

be that again. Tears of repentance had washed away the bitterness and the hardness, but death must close them forever before they could regain anything of their lost heritage of joy.

Lina murmured an apology for coming at so late an hour, mentioning Netta's name.

"You are a friend of Miss Casserley. A friend of hers is welcome at any hour. She has been very kind to me."

"It would be hard not to be kind to you, you are so very lovely."

The girl's dark brows contracted, a pained expression indicated that the compliment was distasteful.

"I am sure that would not make any difference with her," she said slowly. "She found me poor and sick and friendless, she did for me all that a noble woman might do for a little lost sister of her own. But she has done the same thing for many other girls, so it was not because I made any special appeal to her. I have heard such splendid things of her since I've been here—things you could never get her to tell about herself."

The simplicity and candor of this lovely Agatha Crane appealed to Lina even more than her beauty. She felt moved to emulate it—piqued a bit, too, perhaps, by the girl's praise of Netta.

"I cannot let you go on thinking that I am a dear friend of Miss Casserley's—we had not seen each other for years until this morning. We were constant companions at school and afterwards, until Netta began to disapprove of me."

"Disapprove of you? What awful thing did you do that gentle Miss Casserley could find bad enough to be harsh about? But there—I did not mean to be rude. You must not tell me—"

"But I shall. Your interest was quite natural. Netta was very cordial when we met this morning. Perhaps she has found she was wrong and is inclined to be more lenient towards what she once regarded as a capital crime. You see, I wrote a book that was not at all to her liking. I can hear her yet pleading with me not to try to publish it. You would not have thought her gentle then. When every argument failed to shake her determination not to waste the result of so much thought and labor, she turned on me in a passion. 'Suppose it should send souls to hell?' she cried. 'Are you willing to pay a price like that?' Silly and absurd, wasn't it? But I was right not to listen to her—that book made my name and fortune."

The sick girl turned her head quickly and looked at her. Lina had seated herself out of range of the gaze which somehow disconcerted her.

"I think that must be why she mentioned you to me yesterday. We were talking about books, and I told her that it was a book, an evil, fascinating story, that led to my first false step."

"And she told you she knew a woman who wrote that kind of books?" Lina's laugh was not exactly pleasant.

"Oh, no, no! She said only that you were gifted and very successful and that she would like to have you come and see me. It was kind of you to come—here."

A sudden presentiment, a vague agitation, a something she knew not what, impelled Lina to instant flight. But an uncontrollable desire to learn why Netta so wished her to know this girl's history held her.

"Tell me about this book, dear. Was it very dreadful?" She leaned over and straightened the ruffled pillows and lifted Agatha up a little so that she could talk with more ease.

"It wasn't dreadful at all—that was the cleverness of it. It was full of life and joy—no, not joy—gaiety, and the kind of gaiety that I have found to be just noise, sounds to drown the cries of anguish that the world must not hear. It told you things without quite telling them, and you wondered if you knew them and wanted to know more. A laughing sneer ran through it, making all the good safe things seem childish and foolish. There was the sparkle of wine in its brilliant sentences, and its characters did and said such clever and wonderful things under the exhilarating influence of wine that I, who wanted more than anything else to do clever and brilliant things, began to blush for my prudishness. Oh, perhaps no one else of all the thousands who read that book was so weak and so easily influenced as I, but for me it opened a door,

and I looked through, timidly at first, but full of curiosity about many things that it made fascinating and of whose existence I had known nothing until then. I took one step down the shimmering pathway to see what lay on either side, and hands grasped me and drew me on. And then it was too late. I couldn't find the way back. There was nothing for me but to dance down to death on the way my feet had strayed."

A hectic flame burned in either cheek.

"Oh, my dear, you shouldn't have told me! And I shouldn't have let you."

Lina's haughty, self-complacent calmness was shaken to the depths. She knew now why she was here. But she must know beyond a doubt.

"The name of the book? What was it?"

"*Birds of Paradise*. An innocent name enough, was it not?"

A blaze of hot anger against Netta for sending her here dried Lina's tears as they threatened to fall and betray her. Was she responsible for every weakling who attempted to imitate the characters in her book? Must she employ her talents in depicting only the straight-laced and decorous, deviate not all from the goody-goody subjects that satisfied Netta and her kind?

Then her eyes fell upon the spent form upon the bed, on the white beautiful face where Death's gray shadow rested; and she was ashamed and humbled and afraid. She looked away to hide the tears that suddenly blinded her, and her eyes fell upon a crucifix showing dimly on the white wall. On the other side, when she turned from that, was the Good Shepherd, a touching picture of the compassionate Christ with His lost lamb in His arms.

Oh, why were these things crowding in upon her now? She had put them away with the old times. They were simple things that had no place in the new sphere she had chosen. She had meant to go back some time—when the world had given her all she wanted; but the desire had grown fainter and died and left her a workling utterly. Now she was here like a shaken reed in the midst of these sacred symbols, with the terrible evidence of her malign power lying before her—her triumphs empty, her pride abased.

She felt Agatha's cold hand on hers.

"Are you going, Miss Gilson? I am sorry that I made you feel so badly. I never spoke of that to anyone, except to Miss Casserley yesterday. I don't know what made me. I was thinking just now what a power for good a book might be, since one can be such an influence for evil. I am sure your stories are like that, helpful and good and uplifting."

With a strangled sob Lina sank to her knees.

"My dear, oh, my dear, will you try to forgive me? They are not good—they are like that first one—all of them."

"You mean—you cannot mean you wrote the *Birds of Paradise*?"

Lina bowed her head miserably. To her dying day she never forgot the look on the girl's face.

"May the good God forgive you!" she said softly after a while.

She lay with closed eyes and Lina thought she would not speak to her again and got up to go away. But the wide, tired eyes opened and smiled at her, and Lina's heart was wrung for the quenching glory of them.

"I think I could die happy if you would promise me never to write a book like that again. Will you promise me? Is it asking too much?"

"I do promise you! And I will do all I can to help Netta undo the harm that has been done—atone for it by helping in her brave work."

And Lina, who a few short hours before had been self-satisfied, proud of many things, was grateful for nothing so much as for the kiss of forgiveness from a humble, repentant sinner.



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