her with an abrupt, challenging stare. "Louis does not need a doctor," she said. "He is better now. Besides," she went on with an obstinacy that bore strange contrast to her former mien of grief, "a rural doctor like that might do him more harm than good. Tomorrow, if he is strong enough, we will go to town and see some physician of authority."

Brenda gave a slight sarcastic smile. "I disagree with you," she said, "and shall send for Dr. Southgate."

Natalie rose haughtily from the chair beside her husband. "You shall not set your will against mine," she said. "You are always delighting in opposite views to my own. Ever since I married Louis you have seen fit to treat me with either concealed or open insult."

Just then Louis opened his dark eyes and Brenda saw, as they fixed themselves on hers, that they burned like diamonds.

"Louis!" she exclaimed, hastening toward him. "do not you sanction my sending for Dr. Southgate?"

"No," he answered. But while Brenda started back in despair at this unwelcome reply he put forth his hand with a slight, unmistakable motion. Brenda at once seized the hand between both her own and sank down at his side.

She perceived the next instant that he was more ill than she had ever seen him. Across Brenda's shoulder he looked at his wife.

"Natalie," he said, in a voice that was husky, and yet contained a ring of command. "I wish to speak a few words with my sister. You yourself can go and tell them that the bell which I heard Brenda ring need not be answered. Do you understand me? I hope that you do."

Those last two brief sentences had not a sign of menace, and yet there was something in their low emphasis that made the color slip from Natalie's cheeks.

"Dear Louis," she broke forth a moment afterward, however in tender, persuasive tones. "you had best not talk with any one this evening! Tomorrow"—

"Do as I desire you," Louis interrupted. His voice was not much above a whisper, but Brenda recoiled from him as she heard it, so unlike his usual self did it seem, so compelling, so commanding, and yet so terribly tranquil.

Natalie went to one of the doors and slowly opened it. She disappeared slowly, too, as if some magnetic form were insisting upon the exit.

Louis' hand trembled a little now in Brenda's hold. But soon it lay there quite still again. He presently spoke, but as if with intentional caution against a possible listener. Brenda, leaning forward so that his breath almost swept her cheeks, was just able to hear each word as it fell from his pale and slightly twitching lips.

"My sister—I have wronged you very much. Yes—I see this—now, when death has laid hold of me and there may be only a few hours left me to live. Brenda—don't start like that—it is nothing, this change we call death. But to die as I am dying is an exquisite comfort. I would not live on, Brenda, for an empire. My part of life is done—utterly done. I have loved that woman, Natalie Leveridge, with an immense passion, an immense constancy. What I forced her to tell me the other evening there is no need of my telling you. You are a mere girl; you could not avenge me. But all has grown clear to me, and I know beyond a doubt that some one else will."

"Some one else? Oh, Louis"—

"Hush, Brenda. You see how weak I am. My brain seems to swim now. There is a paper here in my breast pocket. Reach up your hand. Take it and hide it as though your own life depended on its jealous concealment. Have you found it, Brenda?"

"Yes, Louis, yes."

"Have you hidden it?"

"Yes—yes."

"Now, remember. When I am laid in my coffin—not until then—get a chance to place it against my heart just as you found it placed a minute ago. Don't let her see you. But Gerald will come: he will come the day of the funeral, even if something should delay him from the funeral itself. And then as soon as you and he shall meet tell him where you put the paper. Will you swear to me, Brenda, that you will carry out this wish of mine?"

"Yes, Louis, I will swear with my whole soul! But"—

"The paper is sealed close, as you will see, and bears no inscription. It is something I wrote yesterday. I have been in fearful suffering for hours past, but I have guarded this even from her. And don't grieve much for me, Brenda. I'm a thousandfold happier at going than staying. To live now would only be one prolonged anguish. Some day I think that Gerald will make everything clear to you. He will find out. Never mind how. He can't tell you yet, even if you ask him. He will simply listen to you when you tell him what you have done."

Perhaps Louis might have gone on speaking in his faint, yet clear heard voice, if the door had not now been suddenly opened and Natalie had not swept into the room.

Brenda at once realized that she had