

Serial Story.

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HER LAST ADVENTURE.

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(Author of "What Came Between?" "Under Suspicion," "Fighting a Lie," "Beth Gwyn," "The Shadow Between," etc., etc.)

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CHAPTER I. FATE-DRIVEN.

It was a cold night—cold and windy, with ice lying thick on the frozen roads and hanging like snow to the stiff black branches of the trees and bushes.

It was not late—scarcely seven o'clock—but darkness had settled down early that night, and had brought with it an ugly wind and a sudden storm of sleet that threatened to develop into snow before morning.

Rene Trennant looked round her room with a shiver. Then with a quick movement she stepped to the window and flung it open to the night.

Only half an hour before she had come in with her hat still on, with a blood stained glove tightly rolled in her hand, with a strange grey, frightened face that shrank from the shadows in the room, and hurrying across had drawn both blind and curtain and roused the fire to flame to drive out the hideous darkness of the night.

Now, for a moment, she seemed to have forgotten her terror. She leaned forward listening, her face turned breathlessly to the common that lay at a little distance and to the wood that stretched along one side of it.

Already the little straggling town was still. It was scarcely little more than a village, and only the inn at the top of the street seemed to show any signs of life.

Rene could hear nothing but the wind. It blustered through the trees and over the house, shaking the loose shutters and howling in the chimneys.

The sound made her shiver. It brought back all the ugly feeling of horror and terror and fear that she had felt an hour ago. She drew a long breath and listened again, as if she expected to see across the empty patch of common the desolate wood on the other side—as if she might see under the shadows of the bushes the thing she had seen a couple of hours ago—a face turned upwards to the grey sky with the wind moaning over it, and with the cold wet sleet beginning to moisten its white lips.

She peered forward through the darkness, shivering, shrinking, and yet waiting. What she expected she could not have told. What evil the night would bring she dared not think.

The wind swept on, crying to the darkening night, dying away across the wide common, and she still leant forward, forgetful of the cold, starting wildly at the drifting clouds and sullen sky.

Some flakes of snow falling on her face roused her at last. She raised herself and looked round. It would be thick before morning—thick and white over field and heather and the barren common.

A moment later another paroxysm of fear seized her, and with sudden hands she dragged down window and blind, and turning, shut her eyes to the glow on the floor and crouched before her fire and stared with hollow haggard eyes into its bright depths.

The flames leaped in the chimney, and the light flickered over her white face.

It was a beautiful, strange face; beautiful because of the eyes and mouth, and strange because of the shadows round both. There were lines,

too, that seemed to be out of place there, and a curious look in her eyes that would have startled the children she taught if they could have seen it.

They would have been still more startled, if they could have seen her thoughts—if they could have seen the things she saw—the faces that had stared up from the frozen common at the grey sky above it.

She shivered as she remembered it, and went slowly over the series of events that had brought her step by step to that room on that night with that face before her. She had been Fate-driven. She was Fate-driven still, and her next move lay already pointed out by the papers on the little table beside her.

She crouched closer over the fire, watching the pictures of the last three months of her life as they seemed to rise before her out of the red flames. They were all driving her on—driving her—where?

She shivered again and tightened her lips. Each one of those events had led her to this. Each one had taken her a little farther along the ugly road, until now there seemed only one way before her. She was intended to go on—she was meant to do the thing she shrank from doing, and in her heart she knew that she would do it yet.

The firelight played on her face, making it look hopeless and weary as her thoughts travelled backwards.

The first event had occurred only three months ago! But it seemed more like years since she and Effie Chaloner had been brought together. She remembered it with a shudder—the lonely London street, the dreary autumn afternoon deepening into fog, and the lost and nervous girl who had come to her for help.

They were the only two figures in sight. The fog was thickening over the muddy river, covering the gloomy buildings on the other side, and creeping up silently from the water into the roadway.

In all her miserable life Rene had never felt more miserable than she had done at that moment. There was no hope that day—nothing but deadly misery and despair, and she had stood staring into the river with dark eyes and ugly thoughts when the girl's voice startled her.

She was only inquiring his way, but Rene turned sharply with a feeling that, after all, she had not done with life yet.

She peered through the fog at the girl's bright face, and after she had directed her stood watching as she started across the road.

The next instant she darted forward. A heavy waggon had plunged suddenly through the fog and borne down upon the girl, and an instant later she would have been under the wheels if Rene had not caught her. As it was, the shaft had struck her, and hurled her to the muddy road.

Rene bent and raised her. For a moment she thought she was seriously hurt, but an instant later she raised her head and opened her eyes with a start.

"Oh," she cried with a gasp for breath as she looked up into Rene's face, "you have saved my life! If it hadn't been for you I might have—" She shuddered. "Let us get into a cab," she added nervously. "Oh, it frightens me, this London."

She looked round half helplessly

and clung to Rene's arm with chattering teeth.

"Mother forbade me to come out alone," she added, "but she is partly an invalid, and she was not very well, and I wanted to go so much. Oh, it served me right."

She scrambled to her feet and looked again into Rene's face.

"You must come with me," she added, "You must come and see mother and tell her. Oh, please do come."

It would have been easy to refuse, yet Rene did not. There was something in the girl's face that reminded her of something she had lost, and she yielded. There were more reasons than one why she shrank from accompanying her, but there came to her then, as there comes to most people sometimes in their lives, a feeling that something outside herself was leading her on—driving her to an end she could not see.

She yielded almost helplessly. She was so tired of struggling. She was so tired of life that she scarcely seemed to care what happened now, and as they drove to the hotel she scarcely heard the girl chattering beside her.

She was roused by a hand on her arm.

"Now you must tell me your name," she was saying. "Mine is Effie Chaloner and my brother is Sir Christopher Chaloner, and I'm going to take you straight to my mother, who, of course, is Lady Chaloner. Chris has some business to attend to and we came with him for a week, and that is why we are here. Now your name?"

Rene hesitated, but even as she did so her lips had spoken it.

"Oh, what a pretty name," cried Effie, "and just like you. Rene! It means queen, doesn't it? Oh, you are like a queen."

She was recovering quickly from the effect of her shaking, and she leant forward in the cab to look at her. Rene shivered and turned away a little.

"I would rather not come, if you don't mind," she faltered, "I—I would rather go away—"

Effie clung to her arm.

"No, I'm not going to let you go," she cried. "You don't understand how much you've done to-night, and you must come and be introduced to my mother. I'm not going to let you refuse—oh, you can't refuse."

She turned an eager, girlish face, and Rene yielded helplessly.

A few minutes later she found herself confronting two other faces that were destined to alter her whole life.

The one was an old lady with white hair and faded blue eyes, and the other was a man. Rene's first impression was that he was very tall and stern. When she looked again there

was something in his eyes that sent an odd thrill to her heart. She caught her breath. It was years since a man looked at her like that—years since a man had looked at her so gently as that!

Effie ran forward.

"Oh, mother, oh, Chris," she cried. "I've been nearly killed."

They looked up startled.

"Killed?"

"Oh, mother, it was all my fault for going out myself when you forbade me. I'm awfully sorry, I'm really awfully sorry."

Chris rose to his feet and Effie dragged Rene forward.

"This is the girl who has saved my life," she cried. "Miss Trennant. I got knocked down by a waggon, and she dragged me out from under the horses' very feet. If she hadn't been there I might have been hopelessly hurt, and even then if she hadn't been quick—oh, mother, it frightened me to death. I made her come to you, and here she is, and I'm not hurt a bit—thanks to her."

Lady Chaloner rose to her feet and held out her hand quickly. She was a proud and rather cold woman, but the sudden rush of gratitude made her forget her usual dignity. Whatever Rene was at that moment she did not care. For an instant she forgot herself. Rene felt the blood rush to her face and then die out again. For a moment she hesitated. How could she give her hands to a woman like that—she, with so much that was ugly in her life?

"How can I thank you? My dear girl, you have earned my everlasting gratitude," cried Lady Chaloner.

Her words seemed far away to Rene, and the old grey face that was looking at her so kindly seemed like a face out of a dream.

"There is no need to thank me," she cried. "I—I did what I could. I—I—"

She turned away a little and in so doing met Sir Christopher's grey eyes fixed on her. He, too, held out his hands.

"Indeed it is not worth it," she cried hoarsely. "It was—only a chance. I—anyone else might have done it."

"But anyone else didn't," said Sir Christopher. "It was you who did it. You saved my sister, perhaps from serious hurt, and we shall never know how to be grateful enough."

He looked into her eyes again and something in them sent over him a sudden shadow—a shadow of something that was to come perhaps.

He turned away half uneasily and then looked back at her again, as if she attracted him in spite of himself. Her face was the face of a girl with a woman's sorrow in it. Its beauty was almost irresistible, in spite of her shabby clothes and hat, and almost unconsciously he found himself watching her as she talked to Lady Chaloner. He watched her with an odd feeling at heart as the minutes sped on.

Effie would not let her go. With her usual impulse she had taken a fancy to the woman who had saved her, and for a while Rene let herself drift. There was no harm in it, she thought, and it was so comfortable, so warm, so like what she had known once, a long time ago, and so unlike the comfortless garret she called home.

Her heart fell at the thought of the word home.

"I hope your people will not be anxious about you," Lady Chaloner was saying. Her voice had grown stiff again. "Perhaps they do not mind—I mean they may not be waiting for you or wondering what has become of you."

"Rene's lips set a little." "I have no one to trouble about me," she said, bitterly. "I am all alone in the world."

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