

"No," was the muffled answer, which should have been "yes."

"But you are," said the voice. "And why?"

Silence. Nora was at a loss for a reply. It was clear that Mrs. Sanderson had not told her son of the projected departure—possibly had meant to spare him till the last moment.

A sense of helplessness came over the girl. The pitiful story she had just heard had ignited every spark of sympathy in her. It had put before her so humanly this poor man's need for what she had given and could still give him.

She knew well enough how difficult it would be for Mrs. Sanderson to replace her in that dark room—indeed, how impossible, now that he had grown accustomed to her particular playing.

A great pain filled her heart. How could she fulfil her duty to her father without forsaking—the voice?

"Nora, why don't you say something?" it asked.

"I was thinking."

"Of what?"

"Nothing in particular—everything."

The voice laughed softly.

"Nothing—everything!" it repeated.

"Then, I come into it, anyway, for I am embodied in everything. Are you sorry for me?"

"Yes—oh, yes!"

"And you are glad you didn't go?"

"I—oh—please don't ask me."

Nora sought refuge in the piano, and what she played was as wild as an Hungarian dance. Her nerves were going beyond her control. She wondered how much longer it would be ere the sign for dismissal would come.

The strain in the dark room was almost unendurable that day, and when at last she was free to leave the piano she fled like a hunted hare, leaving Mrs. Sanderson with her son.

The necessity for air drew her into the garden. She walked down the drive breathing heavily.

For a few minutes she stood at the gates, looking out, her eyes dwelling on the sea blankly.

It was very cold. Snow had fallen in the night, and it had frozen on the ground. The sky was blue now, however, and the sun was shining. It was a day typical of a New York winter—bright, brisk, dry.

Nora looked up from sea to sun and thought of the man in the dark room. "He is right!" she thought. "To be denied the sun must be death in life. To be blind—and so young—"

She started, and stared down the road suddenly at the rapidly approaching figure of a man.

Taking a swift step toward him, she said hoarsely:

"Why have you come?"

"To warn you," the man replied, without greeting.

"To warn me!"

Nora's gaze travelled over his pallid face and gleaming eyes.

"Father," she whispered, "something has happened. What is it?"

The man looked about him before answering. "Their suspicions were aroused by my coming to New York," he said, "and they have had me watched."

"Watched!"

"Yes. I found it out last night. I was followed everywhere I went."

"Then you have been followed here," said the girl, looking fearfully past him along the road.

"No. I think I gave them the slip. I didn't see any one on the boat."

"There's no one in sight," said the girl. "Well, go on."

"We shall have to be careful," continued the man. "I needn't tell you that they stop at nothing. If they become convinced that I mean to leave them they will probably take my life."

"Oh, no! no! no!" cried Nora, in anguish.

"They would do it to seal my lips," said the other. "But that's not why I came over. It's on your account. You are no safer than I. In fact, you are less safe, and I came to beg you to be cautious—to take no risks."

Nora shuddered.

"I'll be careful," she said.

"You must not go out alone, day or night, for the present. And Nora—where do you sleep?"

She pointed up at the house.

"On the second floor."

"Well, keep your window locked, anyway," said the man.

"There's a Jap in the house now," said Nora, with another shiver.

"A Jap! When did he come?"

"Two days ago. Mrs. Sanderson brought him over from town to help."

The man's brows met in a frown.

"I suppose he's all right," he said reflectively. "Still, watch him. One can never tell."

She clasped her hands together agitatedly.

"Oh, God!" she cried. "What a hideous position to be in! To be afraid of one's very life—to go on from hour to hour wondering what awful thing is going to happen next!"

"My poor girl!" said the man huskily. "And I have brought all this on you! But it's too late to talk now. It's all done, and nothing can undo it."

"That's the most terrible part of it," said the girl, her eyes turning once more to the sea. "Nothing can give those poor men back their lives, and they're all on our souls—all of them!"

"Not on yours, Nora. No. There is no one in the world who can blame you."

"I blame myself. I—I ought to have spoken when I found out—the truth."

"You think that? You believe you ought to have given me up to justice?"

The man's voice was quiet and sad. Nora moved from him with a sob.

"That was why I kept silent," she said brokenly.

The sound of an opening window made her pull herself together.

"I must go back," she whispered. "And you'll be careful?"

"Yes, yes, I will."

She began to walk quickly away, but before she had gone half a dozen steps she looked back.

"Father," she said, "you will let me know when—when I am to come to you?"

He nodded without speaking. In another minute he was standing in the road alone.

He watched her till she vanished from view. There was an unutterable sadness on his face.

"She was glad to get away," he told himself bitterly. "She's happy and cared for up there. And she dreads coming back to me. Well, I've nothing and nobody but myself to blame. Curse me! Curse me!"

He set his teeth as he turned and retraced his way to St. George.

At the ferry depot he bought an evening paper.

The front page was heavily outlined in four sensational headings—

WAR-SHIP CATASTROPHE.

Total Loss of the U.S. Cruiser Hildergarde.

ALL HANDS DROWNED.

Bodies Washed Ashore on San Diego Coast.

Nora's father nodded once or twice as he read.

"So they're at it still!" he muttered. "But they don't know how to keep their dead at the bottom of the ocean, and, by God! I'll never tell them."

And, like Nora, he turned cold as he looked at the sea.

CHAPTER VII.

THE HAND IN THE DARK.

Mrs. Sanderson threw a suspicious glance at Nora as she entered the house. It cut right through the girl.

"My father came over to bring me a message," she stammered from pure necessity.

The elder woman's mouth hardened. "It seems a pity that your father cannot come up to the door like any other person," she coldly remarked.

Nora looked down, flushing consciously.

"Why can't he?" asked Mrs. Sanderson. "I do not recollect having denied you the right of visitors."

"You've never denied me anything," replied the girl.

Mrs. Sanderson turned from her impatiently.

"It's no use," she said. "Nothing that I can say or do will make you candid with me."

And with this she went off abruptly, leaving Nora alone.

"Oh, how hateful I must seem to her!" cried the girl. "And how hateful I am to myself!"

Life was becoming less endurable every hour. Her father's warning hung over her like the sword of Damocles. She knew that the words had not been merely the outcome of a guilty conscience. She knew, moreover, that her enemies were of the calibre that stooped

at nothing to fulfil an end, however vile.

Throughout that day she was in a constant state of nervousness.

Every little sound made her start fearfully. Each time Bashi came into the room she turned white. Her hand shook as she ate her meals.

Mrs. Sanderson watched her narrowly.

She drew attention to the latest news—the loss of the cruiser Hildergarde—and noted the widening horror in Nora's eyes as she read it to her.

From this and recent events of a similar kind Mrs. Sanderson drew certain deductions.

Although she could not fathom why or how, she was convinced that these repeated naval catastrophes were affecting Nora personally, and in no minor degree. But no suspicion of the truth struck her—a fact which did not surprise her when, not many hours later, it was laid bare!

After dinner Mrs. Sanderson went to her son, and Nora remained alone in the library.

Taking out a book, she began to read it, in the hope that it might, even for a few minutes, distract her from the thoughts and fears that oppressed her.

The words, however, danced before her eyes, and soon she replaced the novel in its case.

The loneliness of the room began to work on her nerves. She wondered when Mrs. Sanderson would return to her, and whether she would be required to play in the dark room that night.

Not half an hour had gone since her benefactress had joined her son, yet to Nora it seemed hours.

She walked up and down restlessly.

Once the door was pushed open, and the head of Bashi appeared round the corner. The movement was quiet, and to Nora, stealthy.

Her dry lips opened.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

"Mis' San'son," replied the Jap, with his usual broad, good-natured smile. "She not here, eh?"

"No, she's up stairs. Shall I call her?"

"No matter, mis'. I wait. I come back."

Smiling and bowing, he disappeared, and the door was noiselessly closed after him.

Nora breathed fast as she resumed her march.

Presently he reappeared.

"Mis' San'son—she not here yet, eh?" he inquired.

"No; you'd better tell me what you want." Nora exerted herself to say.

"Mrs. Sanderson may be gone some time."

"Alla light, mis'. I wait," repeated Bashi, and once more vanished.

Irritation mingled with Nora's nervousness.

What did Bashi want? Why would he not tell her?

There was nothing really mysterious in the Jap's conduct, yet to Nora it was full of meaning. Imagination conjured up one horrible thing after another in her distorted brain.

Her fears increased as the half-hour lengthened into an hour.

How much longer would Mrs. Sanderson remain up-stairs?

She stood in the centre of the room, listening for the sound of her footsteps, but they were not to be heard. The house was silent. It was a still and frosty night, and everything within and without the house seemed more than usually quiet.

But as she stood there a noise—at first faint, then more distinct—defined itself.

She trembled violently, and turned icy cold. It seemed to her that something—someone—was outside the window.

At any other time she would not have heeded the noise. To-night, within a few hours of her father's warning, it held for her possibilities of a sinister kind.

She listened, standing like a marble image—and as white.

It came again—a sound as of a hand fumbling on the window-panes.

Suddenly Nora rushed across the room and sent the blind up with a jerk.

Just then the library door opened, and she turned to meet Bashi's smile.

"Mis', you call Mis' San'son?" he questioned amiably.

An answer gurgled in Nora's throat. "No!"

"You call, mis'," again said Bashi, this time as a request.

"Why, what do you want?"

"I tell her something. The dining-room window—it open," he replied.

"The dining-room window open," said Nora. "Well, what of that, Bashi?"

"I don't know," said the boy. "I go in the room jus' now. I put the silver in the drawer. I feel cold. I pull the blind, and see window open. I no open it. You come see, mis'."

He led the way, and Nora followed.

In the dining-room, Bashi pursued the point.

"See, mis'? You tell Mis' San'son not Bashi's fault, eh?"

Mrs. Sanderson's voice was now heard calling.

Nora hurried out to find her at the foot of the stairs.

"Will you go up to Desmond?" said the woman.

Nora nodded and passed on her way. Mrs. Sanderson went into the library.

Bashi was left staring perplexedly at the open window, which seemed to prey on his mind.

He was just about to close it, when He was just about to close it, when a figure emerged from behind the curtains of the adjoining window. Bashi turned. A cry rose to his lips, which was instantly checked at an imperative sign from the intruder—a short, evil-looking Japanese.

A few sentences in their own tongue passed rapidly between the two men. Then, with a stealthy movement, as of a cat stalking its prey, the newcomer glided out of the room and up the stairs.

At the door of the room from which the music was issuing the figure paused, then slipped behind the heavy curtain which was hung outside.

For a few seconds he tarried, searching for the handle. Finding it, he silently pushed the door a few inches ajar and peered into the darkness, to assure himself that the player was alone.

In another moment he was between the door and the inner curtain, and the door was closed behind him.

Nora had gone gladly into the darkness. It had seemed to her like going out of a storm into a summer calm. The very darkness soothed her racked nerves.

Wild, desolate melodies, that were the expression of a breaking heart—chords harmonically incorrect, yet poignant with suffering—Nora played on, forgetting fear, remembering nothing but sorrow.

And while she was playing a picture rose before her.

She saw into the future—herself, forlorn and hopeless, a creature shadowed by the cloud of a great crime, shut out from the light of life almost as completely as the man in this dark room.

She saw her father drifting slowly toward the grave—a sinner whose past would be ever present, whose sins could never be wiped out on this earth. She thought of her dead mother, and a cry of anguish broke from her.

The very sound, involuntary as it had been, brought her abruptly to her senses, and she went on playing, desperately trying to banish her unhappy thoughts.

Slowly, gradually, other feelings and impressions began to assert themselves. All the warmth in her body seemed to be leaving it. Her hands grew icy cold as they struggled over the keys.

Something she knew not what had suddenly thrilled her with dread. The voice, to-night, was silent, yet never had she longed so much to hear it. She wanted to cry out and beseech it to speak, but the words froze on her tongue.

She went on playing, but now as a mere automaton. The intensity of the darkness was no longer soothing; it had become fearful. She wondered how long she could sit there and bear it.

A movement near her brought a cry through her dry lips. She reached out both arms quickly.

The next instant two long, horrible, bony hands met like a vice around her throat.

"Desmond! Des—!"

Choking, cackling, the name fell on the blind man's ears.

He awoke as from a dream.

"What is it? What is it?" he said, starting to his feet.

Nothing but that awful ominous cackling answered him.

He stumbled over the room, groping about him. He reached the piano and put out his hands. Then he knew that there was some one with Nora, and that they were struggling.

Staggering over to the door with but one thought, he pulled back the curtains.

Everything was forgotten but the knowledge that the girl he loved was in peril.

"Help! Help!" he called out hoarsely.