

"Very well," I answered with a laugh, scouting the idea, and then boldly passing out into the hall.

"Good heavens!" I gasped a few seconds later, almost as soon as I reached her side. "Hoefel! Come here quickly. There's something devilish uncanny in this. I've never felt like this before."

The old German dashed out of the room, and was in an instant beside me. "How do you feel?"

I heard his voice, but it sounded like that of someone speaking in the far distance. The shock was just as though an icy hand had struck me as I had emerged from the hall. I was cold from head to foot, shivering violently, while my lower limbs became so benumbed that I could not feel my feet.

I must have reeled, for Hoefel in alarm caught me in his arms and steadied me.

"Tell me—what are your symptoms?"

"I'm cold," I answered, my voice trembling, and my teeth chattering violently.

He seized my wrist, and his great fingers closed upon it.

"Ach!" he cried in genuine alarm. "Your pulse is falling. And your eyes!" he added, looking into them. "You are cold—your legs are rigid—you have the same symptoms, exactly the same, as the young lady!"

"And you," I gasped. "Do you feel nothing?"

"Nothing yet," he responded. "Nothing."

"But what is it?" I cried in desperation. "The feeling is truly as though the Angel of Death had passed and struck me down. Cannot you give me something, Hoefel? Give me something—before I lose all consciousness!"

The woman near me stood rooted to the spot in absolute terror, while the old German placed me upon an oaken settle in the hall, and ran along to the boudoir, returning with the syringe filled with the same injection which he had administered to my love. This he gave me in the arm; then stood by breathlessly anxious as to the result.

The feelings I experienced during the ten minutes that followed are indescribable. I can only compare them to the excruciating agony of being slowly frozen to death.

Through it all I saw Hoefel's great fleshy face with the big spectacles peering into mine. I tried to speak, but could not. I tried to raise my hand to make signs, but my muscles had suddenly become paralysed. Truly the mystery of that room was an uncanny one.

It ran through my mind that the house being lit by electric light, the wires were perhaps not properly insulated, and any person leaving the place received a paralyzing shock. This theory was, however, completely negated by my symptoms, which were not in any way similar to those consequent upon electric shock.

Hoefel looked anxiously at his watch; then after a lapse of a few minutes gave me a second injection, which rendered me a trifle easier. I could detect by his manner and his grunts that he was utterly confounded. He, who had sneered at the weird story, like myself, was now convinced that some strange, unaccountable mystery was connected with that room.

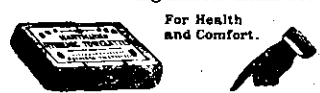
To enter apparently produced no ill effect. But to leave brought swiftly and surely upon the fated intruder the icy touch of death.

I had laughed the thing to scorn, yet within a few seconds had myself fallen a victim.

Some deep, inscrutable mystery was there, but what it was neither of us could tell.

(To be continued.)

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By JOHN K. LEYS.

Author of "A Sore Temptation," "The Thumb-print," "The Broken Fetter," "In the Toils," "A Million of Money," etc., etc.

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PART I.—THE LADY'S QUEST.

SYNOPSIS OF PREVIOUS CHAPTERS.

CHAPTERS I. & II.—Professor Zucatti, an Italian painter, is consulted by a lady, Miss Grant, as to an undertaking on which she is about to embark. He has met her previously at a garden party at Spezzia. He consults her hand and tells her that her future is fraught with great danger, and in a magic crystal she sees a murder enacted, and a man thrown over a precipice, and a person representing herself standing near. She promises to consult him again. After she has left, a couple of Sisters of Charity take refuge in his doorway from a thunderstorm, and he assists them in their charity. After they have left he remembers that he will write to his old friend, and sits down and writes for two hours.

CHAPTERS III. & IV.—The professor, writing to his friend, explains that he has again met Miss Grant in England, and has shown her the crystal, which he had manipulated by means of slides previously prepared. Miss Grant, visiting the professor again, asks him to help her to discover the secret of her birth, her earliest recollections being of the deck of a vessel. He prepares a bogus letter in which a situation is offered her, on her furnishing proofs of her birth, etc., and tells her to present it to Mr Gregory, the lawyer, who up to a few years ago had remitted money to her, but had for some reason desisted from doing so.

CHAPTER V.

THE LAWYER AND THE LADY.

Gregory, Jackson and Ford were an old-fashioned firm, and they carried on business in an old-fashioned house in an old-fashioned way.

When Miss Grant called to see Mr. Gregory—she went straight to the office from Signor Zucatti's—she was shown into a room almost as gloomy as an underground cavern. It was of fair size, and was lit by a large window; but the panes of the window were covered with white paint, so that but little light came through them, and on the other side of the window there was a blank wall, so that very little light found its way in. Dust lay everywhere—some of it looked as if it had not been disturbed for half a century.

One side of the room was covered with shelves laden with stout volumes covered in law calf, and alongside the shelves were ranged four or five horsehair-covered chairs, for the accommodation of clients of the less important sort and chance callers, while they waited Mr. Gregory's or Mr. Ford's leisure. Mr. Jackson had been dead for some years.

As Miss Grant could not say that she had an appointment with Mr. Gregory she was asked to wait till he was disengaged, and she found the minutes pass very slowly. Opposite her stood two tall desks of solid mahogany, which had evidently not been used for years. Between them and the window stood a small table furnished with a copying-press, a large envelope case, a tray of sealing-wax and seals, and a big letter-scale, as well as pens, ink, and blotting-paper.

Bye and bye a clerk came in with a sheaf of open letters in his hand. These he put down on the table to be posted; and then, taking a large book from the copying-press, he began turning over its contents as an excuse for remaining in the room, throwing every now and then an admiring glance in the direction of the lady.

Miss Grant was at first amused, then angry. She was on the point of asking him whether the office contained another waiting-room, when he met her eye, changed colour, and hurriedly left the room. Another period of solitude, and then a youth entered with an appearance of haste which was evidently assumed, and, going to the correspondence table, began to prepare the letters for the post.

Taking the letter-book, he turned over its leaves, which consisted of thick prepared paper, impervious to damp, and then placed upon one of them a sheet of very thin paper, like

tissue paper. This he moistened with a flat brush that lay in a dish of water, and then he carefully placed over it one of the letters that lay on the table, face downwards.

Miss Grant was watching his proceedings with interest—there was nothing else for her to do.

"May I look on?" she said, in a pleasant voice, rising and approaching the table.

"Certainly, ma'am."

"What are you doing?"

"Copying the letters."

"But how does that copy them?"

"I'll show you in a minute."

He turned a leaf of the letter-book, and spread another sheet of tissue paper upon it, and after wetting it, placed a letter upon it, and so on till he had treated all the letters in the same way. He then closed the letter-book, and put it into the press. Then, whirling the lever round, he threw his weight upon it and pressed the letter-book tightly between the upper and lower plates of the press.

Having waited a few seconds he released the screw, and, taking out the letter-book, he showed the lady that a legible copy of every letter remained on its corresponding sheet of tissue paper.

"What a capital plan!" cried Miss Grant. "And do you copy all the letters in this way?"

"Every one that I post has to be copied, ma'am," replied the youth, and raising the lid of one of the disused desks he showed her that the desk was full of similar copies of letters, arranged in piles, and secured by means of paper-weights.

"When we've done six months we get them bound up," said the lad, pointing to the rows of volumes on the shelves.

"I see—thank you. It is very interesting," said the lady, and her curiosity being satisfied she returned to her seat.

She had scarcely done so when another clerk came in and told her that Mr. Gregory was at liberty and would see her. She followed him into a room, well furnished, but scarcely less dingy than the one she had left. Behind a large writing table sat an elderly man, with a thin, sharp face, above which his grey hair rose upright and bristling. He rose when Miss Grant entered the room, bowed awkwardly, and with a motion of his hand towards a chair resumed his seat.

"I see you do not remember me, Mr. Gregory."

The lawyer started and frowned slightly. "No, I do not," he said, abruptly.

"When I last saw you it was at Miss Penfold's school at Holloway—"

"Ah, yes, I remember now." Miss Grant, who was watching his face keenly, saw it stiffen and harden, as if a hundred nerves in it had suddenly tightened.

"I have come to you to ask you to do me justice. Wait a moment, please. I wish to appeal, first of all, to your own sense of honour. What right have you to stand between me and my relations? What right have you, or they, to cast me out upon the world, friendless and nameless? I have a right to know, at least, who I am, and whether I have any real claim to it. It is true that has been given to me. It is cruel and wicked to treat any human being as I have been treated, more cruel and more wicked because I am a weak and helpless woman."

She stopped, fearing that she might suddenly break down, and the lawyer immediately took advantage of her silence.

"Miss Grant, you have said all this to me before in your letters, and I replied that my duty to my client prevented

me from answering any of your questions. The same reason that prevented me from answering you then forbids me to answer you now. If you have nothing more to say, this interview had better terminate." And he rose up as a hint that she had better go.

Miss Grant took no notice of the hint. She went on exactly as if Mr. Gregory had been dumb.

"It occurred to me more than once that some one must have an interest in my being suppressed. It may be that I am entitled to a large sum of money, and am being kept in ignorance in order that someone may keep the money for himself. I have heard of such things being done."

The lawyer's sallow face flushed. "And you would suggest that I have made myself a party to a fraud of that kind? Well, I suppose you are at liberty to believe what you like. It makes no difference to me. Now, that you have said what you want to say, will you go?"

The lady's eyes had not left the solicitor's face for one instant. She was trying to make out from his expression whether the random shot she had fired had hit the mark or not. And she felt that she had learned nothing, one way or the other. The flush might mean guilt, or, more likely, it might mean nothing but surprise and indignation at the suspicion that he was mixed up in a fraudulent plot.

"I beg you will not think," said Miss Grant, "that it is merely from motives of sentiment that I am trying to solve the mystery of my birth. I find that it is necessary for me to be able at least to state my birthplace, or I shall not be able to earn my living in Italy. Will you please look over this letter. Here is a translation of it."

Miss Grant was lying now, but no, there was no tremor in her voice, no flicker of embarrassment in her manner. She rose, handed the letter and the translation to the lawyer, and went back to her chair.

Mr. Gregory laid the two sheets of paper side by side on his desk, and began to compare them. It was evident that he knew something of Italian, and was determined not to be taken in. Apparently he soon satisfied himself that there was a substantial correspondence between the two documents, for he soon laid aside the original and betook himself to the translation.

"This seems a very strange regulation," he said, looking up with a frown. But in spite of the frown Miss Grant thought she detected a certain sympathy in his look, and her heart beat with a sudden hope.

"I believe it is on account of the Anarchists," she said calmly.

"You were educated to be a singer," said the solicitor, sharply. "Why do you not follow that profession?"

"I did till an illness destroyed my voice," said the lady. She looked again at the lawyer as she said this and again she thought he looked as if he were to some degree sorry for her. Surely, she thought, her little plan was going to succeed.

But in a moment Mr. Gregory dashed her hopes to the ground. Folding up the letter and its translation carefully, he rose and pushed them towards her across the table.

"I am sorry to say that this makes no difference," he said coldly. "I ought not to have looked at the letter. It is really no affair of mine, or of my client's. I have little doubt that, with the advantages you have had in the way of education, and with your other requirements, you will be able before long to find a situation in this country, where these ridiculous regulations do not exist. I wash my hands of the matter altogether."