

The Fatal Woman
by Elizabeth Campbell

There are few events of my life that I remember more distinctly than my first meeting with Adelaide Cornelli. She was then a girl of nineteen, and strangely beautiful; she was of American birth, but of Italian parentage upon the father's side; her mother was a lovely, delicate New England girl; and Adelaide united in her own fair person the ethereal grace peculiar to American women, with the more luxurious beauty of the Italian race.

Signor Cornelli, although of noble birth, had for many years gained a livelihood as first tenor of an opera-troupe. Such had been his position when he married Adelaide's mother; but at length, by the death of a sordid relative, he was put in possession of a princely fortune. He said adieu to his artistic life, of course; but he did not leave the land which had been so kind to him, and whence he had found a wife. He took up his abode permanently in one of the beautiful New England towns, where he lived like a king, and entertained all whom he knew in a manner befitting his rank. With such a host of advantages, it will be understood at once that Miss Cornelli could number her admirers by hundreds; but out of all the men who professed love for her and entreated her favor, I conscientiously believe that not one was actuated by a single thought of the great wealth to which she would be heiress. She was loved for herself alone; there was about her a sort of magic, that enthralled the very soul, and drove to despair the many who loved and wooed in vain. And even so early as at the time of my first acquaintance with her, she was looked upon almost as an object of terror as well as adoration. It was fatal to love her. For, up to that time, every man who had confessed love for her, was dead. Yet this horrible fatality, while it repelled, also attracted suitors—among the rest my dearest and most intimate friend, Albert Gowerie; and it was in this manner that I made the acquaintance of Miss Cornelli.

"I love her, Fred.," Gowerie concluded, after relating to me many facts I have hinted at. "Love is too cold a word—I adore her; but yet, I must confess, with a certain feeling of dread. For I cannot disguise from you that it fills me with horror to hear every few weeks or months that another of those who have loved and wooed Adelaide Cornelli is dead"; and arm-in-arm we issued into the street, and took the direction to Signor Cornelli's residence.

It happened to be a sort of friendly reception night—that is, it was not an occasion of ceremony, but many friends had, by chance, found their way into the drawing room of Cornelli's, and I saw Adelaide under the most favorable circumstances, for she was exerting herself to the uttermost to entertain a goodly company of her father's friends. I narrowly watched her greeting to Albert. To a watchful eye there certainly were signs of a warmer feeling than friendship on her part. During the whole evening I continued to watch her as narrowly as I could, without attracting attention; and contrasting her manner to Albert with her manner toward other gentlemen then present, I felt convinced that she was more than interested, and would soon be deeply in love with him.

As we walked home, I said as much, and he gave vent to his joy with all the enthusiasm of his nature.

“But think deeply, my dear fellow,” I said, earnestly; “before you confess your love to this extraordinary girl—remember the terrible fatality which follows all those who love her.”

“And what is my life to me without her love? Nothing—less than nothing. I would willingly risk it for a single kiss from her dear lips. But you forget one fact—all of those poor unfortunates—but I cannot speak of them, it is really too dreadful—but they were all rejected suitors. And you encourage me to hope that she loves me in return.”

“I do indeed think so; and truly, that is a great point in your favor in every respect. I only implore you to assure yourself that she does love you, before you make a confession that may imperil your life.”

“Don’t be superstitious, old fellow—after all it cannot be anything but an extraordinary succession of accidents; and, anyway, I never will have the courage to tell my love till I am satisfied that an answering fire burns in her heart for me.”

With these words we parted, wishing each other a hearty “good-night;” and it was several days before we met again. In the meantime, a few chance words had revived the subject of Miss Cornelli’s dangerous fascinations in such a way, that I again heard herself and her unfortunate suitors discussed.

“How much of all this is true?” I asked, affecting incredulity, for I desired to learn everything about her that was likely in any way to affect my friend Gowerie.

“Every word of it!” exclaimed a youth who made one of the party in which the subject was talked about.

“No, gentlemen, nor every tenth word of it,” said another, joining in the conversation for the first time since Miss Cornelli’s name had been introduced; and everyone turned attentively toward the speaker.

He was a tall, dark, very handsome Italian, named Cesare Bellini, and a frequent visitor at the house of Signor Cornelli.

“Pray, then, Signor Bellini, give us the only true and reliable information on this subject—for no doubt you alone possess it,” retorted the youth who had undertaken to answer my question, glancing scornfully toward the Italian.

“Well, gentlemen,” began Bellini, slowly, and not even glancing toward the last speaker, “though I question the good taste of making this lady and her affairs the subject of public gossip, for the sake of giving you the most correct idea of this mystery, I will enter into a brief statement of facts. It is unnecessary to comment upon Miss Cornelli’s attractions,

nor on the number of her admirers—in both cases their names are legion. But in the course of three years it is known that ten young men, whose own want of discretion made the matter public, have proposed marriage to Miss Cornelli; and in the course of three years each of these ten gentlemen has strangely come to his death. I say strangely, because that is the general impression with regard to the matter, but let us consider for a few moments. Out of a hundred men of various ages and conditions in life, who are constant visitors at the house of my friend Cornelli, is it natural to suppose that only ten have, in three long years, summoned up the courage to try their chances for the hand of the fair Adelaide? Such a supposition is absurd. Is it not far more reasonable to suppose that fifty have set their hopes upon a cast—that fifty have been refused; and that ten out of this fifty, all of them young, rash, and crossed in love for the first time, have grown desperate, and so invited death in the various forms in which that grim tyrant waits upon recklessness and desperation? Be assured, gentlemen, this is the natural and simple explanation; and Miss Cornelli is no more fatal than all beautiful and fascinating women must be to us who have the proper appreciation of these attractions.”

The Italian ceased speaking, and dismissed the subject with a light wave of his slender dark hand; and carelessly lighting a cigar, smoked in silence for some time, and then rose to leave the company.

I also rose, for I had sent Gowerie word that I would probably meet him that evening at Cornelli's. Finding that we were going in the same direction, Bellini and myself both wished our companions “good-night,” and issued forth together.

We had not much conversation by the way. I thought seriously on all that the Italian had said; and his words seemed to me to contain much common sense and reason; and I was comforted for the sake of Albert. After all, how absurd it seemed to ascribe any special fatality to Miss Cornelli, because, in the course of so long a time as three years, and out of more than a hundred well-known admirers, ten had chanced to die. I dismissed the chilling thoughts that had hitherto oppressed me, and warmly congratulated my friend on the prospects of his great good fortune.

When we entered the drawing room, we found it almost deserted. There was no one there but Adelaide and Albert; and judging from the delicate confusion of the lady's fair face, that the lover had perhaps ventured on declaring his passion that very evening, I wished heartily that I had remained away.

To remedy my mistake, if possible, I hurriedly inquired for Signor Cornelli, declaring that I was most anxious to see him.

“I would find him in the library if I would venture on going alone,” was the smiling reply.

And I turned to Bellini, determined to take him with me; but the words died on my lips before I could speak them. At a single glance I read the Italian's story. He loved Adelaide Cornelli, and hated Albert, whom he now saw to be a rival, and a successful one. The

fiendish expression vanished from his face when he felt my gaze upon him. The ordinary cold, quiet smile returned; but there was that in his deep, darkly-gleaming eyes that boded no good to Albert Gowerie. I did not go in search of Signor Cornelli; indeed, I sat down at a little distance, and gave my undivided attention to the task of watching Signor Bellini. This I continued to do, not only during the whole of that evening, but for many a day to come; and the event showed that my suspicions of Bellini were but too well grounded.

I did not get an opportunity of exchanging even a word alone with Albert that night. When we left Cornelli's, Bellini left with us, and he stuck to me like my shadow; but when I bade Albert good-night I understood from the cordial and significant grasp of his hand that he was a happy and accepted lover.

Early on the following day I found my friend. His first words were:

“My dear Fred., I am the happiest fellow living. She loves me, and has told me so; and we are to be married as soon as her father will permit of our union.”

I was loath to dash his happy spirits by even a word of warning, but I felt too seriously what was my duty in the matter; and, after warmly expressing my delight at his happiness, I said, earnestly:

“My dear Albert, be on your guard against an enemy which your good fortune has made for you. Signor Bellini loves Miss Cornelli, and hates you.”

“Nonsense—you are dreaming!” he exclaimed, incredulously.

“I am in serious earnest, my Albert, and I beg that you will believe me so.”

“You have surely grown strangely superstitious, Fred. All this stupid talk about Adelaide and her lovers has affected your nerves. Bellini jealous of me!—Bellini an enemy of mine? It is impossible!”

I began to get out of patience at his incredulity, and retorted sharply that he would do well to observe for himself if he understood the meaning of an Italian's hate, or valued his own life enough to preserve it.

Seeing me so much in earnest, Albert became somewhat infected with my suspicions and fears; and having brought him to that frame of mind, I extorted a solemn promise from him that he would be constantly on his guard against Signor Bellini.

I then left him; and reflected seriously on what might be the best safeguard for him. After much thought I could determine on nothing better than to keep a constant watch upon the jealous man.

I think Bellini suspected me from the first: unerring instinct, coupled with the fact that he knew I had closely observed his face during the exhibition of his first jealous fury, told him that I was dangerous to any purposes he might have against Albert.

I watched long and patiently before I obtained any further evidences of his hate to Miss Cornelli's lover. His command over his countenance was something wonderful; he never once betrayed himself even by a look, from the night before referred to up to the time when it became publicly understood that Albert and Miss Cornelli were betrothed, with the full consent of everybody concerned in the marriage.

But this announcement proved too much for him. Once more he betrayed his passion and his jealousy; and, as before, I happened to be the only one who witnessed the agonized convulsion of his countenance. He quickly subdued all outward signs of his agitation, and, with devilish hypocrisy, he crossed the room to where Albert was standing, and taking his hand within both of his, as though he had been a woman, he warmly congratulated him on his approaching marriage. But his eyes were not so much under his control as the rest of his countenance, and the expression of them did more to convince Albert of the truth of my suspicions than all I had been able to say on the subject.

From that time forth I watched Signor Bellini with the eyes of a lynx. So well did I watch him that I knew how he spent his every waking hour from his rising in the morning till his lying down again at night. And people at last began to remark upon my vigilance, and then for policy I was obliged to diminish a little.

One evening as I took my way from the part of town in which I lived toward the house of my friend, I thought I recognized Miss Cornelli coming out of a house at a little distance. I knew the inmates of that house to be poor and wretched; and she had, no doubt, been upon some mission of charity. The evening was closing in, and she walked rapidly in the direction of her home; but I walked more rapidly, that I might overtake and offer her my escort. I was just about to accost her, when a figure emerged suddenly from the shadow of another house, and approached her quickly; and, as I recognized the voice of Signor Bellini the instant he spoke, I blessed the gathering dusk that hid me from observation.

"You are out late, Adelaide," he said, in low and tender tones, offering his arm with much deference.

She took his arm carelessly, as she would have taken that of any acquaintance, and answered indifferently:

"Yes, one of my poor people detained me rather longer than usual; but everybody knows me here. I am safe to walk about at any hour."

"Still, I hope you will not deny me the pleasure of taking you home?"

"Surely not; as you have chanced to meet me, I am glad enough of your company, Signor."

Bellini did not reply, and they walked on for some distance in silence.

I walked lightly behind them; and if this was eavesdropping, I felt fully justified in the course I was pursuing. Not a word was spoken again till they came to a common, across which it was customary to make a “short cut” to Signor Cornelli’s house, situated about half a mile beyond.

Bellini did not ask his companion if she desired to cross the common; but acting as if she had already expressed that wish, walked straight ahead without pausing. But when they had reached about the middle of the common, he suddenly stopped short and addressed her, answering the last words she had spoken to him. I also stopped short; and fearing that if they looked around, though it was now almost dark, that they might discover me, I lay down flat upon the ground.

“It has not chanced for me to meet you, Adelaide,” said Bellini. “I have watched and waited for this opportunity for weeks—for months. I prayed you for a private interview, but you refused me; and now I have conquered your refusals by taking that which you would not willingly bestow on me.”

Miss Cornelli drew her hand from his arm; and, with a haughty “good-evening, Signor,” was about to walk on. But the Italian laughed slightly, and caught her arm in his strong, nervous grasp. She made one effort to free herself; and finding that impossible—too proud to struggle—she remained immovable, and looking on him with calm and haughty scorn.

“Yes, hate me, Adelaide,” he said, answering that look. “Since you cannot love me, you can at least hate me. I will not detain you long; there is no cause for fear; I will not harm you. Words are the only weapons I will use to you. Adelaide, when three years ago you refused to marry me, I then swore that I would not survive your preference for another man, and I will keep my oath. I also swore that I would not be the only victim to hopeless love for your sweet eyes and your fair face. I have already kept that oath. The path that I must soon tread has been worn smooth for me by others whose peace you wrecked, whose hearts you broke. Allan Grantly left my room that night when he walked across the bridge over the river here below—the river from which his dead body was picked up the next day. It was a kindness to the poor wretch when I furnished him with the liquor that sent him reeling to his death. It was into my ear that George Frankfort poured the woes of his blighted heart, and it was my counsels that led him to that bottle of laudanum which stilled his throbbing brain. I, too, sympathized with William Moreton, and bought the pistol that served for his quietus. Robert Harkinson, Thomas Lalor, Sidney Fullerton, Hiram Lowe, Adam Budworth, James Snyder, George Armstrong—I played the sympathizing friend to all. I could afford to sympathize. My heart was broken too, and they were as miserable as myself. Each and all went hot from my counsels to the several deaths by which they gained peace and rest. And last of all, I, too, shall be at peace. Yes, girl, well may they call you fatal—well may they tremble at the sight of that more than mortal beauty—for to love you is to die.”

He paused for a moment, and drew from his breast a pistol. During his words I had gradually crawled closer and closer, till I was now almost at their feet; and I raised myself slightly, ready to defend the now trembling girl at the first appearance of danger to her.

“Do not tremble, Adelaide; you know that I would not harm a hair of your head to save whole multitudes of lives. But here at your feet I am determined to die; it is the one ray of joy that has shone on my wretched life since you blighted it. Make no outcry—to call for assistance is vain. Long before help could come this will have ended all.”

And he calmly placed the pistol against his forehead. He had released her arm and was now kneeling at her feet. He clasped her hand and pressed it passionately to his lips.

“You will forgive me this one caress, Adelaide,” he said, piteously,—“the first and last. I can now die almost happy. As I loved you, so did I hate the man you loved. I could not live to see you his; and I could not die and leave him to possess you. He is dead!”

A piercing shriek rang out upon the still night air. I was on my feet with the speed of lightening, and only in time to catch the inanimate form that was falling to the earth; and then, before that shriek died away, a flash—the report of a pistol—and a cloud of white smoke—and all was still.

Miss Cornelli lay in a deep swoon upon my arm, and all my efforts to revive her were vain. The Italian was stone dead. He had not even uttered a groan. I raised the insensible form of the poor girl in my arms, and bore it with all possible haste toward her home; and as I realized my own loss in the terrible words that had wrought her woe, I burst into tears for the young, generous, warm-hearted boy whose life all my care had not been able to protect.

I had not gone far when I was met by an army of servants from the house of Signor Cornelli; they had been out in search of their young mistress, and the cry, followed by the pistol shot, had brought their trembling feet in the right direction. Signor Cornelli was close behind them; and when I saw and recognized his companion I began to doubt the evidence of my senses, and to think all that had happened within the past hour but a horrible nightmare.

Albert Gowerie, at sight of his beloved, lying pale and death-like in my arms, rushed forward with a terrible cry and threw himself at my feet, passionately weeping over and kissing her cold hands.

“Be comforted, Albert. She is quite unharmed. This is but a swoon, caused by the shock of hearing that monster say that you were dead.”

“Not dead, thank God! but alive and well, to punish the would-be murderer, and to protect her from him.”

“He is past all punishment, now, Albert.”

“Dead?”

“Dead, by his own hand.” I then hurriedly related the circumstances; several of the men, at orders from Signor Cornelli, approached the scene of the tragedy and took charge of the dead body.

Miss Cornelli began to show signs of reviving, and as I could not summon up nerve enough to witness the scene between her and Albert when she should recognize him, I retired to some distance where I could neither see nor hear what took place.

As I afterwards learned, the awakening to consciousness was much more natural than could have been supposed. The poor girl, unclosing her eyes and finding her lover beside her, forgot the immediate cause of her late terrible grief and seemed to fancy she had awakened from sleep.

“O, Albert!” she cried, clasping him tightly in her arms, “I have had such a terrible, terrible dream!” and she began to weep, which quieted her greatly. She then looked around, seemed to realize everything, and with an awful shudder shaking her whole form looked back again at Albert, as if fearing that she might not see him. But his deep eyes, overflowing with tender love, rested on her face, and she uttered a great cry of joy and rose to her feet.

“Thank God, you live! you live!” she said; “and he lied, even with his last breath.”

At this moment I approached again, and heard the explanation of Albert’s most welcome but unexpected presence there.

“Yes, darling,” he said, “the miserable man lied indeed, though he knew it not. He had attempted my life, and, as he supposed, successfully. Intending to visit you tonight, I went this afternoon in search of the lilies you had been wishing to have; and as I returned, it being a beautiful evening, I left the country road along which I was leisurely walking, and struck into a small wood a few miles from here, for the pleasure of walking among the trees, and now and then gathering the beautifully tinted leaves, which I knew you greatly admired. You may imagine my surprise when, from behind one of the trees, suddenly emerged Signor Bellini, and before I had time to realize he was before me he drew a pistol and discharged it directly in my face. By merciful interposition of Heaven I at that moment fell heavily forward, for I had tripped in an old root, and so by falling escaped my death. I lay perfectly still, for I had no weapon, and my first defense was caution. The Italian, never doubting that he had killed me, hastened away; but I lay still for nearly a quarter of an hour without moving. At last I rose, returned to the highroad, hired a horse at the first farm-house I came to, and rode with all possible speed to Signor

Cornelli's, for now I feared for your safety, dearest. But the insane villain was ahead of me, it seems. I found you not at home, and, much alarmed, we set forth in search of you—and, thank God! we have found you, safe!”

After these alarming occurrences Miss Cornelli and Albert were more tenderly attached, if possible, than they had been before; and Signor Cornelli himself hastened the wedding day. They were married and from that hour Albert has never had any reason to regret that he loved the fair being whose beauty had, in part, proved fatal to so many.

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