

come—unless, of course, I'm not worth so much trouble!"

"My darling girl," said the Captain, tenderly stroking her hair, at sight of which the other could have killed him there and then, "if you will leave me alone for a minute or two, I think I can find a way out of the difficulty."

Wondering at her lover's serious tone and her cousin's averted look, Helen suffered herself to be coaxed from the room with moistening eyes; and the two men confronted each other once more.

"I owe you a debt of gratitude for keeping silence before her," said Alstone hoarsely, "and now in Heaven's name what is it you want me to do?"

"What I want?" replied Philip sternly. "That you leave the house with me at once and never enter it again."

"Ah!" cried the Captain strangely. "And then?"

"You will sign a written confession of your knavery," pursued Philip, amazed to find himself calmly parleying with the rogue, "and I will book your passage to any part of the world you choose."

"And suppose," replied the Captain with an enigmatical expression, "suppose for a moment I don't choose to agree to these terms?"

"Then," said the other with flashing eyes, "I will expose you publicly, and you'll hardly escape with a whole skin."

"Just one thing more," asked Alstone reproachfully. "Suppose I deny the whole thing?"

"Deny it?" repeated Philip scornfully.

"Yes, suppose I say your charge is false—we may as well play with cards on table—what proof have you? Come!"

"Are you mad? Will it not suffice for me to publish the fact that you have a wife already?"

"But you may publish—and I may deny! You have no proof?"

"Have I not?" replied Philip grimly.

brain he scanned the fatal words once more. God in Heaven, it was true! Not a syllable was there to give the lie to the fellow's impudent explanation; indeed, did not his very coolness show he felt himself secure? His past treatment of his wife,—there was nothing to indicate that she was still living; nay, was not the very contrary implied? Perhaps the wretch could legally marry Helen after all; and the thought drove him to despair.

"We will see what Mr. Gower says," he faltered, catching at the last hope, "whether he will still be content to entrust his only child to the care of such a man—even if you have succeeded somehow in getting rid of your unfortunate wife."

"My dear fellow," replied Alstone, with spirits rising as the other's fell, "had you shown him this letter a month ago, I grant you that he might have hesitated. But now, at the eleventh hour, are you simpleton enough to dream he would take action on a document obviously got up for the occasion! Especially when I deny every word of it!"

Philip listened in a stupor of consternation. He was crushed, he had no more to say. While a groan he staggered to a chair and covered his face with his hands.

The Captain regarded his enemy's collapse with a curious expression of countenance. "And so you see," he pursued remorselessly, "the best thing you can do is to let well alone and welcome your new cousin with open arms."

Philip pulled himself together at the sneer. "You must be the Devil in person!" he cried bitterly. "But at whatever cost to myself I will do my duty. I will show this letter to my Uncle and you can tell him whatever lies you choose. But I dare say you are right. No doubt it is too late and you have

to say—to do! A thousand wild conjectures darted confusedly through his brain. The moments seemed hours until the other returned with a paper in his hand. Without a word he passed it to Philip, only pointing to a brief paragraph, headed, "A Colonial Tragedy." It was a cable from Perth and read as follows: "A notorious resident of Western Australia, known as Captain Alstone, was shot dead outside the Town Hall to-day by his wife, whom his brutality had driven out of her mind."

"What does it all mean?" stammered Philip, striving to collect his scattered thoughts.

"Forgive me, Mr. Gower," said the Captain penitently, "but it seems I have—or, rather, had—a blackguard unclesake, to whom, no doubt, your letter also referred. I was so annoyed at your absurd suspicion—when I did begin to realise what you were driving at—that I didn't tell you your Uncle had been chaffing me unmercifully over dinner about this very paragraph. I thought you, I confess, an impudent meddler, and so I led you on. It was cruel, it was wicked, and now that I understand you better, I humbly beg your pardon. Come, won't you shake hands?"

At this unexpected dispelling of the clouds, Philip experienced a whole world of conflicting emotions. He felt—he knew—it was true, and the Captain's every word carried conviction with it. What an ass he had made of himself! And yet how immeasurable the relief to feel that Helen was not to marry a scoundrel after all!

"Can you forgive me?"—he grasped the proffered hand—"I wish you every happiness!"

Could Helen have chosen a more opportune moment for her return! She was delighted beyond measure to witness the good understanding between the two men.

"I'm so glad!" she cried, gleefully clasping her hands. "So you've managed to

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And producing once more the letter he had hastily concealed on Helen's entrance, he read out the damning passage with due emphasis:

"Your inquire whether I know anything of a Captain Alstone of these parts. Well, rather! Who doesn't, out here? There may be bigger scoundrels in the Colony, but so far I haven't come across one. Why, his past treatment of his wife alone would suffice to ensure him a good horsewhipping, if he ever dares to show his face in the neighbourhood of Perth again. But what makes you ask about the fellow?"

As he read, he had the satisfaction of seeing the baffled fortune-hunter's face turn all colours; and the singular smile that seemed to lurk at the corner of his mouth only confirmed Philip's opinion of his utter heartlessness.

"All this is very fine, I admit," was his comment, submissive enough, apparently, yet not entirely free from a suspicion of insolence. "But isn't there a little flaw in your piece de conviction?"

Philip could but stare at the speaker in vague disquietude.

"Assuming, entre nous, that I have been married before—"

"Ah!" interjected the other in disgust. "It doesn't by any means follow my wife is still alive—"

"What?" cried Philip, aghast at this unreamed-of possibility.

"And, as a matter of fact, she isn't!" resumed Alstone with brazen effrontery. "So, pray, why shouldn't I marry again if I choose?"

"It's a lie!" cried Philip fiercely. "I don't believe it—no, not one single word!" But the blood flying from his cheeks betrayed him.

With bewildered eyes and swimming

nothing to fear—nothing," he added half to himself, "save one thing."

"And that is?" bantered Alstone.

"If," cried Philip, rising and looking the other unflinchingly in the face, "if you are going to wreck the life of a pure and innocent girl; if, whatever you may have been guilty of in the past, Helen is to be sacrificed too, after the same fashion—then I will follow you even to the other end of the world—"

"Thanks!" interjected the Captain, ironically.

"—and shoot you like the dog you are! And this I swear, so help me God!"

At this he raised his right hand solemnly and for an instant let it rest lightly, not menacingly—upon the other's shoulder; then turned aside with a catch in his throat.

"In the name of all that's sacred," cried the Captain in amazement, not unmingled with respect, "what is this business of yours?"

"It is my business," exclaimed Philip with unconcealed emotion, "for I love Helen, and I have loved her all my life. Now you know!" And he gazed defiantly at the other.

Then to his astonishment he saw a change creep over the Captain's features; saw him, too, deeply moved, and filled with undisguised remorse. "By heaven!" cried this one, feelingly. "How I have misjudged you! You are a far better man than I. Can you forgive me?"

Philip could hardly believe his ears, and stared at the Captain distrustfully.

"Wait but a moment," resumed the latter, earnestly, "and I will show you what will save you the trouble of disturbing Mr. Gower at all." And he hastily left the room.

Philip gazed after him with his head in a whirl. What was the Captain going

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