

A Great Peril
by Carl Brickett

“It’s so tedious lying here, Martha, this bright, beautiful afternoon. Haven’t you a long story, something I have never heard before, to tell me to pass the time till papa comes home?”

Old Martha looked up from her sewing, with a fond smile at her young mistress.

“It is too bad, Miss Helen, that you should have sprained your ankle just now the fine weather is here. So you’d like a story? Let me see.”

As she spoke a sudden expression of resolve entered the old nurse’s face, and after looking thoughtful a moment, she said:

“I have one in my mind which I have meant to tell you for a long while. Your papa gave me permission to do so whenever I thought best; but, dear, jealousy and hatred are mixed up in it, and I never like to speak of such things to you. But you are old enough now, and as it is about your mother, it is only right you should hear.”

Helen leaned back against her soft cushions, and Nurse Martha began:

“Years ago, when I was only a mite of a child, Mrs. Grangely—your father’s mother—lost her baby girl. My father was gardener at ‘Mile’s Court,’ as her place was called, and often the sad-faced lady would come to our humble cottage and take me on her knee and pet and caress me. After a time, when I had grown to be about twelve, she asked my mother to let me go and live at the Court. My parents were poor, and as I was one of a large family, they were willing that I should go. Then began a happy life for me. I had little to do save to wait upon the kind lady of the house; and thus quietly and uneventfully the years passed until I was eighteen.

“Mrs. Grangely had one son, but we saw him very seldom, as he was away at college.

“As I have said before, I was your grandmother’s maid; but I was treated more as a confidential friend than as a dependant. So, when the letter came announcing the death of Mrs. Grangely’s sister, and leaving her only daughter in your grandmother’s charge, it was to me that all the preparations and arrangements for her comfort were entrusted.

“I shall never forget the first time I saw Miss Alta. My heart went out to her from that moment. She had a bonny face and the softest, sweetest brown eyes. I was young as was Miss Alta, and thrown together as we were, it was not strange that she soon grew to like me in return for the adoration she could not help but know I had for herself.

“And yet I never presumed upon her kindness; I felt that she was as far above me as the blue sky of heaven.

“She had only been with us a few months when young Mr. Gerald came home for good. Then his mother sent out invitations far and near, and soon the house was gay with girlish laughter and the deep, musical tones of manly voices. I used to love to watch Mr. Gerald and Miss Alta together, and more than once, in my romantic brain, I thought what a handsome couple they would make.

“Among the guests there was only one who could compare in beauty to my mistress’s niece; and I had to acknowledge—even though I had conceived a strange feeling of distrust towards her—that Miss Thalia Rivers was exquisitely lovely. Her father had been called away on business, and he had been only too glad to leave his daughter in the care of one as judicious as Mrs. Grangely. She was a brunette, with radiant dark eyes, and the purist, richest skin. I saw right away that her black eyes regarded my young master with more than ordinary interest; but I saw too that he cared more for my Miss Alta’s winning loveliness than for all the other’s coquettish graces.

“A couple of weeks went by and cards were out for a large party. Mrs. Grangely sent to Paris for her niece’s dress, and two days before the looked-for event it arrived. Miss Alta could not help an exclamation of delight; and any young girl fond of dainty apparel could not have helped being pleased. It was a rose-hued *tulle* robe, looped and draped with wild roses in delicate, trailing sprays; the fine satin slipper, the fan, and gloves were all to match.”

“The evening came and Mrs. Grangely sent me to assist Miss Alta to dress. When I entered her room I started back in surprise. There, lying in torn fragments all over the floor, was the costly robe, while, white with dismay, Miss Alta stood regarding the ruin.

“‘Martha!’ she cried, springing to my side. ‘Who has done this? Only a few moments ago I came to my room and found things as you see them. What will auntie say!’

“Mrs. Grangely was as much at a loss to account for the work of destruction as we were.

“‘Nevermind now, Alta,’ she said. ‘You can wear a white dress—white is always appropriate; but tomorrow I will have this strange thing looked into.’

“The party went off in grand style, as every thing always did at the Court. Miss Rivers, in a pale, pink silk, with her white shoulders and round, baby-like arms bare, was the finest dressed lady there. Miss Alta enjoyed herself, notwithstanding her simple muslin was eclipsed by the many gayer-hued dresses; and if Miss Rivers thought that that evening would certainly bring Mr. Gerald to her feet, she was mistaken; for everywhere Miss Alta went, there he was like a shadow.

“When I helped her to undress, my young lady did not seem to care about talking much, and when I noticed the dreamy, happy look in her brown eyes, I guessed what had happened that evening. No one knew anything about the torn dress, and as time passed and nothing was discovered, it gradually died out of our thoughts.

“One night, after I had retired to bed, try as I would I could not sleep; something seemed to keep

me restless, and finally I arose, thinking I would go down to the dining room and get a glass of water. I stole silently through the hall which led from my room, and began to descend the stairs, when I suddenly paused in astonishment. There, in the corridor below, stood a tall figure wrapped in a white dressing gown; it was Miss Rivers. In her hand she carried a lighted candle, and by its gleam I could see the fierce, wrathful expression which her face wore, and that was what caused my start. Her hair hung in dense masses down her shoulders, and her eyes glowed like coals of fire in her livid countenance.

“What could she be doing, thus standing before Miss Alta’s door, seemingly listening intently?”

“Some sound evidently startled her, for, shading the light with her hand, she suddenly turned and rapidly glided along the hall and into her own room.

“When I once more returned to my bed, slumber was as far from me as ever, and for a long time I lay awake, my mind filled with conjectures as to what could be the meaning of Miss Rivers’ strange conduct. But, at last, my thoughts became confused and I slept. It seemed as if my eyelids had scarcely closed before, in piercing tones, the terrible cry of ‘*Fire!*’ rang out. Rushing from my room I found the halls clouded with smoke and filled with frightened people. It was not long before the fiery element was subdued by the prompt efforts of Mr. Gerald and the servants, and then we learned from Miss Alta that the fire had begun in her room.

“‘I was awakened,’ she said, ‘by a fearful feeling of strangulation; and it was only by a strong effort I could manage to rise and give the alarm. I cannot imagine where it could have originated, as I am always very careful to turn out my light before retiring.’”

“The next day I told my mistress of what I had seen the evening before.

“As I spoke Mrs. Grangely’s face changed and grew very grave.

“‘My good Martha,’ she said, and there was an agitated tremor in her voice, ‘at last I have a clew to the mystery of the torn dress, and of this unexplainable fire. Listen while I tell you something, which, for the poor girl’s own sake, you must not allow to pass your lips. Thalia Rivers’ mother was a school friend of mine, and one whom I dearly loved. Two years after her marriage with Mr. Rivers she became hopelessly insane. Up to this time her daughter has never shown any tinge of insanity; but I fear from what has happened, and from what you have seen, that at last her mother’s fate has overtaken her. I will write immediately to her father; but until he can come for her I must not send her away. Do not speak of this to Alta—it would only frighten her; but, Martha, keep with your young mistress as much as possible, as I am afraid that Miss Rivers cherishes some grudge towards her. Mr. Rivers is not very far away, and at the most it will be but a few days before he can arrive, and then our anxiety will be over.’”

“Two days passed without Miss Rivers making her appearance. She said that she was not feeling well, and would prefer being quiet. So I had not seen her since the night of the fire.

“At last a dispatch came from Mr. Rivers to my mistress, stating that he would be at the Court the following morning.

“That evening Miss Rivers came down to tea. All noticed the feverish glitter of her dark eyes, and the hectic, burning blush upon her usually clear, pale face; but, of course, it was attributed to her indisposition.

“It was a moonlit night, and a party of gentlemen, Mr. Gerald among them, set out to ride to the Falls, some three miles away; while in groups of two or three the young ladies repaired to the garden to await their return.

“‘Run out and get a mouthful of fresh air, Martha,’ said my kind mistress. And, nothing loth, I laid down the book from which I had been reading aloud, and did as I was told. After a long saunter through one of the many flower-lined paths of the Court garden, I turned my steps to the lake. As I drew near the moonlit water I heard sounds in the summer arbor at its edge, and recognized Miss Rivers’ voice; but although I listened, I could hear no answering words. With my heart beating with a quick, strange fear, I hurried to the spot.

“Never shall I forget what I then saw. Leaning against the rustic seat, almost lifeless from terror, and the crushing clasp of the arms, made strong by madness, which grasped her, was Miss Alta; while in rapid tones Miss Rivers, wild with insanity, poured reproach after reproach into her ears—accusing her in angry words of wiling away her lover.

“Trembling with excitement, I approached and laid my hand on Miss Rivers’ arm. Releasing Alta, she turned and confronted me; then, with a laugh of defiance, she flung me aside, helpless before her superior strength, to the farther end of the arbor, and seizing Miss Alta, dragged her through the open door. Then clasping her arms around her inanimate form, with a wild scream she sprang into the lake.

“What happened then I know not; for the terrible events I had been witness to proved too much for my brain, and from that moment all was darkness.

“When I recovered consciousness my mistress sat beside me, and, to my unspeakable joy, I learned that Miss Alta was safe.

“The riding party had returned, and Mr. Gerald, while searching for Miss Alta, had heard the commotion in the direction of the lake, and had hastened there.

“He arrived just in time to see Miss Rivers spring into the water with her unconscious burden. Twice he saw the locked forms sink; but he reached them the third time, and succeeded in bringing them to the shore.

“Miss Rivers was dead; but God in His mercy had spared Miss Alta to us.

“Oh, Miss Helen, that was a fearful time!

“It was sad to watch Miss Alta’s pale face, and to see the hunted, scared look her gentle eyes wore for a long, long while; and it was pitiful to witness the poor father’s grief over the dead body of his child; although he felt as did we all, that for the afflicted girl—the innocent victim of a cureless malady—it was a blessed release.

“But as time passed the bloom came back to my dear young lady’s cheeks, and by and by there was a joyful wedding at ‘Mile’s Court,’ and Mr. Gerald was united to the sweet girl he loved as the apple of his eye, until after many years of happiness, at last the Lord parted them. Do not cry, Miss Helen—your old nurse did not tell you this story to make you sad. Your dear mother was fit for Heaven if ever any one was.

“There—look out of the window—your papa is coming! Now dear, dry your eyes, or he’ll call old Martha to account for bringing gloom into his sunbeam’s bright face.”

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