The Fatal Marriage

"Your future is dark. I see much trouble for you. I see bloodshed, violence, and worst of all, murder! I—"

With a piercing cry, Inez Opher drew her hand from the clasp of the gipsy woman, who flung the silver at her feet, darted into an adjacent thicket of pines, and was lost to view. She had noticed the girl, had begged to tell her fortune, and this was the result. Pale, trembling in every limb and with staring eyes, the girl turned to her humble home, in the yard of which she was then standing. As she crossed the threshold, her mother a stern-looking woman, met her. She did not notice her daughter's agitation, but exclaimed—

"Your uncle John Morton, will be here this evening. You must take care not to offend him, as he is very peculiar. I have not seen him for almost twenty years; but he has not forgiven my foolish marriage, I feel sure."

Her daughter sank into the nearest seat, and her large gray eyes wandered wearily over the scanty furniture of the room.

"He is wealthy, is he not?" she asked, in low measured tones.

"Yes, indeed."

"Then, mother, this visit means something to us. Oh, how I hate poverty!"

"I am glad to hear you say that, for you must see at once how foolish it is for you to encourage Guy Barton. You cannot afford to marry a poor man; so you must give him up."

The girl turned pale, and a strange expression passed over her face. She moved uneasily in her chair, as she said, with an effort—

"That will be hard."

"Pshaw! Don't be a fool," was the brusque reply. "You are handsome enough to marry wealth and position, and you must do it. There is no doubt but that this visit of your uncle will change your whole life. Hear my past history and learn from it. Prior to my marriage I was a reigning belle, admired by all. I lived with my brother, John Morton, the wealthy planter. Among my admirers was Robert Opher, your father, a man of talent, but poor. He won me, and we were married, when my brother renounced me and drove me from his home. He had set his heart on my making a splendid match, and the disappointment changed him from a genial, hospitable man into a gloomy recluse. Morton Hall has been closed to society ever since. Your father perished in a Northern prison, leaving me penniless. I struggled on as best I could. How I have succeeded may be judged from our present surroundings."

Mrs. Opher spoke rapidly, and watched her daughter closely, but Inez made no reply when she ceased. Just then the conversation was interrupted, and was not resumed.

John Morton arrived that evening. A proud, austere, yet generous man, but unyielding as fate. He allowed no one to defy his authority. The meeting between brother and sister was somewhat formal and constrained, and their words were tinged with bitterness and reproach. But “blood is thicker than water,” and soon they were as tender to each other as of yore. The years of separation had been thoroughly bridged.

When Morton returned, both Inez and her mother accompanied him. He was charmed with his niece, and he at once resolved to make her his heiress, and introduce her into society. The girl bore her new position with dignity. Lifted from poverty into eminence, she remained unchanged. Her uncle seemed only too anxious to repay her for past neglect. He had the hall and grounds renovated; an array of workmen kept the place in confusion for weeks, then, labor done, they disappeared.

Inez had a suit of rooms which were exquisitely furnished; her wardrobe was inexhaustible; her every wish was gratified; the elements which surrounded her were taste, elegance, and wealth. Yet she was not happy. Down in the recesses of her heart was cherished a secret which embittered her very existence.

Inez was sitting in her room one morning, two or three months after her arrival at the hall, wrapped in thought. She had pushed aside the curtains of heavy damask and priceless lace, disclosing a landscape varied and beautiful. The groves of tall pines and magnolias, the thicket of timber which skirted the stream, the long fields of cotton thronged with negroes plucking the fleecy treasure, formed a most beautiful picture. Inside, birds chirped in golden cages, the gold fish darted to and fro in the aquarium, the atmosphere was heavy with perfume and flowers which were arranged with artistic skill throughout the room, and the magic touch of gold was everywhere visible.

A rap sounded on the outer door, and in reply to her invitation, her uncle entered.

“Inez,” he said, as soon as the usual solutions were exchanged, “I have a visitor.”

“Who?” she asked indifferently, and without looking up.

“Guy Barton.”

At the mention of that name the girl started violently. She was no longer indifferent. The color slowly left her cheeks, her very lips grew pale, and her eyes glowed with an expression of positive terror. For a moment she seemed to control herself with an effort.

“What did he say?” she asked huskily.

“Nothing. What could he say?” said Morton sternly.

The girl was silent.

Her uncle sat down beside her and took her hand.

“Inez, this is nonsense. You should have told me of this attachment before. But no matter. I have sent him away, and forever. He is no match for a lady in your position. Besides I have different views for you. Your mother made an unfortunate marriage, and I am determined that you shall not.”

Then he unfolded his plans. He had chosen for her husband Walter Leroy, the son of a neighboring planter, and who had been a constant and not unwelcome visitor at the hall since Inez had been there.

“You are my heiress, Inez,” he concluded, “and I expect you to submit to my authority. When I am dead you will be free to follow your own inclinations.”

These words rang in her head for many days, and afterwards were fraught with terrible significance.

That evening, while she was walking through the grounds, she met Walter Leroy. She grew pale; the magnolia blossoms fell from her hand; she attempted to pass him, but he grasped her hand and held her firmly.

“Release me,” she cried, faintly, struggling to free herself.

“Not until you answer one question,” he said determinedly. “I have spoken to Mr. Morton, and it now remains for you to decide my fate. I love you; will you bid me hope?”

With great effort she wrenched herself from his grasp.

“I cannot listen to you. I am—”

She staggered, murmured some broken sentences, and would have fallen to the ground had he not sprang forward and caught her in his arms and supported her to a seal. Soon she rallied, and drew away from him, while a shudder convulsed her frame. The young man noticed the movement and it stung him sharply.

“Am I so hateful to you,” he said bitterly, “that my presence inspires horror? I fancied a few days since that you regarded me with something like affection.”

“You were not wrong.”

“Is it possible that you love me?”

“It is too true,” was the faint reply.

Leroy knelt at her feet, and so well did he plead his cause that she consented to become his wife, his eloquence apparently banishing her scruples. In glowing terms he pictured their future, and she listened, but said nothing. It was a singular betrothal. Naturally they lingered some time, and when they finally turned homeward, the moon had risen and was flooding the landscape with a soft, delicious light. As they went slowly on he plucked a spray of myrtle, placed it in her hair, and bent over to kiss her. As he did so, and just as their lips met, the report of a pistol rang out,

and with a cry of agony, and tossing up his arms wildly in the air, Walter Leroy dropped senseless at Inez's feet. At the same time the figure of a man dashed through the tangled shrubbery to the left of them, and dashed down the lane.

The girl's wild screams soon brought assistance. Walter was carried to the hall and physicians summoned, who pronounced him badly but not dangerously wounded. Search for the assassin was made, but no trace could be found, and the whole affair was wrapped in the deepest mystery— young Leroy had no enemies, and why his life was attempted in so cowardly a manner was beyond the conjecture of the excited neighborhood.

For a long time his life seemed to hang upon a thread. Inez watched over him with a solicitude that was almost painful. She administered to his every want, no one denying her the privilege. At length the physician pronounced the crisis passed— still Walter seemed no better. On the contrary he grew weaker and weaker, and finally the lamp of life went out altogether. His last breath was spent in bestowing a benediction on Inez— the girl appeared stunned; she uttered no word, she shed no tears.

At the request of Mr. Morton a postmortem was made, and a terrible discovery ensued. The physicians unanimously agreed that Walter Leroy had not died from the effects of the wound, but from the result of slow poison, which had been introduced into his food and medicine surreptitiously.

A season of intense excitement followed. A detective was sent for, who arrived soon after the funeral, and set to work in earnest. The servants were questioned together and separately; but they knew nothing. Inez told what she knew of the case, concealing nothing, and Mr. Morton gave his version with equal candor. The detective then went away.

One week later, Mr. Morton became suddenly ill. The disease baffled the skill of the most profound physicians, and in spite of medical care he died.

The day his remains were consigned to the dust, and the day that witnessed the fulfillment of Inez Opher's hoped for he bequeathed the bulk of his fortune to her, also saw her direst distress and humiliation. For she was arrested and held for trial on the charge of poisoning her uncle and Walter Leroy. Amid intense excitement the girl was conveyed from her sumptuous home to the dismal jail in the neighboring town. Her mother was permitted to accompany her— the country rang with the story of the double crime, and public sentiment ran strong against the wretched girl.

In due time the trial occurred. The prosecution occupied two days in examining witnesses. The testimony, though purely circumstantial, was most damaging. The housemaid testified that she had heard Mr. Morton tell Inez that after he was dead she could follow her own inclination; and on this point the prosecution laid great stress; a vial had been found hidden in Inez's room, which it was claimed had hidden the poison. In short, everything looked dark for the prisoner.

But just as the prosecution was preparing to open the case, a man pushed his way through the crowd that packed the courtroom, and made his way to the judge's seat.

"I want to testify in this case," he said, in a loud voice.

After some discussion he was sworn. He said his name was Guy Barton.

“That woman,” said he, pointing to Inez, “is my wife. We were secretly married more than a year ago, and it has been a fatal union. She is guiltless of this crime. She has no conception of sin.”

He paused. A death-like silence reigned throughout the room. He raised a vial to his lips, drank its contents, and said:+

“I committed that crime. I had intended that she should suffer for it; but at the last moment I repented and came here to confess all. I need not detail how I crept into the house and made sure of my victims; how I sought and succeeded in casting suspicion on an innocent woman. It is enough to know that I am the murderer! Gentleman, I haven’t long to live. I was swallowed a deadly poison, and am now beyond human power. I—“

He staggered as he spoke, and dropped into a seat. He had played for revenge, had won; and yet aided justice to triumph.

A wild scene followed— a scene which our pen is too feeble to depict, so we will draw a veil over it. Within an hour Guy Barton was dead, and Inez was free. But the memory of the dreadful peril into which her first false step led her was never banished from her mind.

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