

## *The Victim of a Plot*

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Not many years ago, a lady, whom I had known long and well, fell a victim to selfishness. Young, beautiful, accomplished, she had many friends. She was married to a gentleman whom she loved devotedly. Previous to her marriage, in order to support a widowed mother, she connected herself with a fashionable millinery establishment, and by her cultivated taste and exquisite skill, soon rendered herself indispensable. Although retired from society, there were many in it who still remembered her as the accomplished daughter of a wealthy merchant, honoring her independence of character and applauding her filial piety. In time she won the affection of the gentleman whom she subsequently married, and, much to the surprise and dissatisfaction of her employer, announced her intention of speedily withdrawing from the establishment. Every inducement was offered her to change her resolution. It was frankly admitted that her place could not be supplied; the lady said that custom would desert her, and ruin would follow on the heels of the separation. These considerations induced her to remain until her place could be supplied; but it did not interfere with the marriage—that took place as announced. Finding that the lady was determined to go, the proprietress conceived the most bitter dislike for her, while yet maintaining an appearance of friendship. The innate selfishness of her nature was aroused, and she thought bitterly of the lady who preferred her own happiness to the interest of her employer. She imagined herself greatly injured, and brooded long and ardently over some plan of revenge. She cared not if it wrecked the character of her victim and destroyed in their bloom all the flowers of her life. Treacherous, vindictive and passionate, her evil mind planned a cruel wrong and carried it out unrelentingly.

The proprietress had in her possession some costly laces, which she prized above all things in her house. They were very beautiful, and many a fair votary of fashion had offered fabulous prices for them. One morning these laces were reported to have been stolen, and incredible as it appeared to her friends, the young wife was accused of the larceny. I shall never forget the look of indignant surprise, the immeasurable scorn with which she received the accusation. She stood before the officers like some young Pythoness, her great eyes flashing and the tall slender form drawn to its fullest height. I had seen criminals in many disguises, the young, and beautiful, the rich; but none ever so counterfeited virtue, or masked themselves in innocence so effectually. I would have staked my life upon the lady's innocence. But our convictions could not aid her in this straight, or prove to those who were already prejudiced the convictions in which we were already certain.

Her trunks were searched, and the laces found in them. Until then she had treated the charge with scorn, but now her feelings underwent a change. The indignant blood that had strained neck and face receded, and the poor creature, with a cry like despair, sunk sobbing, on the floor. To the careless and unthinking, the proof seemed so clear that there was no room for doubt. Her husband stood by uncertain how to act. I hated him from that moment for his vacillation and uncertainty. He should have seen as I had seen that she was innocent. Still, he procured her bail, and tried manfully to procure her acquittal. I worked day and night upon the case, and on the very day of trial, obtained a clue which led to her acquittal.

From the first I believed that the proprietress was the guilty party. There was an uneasy glitter in her eye, a restless uncertain glance [which] showed the meditated wrong. On the morning of the

trial, when every other means had failed, I determined to search her premises, in the hope of finding something. It was a happy thought, for in her escritoire I discovered duplicate keys of the lady's trunk, and a wax impression of the lock. With these I soon ascertained the workman who had made them, and by whose order they had been prepared. With these evidences the proprietress was confronted when she testified on the trial. Never shall I forget her expression of baffled rage and hate when I produced my evidence. She looked more like a demon than a woman, and in look and gesture displayed the intensity of her malice. On the lady the scene had an effect as sad as unexpected. Her reason that had borne such shocks of grief gave way beneath the joy of her acquittal. She rose to her feet, looked with beaming face at her husband, and then before an arm could outstretched to save her, fell fainting to the floor. From that moment she was hopelessly insane. Months went by, and as her reason clouded her body faded away. Not long the restless spirit fretted in the poor frame, and one night she died—died of a broken heart, a victim of a woman's hate.

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