

A SIREN'S VICTIMS

By Frances Warner Walker.

CHAPTER XXII.

One, two, three minutes passed, and the silence, but for the ticking of the clock upon the mantel, was unbroken.

In vain Grace strove to think. She could only follow the monotonous sound which recorded that the time for which she had prayed was swiftly flying.

She pressed her hands to her eyes to strive for calm and thought. At last she let them fall, and, with a shudder, allowed her gaze to rest upon the man whose dark eyes had not for an instant been withdrawn from her face.

She had felt their glance burn even while her own eyes had been hidden.

"You speak of proof," she said. "What is your proof?"

"Harry Reynolds' confession," was the quiet answer.

The moments for which she had pleaded with Harvey Barclay had not been lost to her. He had planned his campaign; he had drawn up his forces; and now he had given the first fire which opened the battle—the battle where defeat meant death, and victory, life and honor. They were high stakes and not to be lightly forfeited.

Nor had the fire failed of its aim. The shot had sped straight to its mark. Grace quivered convulsively as it tore its way through her poor armor and buried itself in her shrinking flesh.

"Harry's confession!" she repeated. "It could not be, argued her reason. Why should he make confession? This was but a new ruse to extort the truth from me."

Her indignation lent her momentary strength. She proudly threw back her head.

"I tell you that I signed the note, Mr. Barclay. What, then, could Harry confess?"

"Poor child! How poor were the weapons she had at her command! Only her innocence, and youth, and candor against experience, and subtlety, and guile."

As well might a swordman use a wooden sword against a blade of Damascus steel, and hope to win the day.

"Let me tell you the story, Miss Grace," he said. "Perhaps then you will judge me more fairly, and will give me the confidence I shall esteem so high a gift. I have not been, I am not, a saintly man. I have led, as perhaps you know, a somewhat wild and dissipated life. There has been, perhaps, some little excuse for this, in the absence of home ties and woman's influence."

"But let that pass. I will not here make excuses for my faults, only boldly avow them. It is for you, Grace, to wipe out their record, if you will."

"Well, among them, first and foremost, was the vice of gambling. First I played for small stakes, but I lost and got heavily in debt—so heavily that I saw no way to escape from its consequences and entailed disgrace.

"At last, one night I grew desperate, and determined to hazard all—to win all or lose all. I played more recklessly than I had ever played before; but luck had turned. Every card I touched turned into gold.

"Beside me stood a man who lost as I won. It was the man of whom we have been speaking. It was Harry Reynolds. He was no stranger at the gaming table. I had met him often before. But this night he was pale, and like myself, played with a reckless abandon which proved some strong necessity.

"As the pile of gold grew at my place, from time to time he drew upon it. I did not fear him as a creditor. I rose from the table ten thousand dollars richer. He was my debtor half that amount. Text day he sent me a check for the entire sum."

"Grace involuntarily moaned. Piece by piece the proof was fitting into place, and forcing into the doubt which made so brave a fight against it."

"Go on!" she said.

"I will make the story short," he continued. "My luck, from that night turned for the better—his for the worse. From time to time he borrowed money from me until he owed me ten thousand dollars."

"Once my debtor, he seemed to almost dislike and avoid me. I bore with this, for reasons, Grace, perhaps you can understand. At last my luck, too, changed, and I lost—lost—lost. I needed the money I had loaned him. I was forced to ask him for it. He put me off, until I threatened to demand it of his father. He promised then to pay it that same night."

"Again he played, and again he lost. He rose owing the bank a large sum. It was then that he drew this note from his pocketbook and tendered it in payment of the amount. He was well known to the bank officials, and they had no hesitation in accepting it. We were both somewhat under the influence of wine, and at the same time the whole transaction seemed natural to me; but, as we walked out together into the open air, the cold, clear atmosphere sobered him, and dissipated the fumes of alcohol and tobacco which had clouded my brain. We walked a few blocks in silence, and then I turned and, seizing his arm, forced him to face me."

"Harry Reynolds, I said, 'that note you gave the bank just now was a forgery!'"

"The moon was shining above us, and by its light I could see the deadly pallor on his face."

"You lie!" he answered.

"You shall answer to me for that," was my reply; "but first I will prove good my assertion. I will go to Grace Hawthorne in the morning, and tell her the facts in the case."

"His whole expression changed then. His mask of boldness fell. I never saw a man so utterly wretched."

"I think I can straighten matters, and, if the worst comes to the worst, I'll have to go to Grace myself. But keep my secret, Barclay. You've got your money. Leave the rest to me."

"I can't leave it to you," I answered, "for I'm in love with the woman you are robbing."

"Well, Grace, I won't humiliate you by telling you all the story of his pleading; but when we parted, he had sworn to me that he would never touch another card. I could see no good in exposing him to you, and so I promised to keep his miserable secret. Grace, I promised for your sake; for your sake I will still help shield him from the consequences of his act; but I can work no longer without some reward. Again I ask you, will you be my wife?"

"Oh, spare me!" cried the girl. "Spare me, as you spared him. My need of generous pity is even greater. Ask me anything but this, and I will acknowledge the justice of your claim. I will make you rich and impoverish myself; but I cannot marry you!"

"You make me a Shylock, Grace, when I would be a Romeo. You force me to demand my pound of flesh, when I would sue for the fragrance of a passing breath. Yet though I would be tender as Romeo, yet am I unrelenting as Shylock. Promise to be my wife, and I will promise to be a truer, better man. Grace, I have had no chance in life. Give me this chance. Surround me by your love, and let my own for you escape its prison."

"It is impossible!" she answered, shuddering. "I do not, cannot love you! I cannot marry you!"

"And of your refusal you accept the consequences?"

"You will enforce them?"

"It is your own act. Send me from you, with no promise for the future, and I will go to the man who accepted Harry Reynolds' note, and denounce it as a forgery—denounce him as a forger. You say there is not money in the bank to meet it. I will make the whole transaction public. Then save him from the law if you can. You will find the law stronger than all your feeble will. But grant my prayer, and I will have the note renewed. Give me your check for the amount already in the bank, and your own note for the balance, payable in sixty days, and all shall be made smooth, the forged note in your own hands by nightfall, and Harry Reynolds' guilt unproven by this living witness against him. You have now the two alternatives, Grace. Which will you choose? I give you five minutes to decide."

And he pulled his watch from his pocket, and stood holding it in his hand.

"Your decision?" he said, quietly, when the appointed time had expired.

"I will give you the check and note," she answered, in a tone as cold and lifeless as though the dead were speaking. "Bring me the note now in existence, and I will marry you!"

A flash of triumph darted into the dark eyes; a lurid fire, as of a volcano suddenly emitting a sulphurous flame, long-smouldering in the very bowels of the earth.

He took one step forward and involuntarily stretched out his arms.

"Grace, my darling!" he murmured, in ecstatic tenderness.

But, recoiling, she held up her own hands in aversion and abhorrence.

"Not that!" she cried. "Spare me that. It was not mentioned in the bond!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

The clock had struck eleven when, mingled with its last strokes, Grace heard, on the silent street, the sound of wheels which proclaimed the travelers' return.

Already old Andrew stood at his post beside the door, which he threw open as the sound for which he had waited so impatiently reached him as well.

No bell must be rung to-night, no sound be heard within the house. Even that of the wheels was dull and muffled, for the street was strewn with tan, that no noise might penetrate the room where Edgar Reynolds lay fighting his silent fight with death.

"You've come, Mr. Harry. Thanks to God for that!" whispered the old servant, wiping away a tear, as the young man brushed hastily past him into the lighted hall, where he caught sight of the tall, slender figure he knew so well, which seemed uncertain whether to advance in the light or retreat in the shadow.

"Grace!" he said.

At the sound of her name, she came forward.

The night air was still very chill, and fires were lighted through the house; but as he took her hand, though coming himself from the outside air, he felt it cold as marble in his grasp, and even in this supreme moment of anxiety he noticed that she seemed to shrink from his touch.

Poor child! Doubtless it was owing to all the anxiety she had been compelled to bear alone.

"Your telegram reached me just in time, dear," he said. "An hour later, and I should have called. My father? How is he?"

"The doctor gives us little hope. Doctors Hope and Agthorpe both are with him now. They have sent for Dr. Thorne in consultation."

She turned toward Helen as she spoke, who had followed her husband into the house. She, too, was very pale, and the yellow pupils were dilated with a strange expression of mingled excitement and fear.

She looked about her, as if expecting to witness some transformation which had been effected in her absence.

"An hour later, and I should have called." The words which, to her husband, meant an interposition of Providence, to her meant the direct agency of the evil one. One hour—no little hour—and she would have left the sword of

Damocles behind; and now—now she had returned to it at the very instant when the thread might part and let it fall upon her unprotected head.

Yet, a wild joy mingled with her fears. Once more she was near Harvey! The old, jealous distrust had sprung into life since she had bade him farewell. The thought of again being near him, hearing the sound of his voice, feeling the touch of his hand, almost reconciled her to any consequence of her return. But for this, she would have sailed alone, and let her husband return without her. This alone was the motor which had brought her back.

"Your father has asked for you, Harry," said Grace. "The physicians beg that you will come at once."

As the girl spoke, she looked into the face of him whom she addressed. Where was his shadow of guilt and fear? A shadow of grief and anxiety rested upon it—the shadow so natural at such a moment—but otherwise the eyes met hers as frankly, as fearlessly, as when first they had won the loving trust of a little child.

"Dear old father!" he answered, while his eyes dimmed. "Of course I'll go to him!"

Helen turned and looked into Grace's eyes.

"What has happened?" she asked. "Something has gone wrong since yesterday more than the illness of the master of the house."

Would her question, she wondered, cut the thread by which the sword hung? Possibly it might; but her suspense was too unbearable to be longer borne. She must know if the knowledge of the forged check had come to Grace.

"Nothing that need trouble you, Helen, dear," answered the girl, tenderly. "What brought on this attack?"

"It was too sudden to be without cause. Has—has any knowledge concerning Harry reached his father's ears?"

"None, dear—none! Nor must it, at any cost. It would be his death-blow. I think the attack was inevitable; only some little business perplexities hastened it. I—had rather overdraw my account. You see, I know so little about my own money!" and she tried to laugh.

The note had been presented, then, thought Helen, and Grace had taken it up. She would keep the secret. The danger was past. Grace was shielding the husband's wrong even from her, his wife. Harvey had been cleverer than she had dared hope.

She drew a long, deep breath, as though throwing off a burden well-nigh too heavy to be borne. She had now only the spectre of her past with which to deal.

Involuntarily her hand clinched, and her teeth met together.

There was within her a hard desperation, which was coming nearer and nearer the surface with every fresh draught upon it.

"It would not do to try her too far, was her self-conscious thought.

"I guess I'll go at once to my room," she said, aloud.

But as her foot fell on the stair, Grace spoke her name. Its utterances arrested her.

There was something more to hear—something she had not yet been told.

She paused, and looked backward over her shoulder, down on the young, fair face, with the light streaming from above showed bathed in a deep crimson tide. Only a minute before she had been pale as death.

"Well?" answered the older woman, and in the one word rang a note of harshness, a seeming gathering of her forces to meet some blow about to fall.

Afterward it seemed to her that in the simple utterances of her name she had learned all the after-story.

"Something else had happened, Helen," continued Grace. "I wanted to tell you to-night, and to ask you to tell Harry, and to ask him not to speak of it to me; but I suppose you both must know."

"Must know! What? What must we know?"

"That I have promised to marry Harvey Barclay."

They were simple words, quietly, sadly spoken, but they wrested from Helen Reynolds' face the mask as though they had held the force of a whirlwind.

Grace stood transfixed at the fearful change, upon which her eyes were riveted.

The beautiful woman of a minute ago seemed transformed into a fiend. Her features were convulsed with passion; her eyes flashed fire; her white teeth were firmly clenched together between her half-parted lips.

Involuntarily Grace recoiled, as one recoils from a serpent about to make its hideous dart to inject its death-dealing poison.

"You—you are to marry Harvey Barclay?" at last came hissing forth from between those closely-shut teeth. "You little traitress! You—"

The question fanned the flames she would have hidden to yet fiercer heat. It was beyond her control; it caught up prudence and restraint, and made of them a lurid and triumphant blaze.

"What have you done?" she repeated again. "Ask, rather, what you have not done. First, you tried to steal my husband; and now—you would steal the man I love—yes, love as you know nothing of loving. Oh, do not look so shocked! You need not remind me that I am a wife. Do I not feel my chains every day? But they are gilded, and so I wear them royally. I am not afraid to trust you with my secret. You will keep it. Not for my sake—ah, no, Grace Hawthorne—but for his. You see that I have guessed your secret, too. See—you dare not deny it! How, then, am I wickeder than you?—you, who have promised to marry another man, loving my husband, or I, his wife in name alone? But listen to me. I am not tame enough to see you feast while I starve. Rather than see you Harvey Barclay's wife, I would—murder—"

The last word was but a low, sibilant whisper.

As it escaped her lips she turned and ran hastily up the stairs.

At their head she met her husband, coming from his father's room.

In the hall below stood Grace, motionless, transfixed, but her eyes were black with horror and amazement.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Harry Reynolds' handsome face was very grave as he followed his wife into their room.

For almost the first time in his wedded life his glance did not rivet itself upon her beauty; but, throwing himself into a chair, he bent his head upon his breast, shading his eyes with his hand.

His silence gave Helen needed time. When at last he raised his head to look at her, she was calm, composed, herself again.

"Your father is dying?" she asked.

"I pray not," he replied. "The physicians think there is a slight change for the better. They say he has been long feeble, but has undergone some sudden shock. Dear father! In the few words he was able to speak I fear I learned its cause. He could merely gasp out a feeble sentence, but it concerned Grace and a note endorsed with Harvey Barclay's name. I did not learn the amount, but it must have been large. Helen, what influence can this man wield that Grace should give him money for his profligate ends?"

"You had better ask her," answered his wife. Her husband started at the metallic ring in her tone. "Or, perhaps I had better enlighten you. She requested me to do so to-night. She is engaged to Harvey Barclay—"

Harry Reynolds sprang to his feet.

"Engaged to that spendthrift and that gambler! What madness has possessed her? And already he makes inroads upon her fortune! Something never shall be made!"

"Something shall be done! Leave it to me," said Helen, with a curious smile. "Grace Hawthorne never shall become Harvey Barclay's wife!"

"Oh, Helen, save her from such fate, and you will be her guardian angel, as you have been mine! But are you sure of your power to accomplish the defeat of this man's plans?"

"I am sure of my power," she answered, and again she smiled. "Meanwhile," she continued, "say nothing to Grace. Trust it to me."

"My darling, in what things, great or small, would I not trust you?" questioned the young husband, tenderly, rising as he spoke, to bend and kiss the beautiful woman who had so infatuated him. "And to think," he went on, "that once I was jealous—jealous of my Helen and this miserable profligate! Have you quite forgiven me, my dear, my foolish madness?"

"Madness, indeed!" she answered. "Do not let us talk of it," and she shuddered.

A knock came at the door. Old Andrew opened it.

"Supper is served, Mr. Harry," he said. "Miss Grace ordered it prepared for you."

"I had quite forgotten I was hungry!" he exclaimed—"and we have tasted no food since an early luncheon. Come, Helen—you must be faint with exhaustion."

"Send me up a cup of tea," she answered. "I will not go down."

The clock was striking midnight as Harry entered the dining room, and Grace was seated in her accustomed place—the place she had never surrendered to Helen, despite the latter's avowed intent to occupy it. A new look of sadness, a new shade of anxious thought upon the young, pale face, swelled Harry's heart to tenderness.

If he could but dissipate this cloud which, so imperceptibly, had crept between Grace and himself—if he could but win her old-time confidence, he could convince her of the unworthiness of this man she had promised to wed. What has come over the child?

He crossed the room and, bending over her, took one little, cold hand in his warm grasp.

"What is this that Helen tells me?" he whispered. "I am like doubting Thomas, and must needs have confirmation from your own lips before I can heed the tale."

"You speak of my engagement?" she replied. "Does it surprise you?"

Her tone was light; but, in spite of herself, her voice quivered, and his quick ear detected it.

"Grace!" he said, "you are not happy, child. Something is behind all this—something you are keeping from us all. You do not, you can not, love this man. With all his fascinations, all his subtlety, your heart is too pure, too fresh, too true, not to detect the false ring in his voice, the false look in his eyes. Grace, dear, you used to trust me. Won't you trust me still?"

Helen had called her love for him a wicked love. Was it, indeed, so? She who had given unto it no name—she who had but striven to cast the shadows from his pathway, to lead him on to better things, asking, courting no reward, working almost in the shadow by the light only of her heart's sacrifice. Ah; in God's sight, was this a wicked love?

She had renounced its every fruit, but the seed was in her heart, and she could not uproot it.

"Let the dead past bury its dead, Harry," she quoted, sadly. "You forget you are no longer dealing with a child. It is you who have forgotten to trust me. Oh, Harry! what is my money worth, if not to help others?"

"And what are others worth who would accept it? Grace, I must speak. I promised Helen just now, to leave it all to her; but I cannot look into your eyes and keep silent. Do you not know that this man is a gambler?"

"Yes," she answered, calmly. "He has told me that he gambles. Is it an unpardonable sin? Have you no pity for a man's possible weakness?"

"You know this?" repeated Harry, in amazement. "He has acknowledged it to you, and yet you have promised to become his wife. A gambler's wife! What possible vista of untold wretchedness does not such a prospect open? Already you have advanced him money for his needs. How long will your fortune last in his hands, when already he does not scruple to dissipate it?"

"My fortune?" wearily echoed the girl. "What has it ever brought me but misery? Who but Uncle Edgar has loved me for my own sake? It seems to have been productive only of untold wretchedness!"

"But this note, Grace, of which my father spoke to me? What was its amount, and are there funds in bank to meet it?"

She looked up into his face. On his eyes rested no shadow of deceit. His eyes met hers with fearless frankness. No quiver was in his voice as he put the question.

"Merciful heaven! Whom could she trust? Was every face a mask? Did Harry hope to deceive her to the end? Well, let him deem himself successful, if it gave him one ray of happiness."

"The note," she answered, "was for fifty thousand dollars. Ah, you are surprised at the amount! As he started back, 'Do not let it distress you! The note is in my possession, and I have paid the price!'"

(To Be Continued.)

WATCHING AND WAITING.
Moral: Don't Lend Money Under Any Circumstances—Hinnoo Was Well Educated.

Among the guests at the Raleigh a few days ago was a well educated and pleasant-mannered son of India. He had been at the hotel several times before, always ordered the best, and paid his bills without complaint. On this occasion he paid for his room in advance and seemed to have plenty of money. When he was ready to depart, however, he confided to Clerk B. A. Smith that he had lost his pocket-book and was without a cent. He did not ask to borrow money, but when he mentioned that he had friends in Baltimore who would help him, Mr. Smith offered to lend him a couple of dollars. The Hindoo was profuse in his thanks, and promised to return the money as soon as he reached the Maryland city. Yesterday Mr. Smith received a postal card from the man in India, upon which was written: "I herewith send you \$2. Thanks, very much. I appreciate your most noble kindness."

Mr. Smith looked first on one side and then on the other of the card, and finally split it in two, but could find no trace of the \$2. He is now wondering if the Hindoo is possessed of a normally developed bump of humor, or whether one of those wonderful Indian tricks of magic is being performed. The latter theory is the more inviting, and he has placed the card in a glass case and is watching it closely.

It will not transform itself into a \$2 note payable at the treasury of the United States.—Washington Post.

He Left Early.
Towne—So you called on the Smiths. There's a young girl next door to them that pounds the piano all the time. The night I—

Browne—Yes; she was playing all the time I was there.

Towne—Was she? Can you imagine anything worse than that?

Browne—Yes; it would have been worse if I had been there all the time she was playing.—Philadelphia Press

Secret of His Success.
"To what do you attribute your success in life?" asked the inquisitive person.

"Work," answered Senator Sorghum, positively; "hard work."

"But you never seem to be devoting much time to work."

"No. But I've hired a tremendous amount of it done."—Washington Star.

The Usual Ratio.
First Suburbanite—How long was your last cook with you?

Second Suburbanite—She was "with us" about two hours, and "agin us" all the rest of the two weeks she was there.—Judge.

Extorted From Them.
Ferdinand sold his great-grandfather's Bible for \$15.

"How odd!"

"Not at all; he said he was bound his ancestors should help him out that much, anyhow."—Indianapolis Journal.

And Willie Knew.
Little Willie—Paw, is ma a mi crobe?

Mr. Henpeck—Why, no, Willie. What makes you ask such a question? Little Willie—Well, the teacher told us that baldness was caused by a mi crobe.—Baltimore American.

Demoralizing.
"I always run from a braggart."

"Why?"

"If I talk to one a few minutes, I get to telling lies myselt."—Chicago Record

The agricultural department proposes to plant 100,000 rubber trees in the Hawaiian islands.



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