

or a chicken from my hen roost. He is put in prison. Perhaps, if the theft is a serious one, he is sent to penal servitude. But if a man steals what is dearer to me than life, the law cannot touch him, and if I try to avenge my honour and revenge myself for the intolerable wrong done to me you cry out, 'How wicked.'"

He left his seat and resting one hand on the table at his side spoke in a firm, equable tone, as though he had been discussing something of grave and sober interest.

"Do you remember the day you came to me in London, when I read your fate in your hand?"

"Yes, I remember it only too well. I wish with all my heart that I had never seen the house, the street, in which you live. It may be ungrateful to say so, but I can't help it."

A spasm crossed the Italian's face as he listened, but he made no reply. He went on, in even, regular tones, as if she had not spoken.

"On that day our fate was revealed. Do you not remember what you saw in the crystal—what I saw, for I will acknowledge that I saw it, too? There was nothing supernatural in the production of the picture." He broke off suddenly, and muttered, as if speaking to himself: "How can I tell what is supernatural and what is not? The image was natural, for the picture was real. But how was it that that picture, of all the others, should have escaped destruction? How was it that, without intending it, Pietro put that slide in place of the right one that day? If ever a fate was foreshadowed it was yours and mine that day!"

The last words, uttered aloud, were addressed directly to Sybil; and the girl shrank back and turned pale. She had not forgotten the mysteriously fading scene—the woman crouching behind the rock, the form of a man lying stiff and motionless before her, and the white, evil face peering over the edge of the precipice. She shuddered, and shrank farther away from the calm, impassive man standing over her.

"The day must come," said the Italian, "when that vision must translate itself into actual fact. And that day is at hand. The vision must be fulfilled. The man who would marry you dies by my hand."

The Italian paused, and when he next spoke it was with the voice of one to whom the actual is a phantom, and the visions of his memory and his imagination the real.

"I know the place—the very spot," he said, in quiet, dreamy tones. "You know it, too. The Black Corrie. We have been there together—do you remember?—in the summer time. He will come to me there. And he shall die."

Sybil stole a look at him; and calm as was his voice, she saw a gleam in his eye that was to her the index and the menace of madness. Again she shuddered, and hid her face.

The sound of a closing door told her that she might look up. Yes, he had gone. She was alone. The man who had been her friend and her helper had gone out into the winter twilight with murder in his heart and in his eyes.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"THIS MAKES A DIFFERENCE."

The short gloaming was already changing into night, but it was not dark. The moon was rising, and the glamour of her shining was stealing over the steel-blue expanse of the loch, the far, shilly mountain tops, and the bare hill sides.

Sybil stood at one of the windows of the Castle that looked down on the loch. Its shadowy, mysterious beauty entered into her soul. She had been shaken by her interview with Signor Zucatti, who had left her but an hour since, but she had now recovered her self-control. The sadness, however, and the fear that the Professor would do some mad thing that would bring about the fulfilment of his own prophecy, remained with her. The Italian was gone out of her life. In all probability she would never see him again. But his influence had not left her. She still seemed to see that tall, spare form; the calm, even voice, which she had instinctively felt to be to the man's utterance what a mask would have been to his features, still haunted her. When she closed her eyes she saw that face, with the strange light gleaming in the deep-set wells beneath his brows.

As she stood there watching the first glimmer of silver shewn on the loch from the rising moon, she was startled by a tall figure appearing in the carriage drive—someone taller than the laird, and not nearly so stout as the factor. Who could it be? Sybil wondered, for hardly any man's foot, putting aside the laird and the factor, had trod the gravel on the drive since the beginning of winter.

Was it possible — ? The girl drew back hastily, and the next moment bent forward, her eyes flashing, and her heart beating wildly. Another minute and she was sure—it was he!

What object could have brought this young man of fashion to that remote Highland glen in the depth of winter but the master passion of humanity? "It must be me he is coming to see! It must! It must! It can only be me!" Over and over, again, these words rang in her ears, and the beating of her heart seemed as though it would stifle her. But she crossed the room and sat down by the fire with a demeanour as calm and composed as if she were going to receive a visit from a dressmaker.

"Is that actually you, Mr. Keith?" cried Sybil, when the young man was ushered into the library. "How good of you to come and cheer our loneliness!"

"So you have been a bit lonely?" said the Honourable Ronald, coming forward and holding out his hand.

"Lonly isn't the word for it. I have been on a desert island since you—and your sister—left us in September. I'm sure there are plenty of desert islands twice as lively as Inveroran Castle in winter. So you know what you have to expect. Shall I tell them to put you into your old room?"

"Wouldn't that be a little premature, seeing that Mr. Mitchell is not at home?" asked Ronald, with a touch of nervousness. This was so unusual a failing with him that Sybil could not help noticing it.

"You mean, taking a liberty? What nonsense! Surely you know that Mr Mitchell would be glad to see you here at any time. And you can't imagine that we are not all glad to see you."

"Are you really?"

"Of course we are."

"And you—Sidney?"

The name made Sybil start. She had forgotten that he knew her by the name of Sidney. But she merely answered quietly, "Of course, I am glad to see you."

"I am happy to hear it, for I have something to say to you. I have come a long way to say it—"

The speaker came to a halt, as if he found a difficulty in expressing himself.

"Don't you think I had better give orders for your room to be prepared?" asked Sybil by way of relieving the tension.

The Honourable Ronald roused himself. "No; not yet," he said. "I may stay to-night, but I may not. It is possible that I may go over to Glenartney and ask them to put me up."

"But how could you get there to-night?"

"I could walk. It is not far."

"The path leads by the Lodge, doesn't it—past the Black Corrie?" The last words forced themselves from the girl's lips.

Her lover looked at her in surprise, for she was very pale, but he answered, "Yes," and his next words made Sybil forget what he had just said.

"I think you can guess what I have come here to say. It is the old story, Sidney. I love you. You are dearer to me than all the world. Will you be my wife, Sidney?"

Sybil was trembling from head to foot. She could not yet accept the love that was lying at her feet.

"Do you know who I am?" she said, in a strange, unsteady voice.

"I know only this—that you are the dearest and sweetest, as you are the handsomest girl in the world," and he rose impulsively and seized her hands, longing to fold her in his arms.

"Stop a moment," and she gently pushed him away. "You know that I have no family—that I am nobody; but are you sure you know even my name?"

"Why, yes, of course! Sidney Grant."

"No. My name is Sybil. I took my sister's name without her consent for a purpose of my own—so that I might gain a footing here."

"Sidney! I mean—are you telling me the truth?"

"The simple, literal truth."

"And does Mr Mitchell know this?"

"He knows it now."

His words went like a stab to Sybil's heart, not for themselves, but for the tone they were spoken in.

"It is very strange," said the young man, regarding her with wide-open eyes and parted lips.

"Yes, it is strange. And there are other strange things," said the girl. It was evident from her voice that the strain was telling on her. She was becoming hysterical. "There are other strange things," she repeated, "things which perhaps you ought to know. My mother—but you had better read it for yourself."

She rose, and taking the packet of Australian papers from behind a pile of books, she put it into Ronald's hands. "Read the marked passages," she said, drawing herself up to her full height, and looking her lover straight in the face, "and then come to me and tell me that you love me—if you can. But I will tell you this—that I believe my mother to have been innocent of the crime she was charged with. And it shall be the object of my life to free her memory from that terrible stain. Now, read."

There was no lamp or candle in the room, but the pine branches on the hearth gave sufficient light to read by. Without looking at her Ronald Keith took the newspapers and bent down to read them. She saw him give an involuntary start and grow pale. She heard him draw his breath with a sound like a sob; but he said nothing and she remained silent.

When the last word had been read he mechanically folded up the papers and gave them back to her. Then he rose and stood before her, his eyes on the ground.

"Thank you very much for telling me this," he said speaking slowly and painfully. "It was very good of you. Very few girls would have done such a thing. I needn't say that the secret is safe with me, and I hope from my heart that you will be successful in—clearing your mother's memory."

There was a long pause and then he went on, his voice husky, and scarcely louder than a whisper:

"Of course, this makes—a difference. One could never be sure when a thing of that kind would come out, and I have—my family to consider. Perhaps it would not be fair to them to say nothing about it; and, yet, of course, they cannot be told. I think I had better take a day or two to think over what had better be done."

To all this Sybil answered nothing. She was not silent from indignation; she was conscious of a gnawing pain, a dreadful sense that the light of her life's happiness was going out, and that soon it would be all darkness. There were no doubt some conventional words of farewell spoken, but she could not afterwards remember whether it was or not. The last thing she remembered saying to Ronald Keith was: "Read; and then come and tell me that you love me—if you can!"

Again she was alone.

She was dimly conscious that she had heard the sound of wheels, and that someone came and told her that Mr Mitchell had come back from Glasgow, and had immediately gone out, without saying where he was going, or when he would return. She listened like one in a dream, and fell to brooding over the fire again.

Suddenly she started, and sat upright. She had forgotten the Italian and his threats of vengeance. If Zucatti had been a Scotchman she would have given little weight to what he had said in the bitterness of his disappointment. But she had lived long enough in Italy to know that such threats were not always made in vain. And she remembered only too well the look in the Italian's eyes. Besides, Ronald Keith must pass (if he carried out his intention of going to Glenartney that night) the very spot which Zucatti's superstitious forebodings had made him select as the scene of his revenge. He must pass the Black Corrie! He had said so!

Sybil sprang to her feet, and hurried towards the door, but ere she reached it she stopped short. Surely it was too late! Unless Ronald had gone back to the inn, and made a fresh start from there, he must have passed the Black Corrie long since. But then, he might have gone to the Inn, and so delayed his start; or—and she shuddered to think of it—he might be lying wounded and helpless in the Black Corrie, and if so might die before he was found. She felt that

unless she wished to be an accomplice in his death she must go and see whether he had passed the fatal spot. She might be in time to warn him.

Without saying a word to anyone, she put on her hat and her thick boots and a warm cloak, and set out for the path that led up to Durant's shooting lodge, and thence by the head of a lonely, uninhabited valley, to Glenartney.

It was bitterly cold, and Sybil drew her cloak more closely around her as she hurried on. The moon was fairly up now, and the road was clear, though the snow lay thickly in the hollows, and more sparsely on the bare hillsides. As she went her fears increased. Oh, why did she not think of this before Ronald left her? How was it that the warnings uttered by the Italian had made so slight an impression on her? Her mind had been full of other things. But what if Ronald should come to his death through her neglect? She should feel like a murderess!

With panting breath she struggled on, till at length she came to the spot. The Black Corrie, a pot-like hollow in the hill, lay to the right. She could see far above her the great boulder that lay on the margin of the path between it and the steep edge of the corrie. Surely, she thought, there could be no danger now? In any case, she was in time. No one was in sight.

The path was slippery with half-melted ice, as well as steep; so she left the well-defined track and took to the hill-side, meaning to cut off a corner, and in this way save some yards. She was now at the lower opening of the corrie; the big boulder, her landmark, was nearer now, right above her, and slightly to the left.

The ground was rough with fallen stones, and she had to pick her way carefully, for the moon was behind a cloud.

She was standing in some uncertainty, thinking that she had gone too far and must go back in order to return to the path, when the loud report of a gun echoed over the hill; and the next moment the body of a man appeared on the very edge of the precipice at the side of the path. For an instant it paused, then fell headlong down—down—down.

Sybil looked up, her hands clasped, speechless from horror. Then the face of another man appeared peering round the big boulder, as if to see whether he had finished his work. Sybil gazed at him like one fascinated, though she was too far off to distinguish the features. Then the face suddenly disappeared, and a wild eddied screech went up to heaven. It was echoed from below. With that one scream Sybil had fallen like a dead woman on the snow.

(To be concluded.)

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