

A SIREN'S VICTIMS

By Frances Warner Walker.

CHAPTER XXVII.—(Continued.)

His face clouded again at her words. "You're a fool, my girl," he said, suddenly. "You've played your part too well to spoil it now. And I might as well tell you, Helen, I've made up my mind to marry Grace. I need her money, my dear, I'd not be long in making my choice. Sometimes I am sorry I ever gave you up to any man. If your husband were out of the way, I believe I'd start fresh again; but as it is, I can help you better as Grace Hawthorne's husband than in any other way; and I think you'll need my help when Harry Reynolds clears the cobwebs from his brain."

An awful weight paralyzed Helen Reynolds' answer. "This was her reward! What else had she hoped? Quietly as Harvey Barclay's answer had been given, she read in it a challenge of defiance, and she was powerless—powerless to defeat him in his plans."

She had helped him unpeep his castle, and now its walls had pincioned her hand and foot.

"Harvey!" she gasped—"Harvey," and, falling on her knees, she grasped his hands and held them tightly to her breast, "tell me you were only trying me just now! Tell me that your engagement to Grace shall be broken; that you will never make her your wife! Your wife!" she repeated, rising now, her eyes darkening with their jealous passion. "I would rather see you dead at my feet!"

"If you were free, ma chere," he answered, coolly, "I might understand this scene. As it is, I do but follow the example you have set me."

"If you were free!" These were the words ringing in the wretched woman's ears as she hastened toward her home—the home she had purchased at such a price.

And in one of its rooms lay the man who had given her all its splendor. And in her hand, just purchased at the druggist's, was the medicine on whose administering depended the issues of life or death. And Harvey had just said, "If you were free!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Scarcely conscious of the terrible purpose slowly forming itself in her brain, Helen hastened on.

Her home was nearly reached, when, as if he had sprung from the ground at her feet, someone intercepted her further progress.

Once more she stood face to face with her old enemy; but this time not in the shadow and concealment of the night and darkness, but in the broad, open glare of day.

A defiant challenge was in each pair of eyes as they met, but the woman's were the first to fall. Bold, reckless as she might be, there was that in this man's glance, in this man's presence, which had the power to cow even her proud spirit into submission. The power he held over her was too terrible to be resisted.

He smiled grimly as he noted her whitening face.

"I've left you in peace some time, my lady," he said, mockingly. "Did you think you were rid of me forever? And you were going to Europe a while ago? I only heard of it after you had started for New York. I followed you by the next train. I was at the pier to welcome you, to bid you bon voyage; but do you know, I fancy, after Mr. Harry Reynolds had heard the few words I had to say to you, you would not have made the voyage? It was a lucky escape for you, my lady. Next time you propose such a move, perhaps you'll consult with me before you take so bold a step."

Helen drew in her breath with a long, shuddering sigh. "So near had she stood to the brink of the precipice of discovery, and so unconscious had she been of her peril! "Let me pass!" she muttered, between her set teeth. "It won't do for me to be seen talking with you. People will wonder."

"I've a few words to say to you yet," retorted the man. "Walk on; I'll walk beside you. What's to prevent my forcing you to walk beside me always? I'd do it, too, the added, brutally, 'if it suited my plans. You think, perhaps, that I'm forgetful of my debt! Don't believe it, my girl! You've many years to live yet, and the debt and interest will hold. Oh, I see the flash in your eyes! It is the old light which used to leap there; but I did not fear it then, Helen Windom; I do not fear it now. I want some money, by-the-by. I'm down on my luck again."

"And so you torture me!" she cried, turning upon him with sudden passion. "And so you would come to me to supply your wretched wants. Well, I can do nothing more for you. I have no money! I am powerless to give you any. What is your word worth? You promised to leave me in peace if I would supply your pressing needs, and I did supply them. I stepped my soul yet further in wickedness and perjury that you might leave me in peace in the home I have won, in the name I have gained, in the atmosphere of respectability I breathe. God knows for long years you have dragged me down, and now again you'd hurl me into those depths of infamy! What's the use of persecuting me? What can you gain by exposing the past? It won't feather your nest to ruin mine!"

"But it'll help pay my debt!" he hissed, between his teeth; and now all his affectation of indifference vanished in the white heat of anger, the fiercer that it ever smoldered. "Where's Henry George?" he questioned. "Where's the man who aided you in your flight? Tell me where to find him, and for a time, I'll leave you in peace, for I've sworn to pay the first installment of my debt to him."

She looked up at him scornfully.

"I've not seen him for six long years. Besides, nothing drove me from you

but your own brutality—your cruelty! Did you think that I would bear it all ways? Do you think to-day, that if you pull down about me the ruins of the home I have made, you'll be any nearer gaining control of me? You'll be further from it—so far that I will vanish from your life again—this time, forever! What is your hold upon me but the mud your hand can throw upon the mantle of my respectability? Drag me down into the mud again, and we stand on equal ground. You'd better leave me alone, Tom. You'd better leave me in peace!"

He looked at her with a certain admiration in the coarseness of his glance.

"You're still plucky, Helen," he said. "You always fought well; but you knew your master, my dear, for all that, and he's not likely to give up his claim. I think we can leave the future to take care of itself. It's the present with which we have to deal. Let's drop generalities. I want money. How much can you give me?"

"None!" she answered, firmly—"not a dollar. My husband is very ill. His father, too, is lying at the point of death. Is this the time when I can demand money from them?"

"Ah, your husband is ill!" he repeated, mockingly. "Well, I'll wait until he recovers. Meantime, I'll find out if you're deceiving me. But, if you have no money, you have jewels. I'll take those in the interim."

"How much will satisfy you?" she asked, doggedly.

"A hundred dollars," he replied, "until your chances of becoming a widow are removed."

"Where can I send it to you?"

"Oh, I'll come for it to-night! I'll be here where I leave you now, at nine o'clock."

"No, let me send it to you. I may not be able to leave the house."

"I'll take chances. I may want a few words with you."

Waiting for no reply, he wheeled and left her, within sight of the spacious mansion which hid so ghastly a skeleton within its doors.

CHAPTER XXIX.

In her own room, Grace had heard the closing of the front door behind Helen, as she started on her errand, and, glancing from the window, saw her walking rapidly down the avenue.

"Was Harry left alone?" she wondered. "Poor Harry! Did he guess the secret Helen had betrayed to her last night—guess that his wife's love never had been his? Was this an added cause for his distrust of Harvey Barclay?"

Harvey Barclay! She shuddered as memory conjured up before her mental vision this image which might nevermore be banished from her life.

She had pledged herself to marry him, to save the name and honor of the man she loved; and to keep back at any cost—even at the cost she paid—the truth which, reaching Edgar Reynolds, would prove his death-blow.

Truly, there was sufficient at stake to warrant the sacrifice; and yet, poor child, small as that sacrifice might appear in itself, it was her all!

Her very soul recoiled from it. Her lips whitened and her blood chilled as she painted her loveless, desolate future.

And he, whose hand had kindled the fire, destructive to her youth, and hope, and happiness, must never know it burned.

Only a great pity was in her heart for him, as she watched the wife's form disappear in the distance.

Forgetful for the instant of her own pain, she remembered only the wealth of love he had lavished upon the woman whose heart was ice to him.

Did he know? Did he suspect? Was this the reason for his sudden illness? And she had left him alone! Was he still unconscious? She must go to him at once!

She turned from the window at the thought, and walked rapidly toward the door.

There she paused, with her hand on the knob, and, turning back, she fell upon her knees beside a chair.

"God give me strength!" was the voiceless prayer which wafted its way upward to the great white throne.

A minute later she stood by Harry Reynolds' side.

At sight of him, the strength for which she had pleaded came to her. She forgot herself and her own needs as she looked down on that white face upon its pillows, marked with so indelible an impress of pain.

The brown eyes were wide open, but they gazed up unrecognized into hers. The short-cropped head moved restlessly from side to side, as though tortured by suffering.

A little moment the girl stood there with bursting heart.

Then she sank down on her knees beside the couch, and, stooping her head, her lips rested an instant on the low, broad brow. It was at once a kiss of forgiveness and renunciation.

At the touch, light as though a fragrant flower petal had been borne by the summer wind across his fevered temples, Harry moved, and a momentary gleam of intelligence came into his eyes.

"Helen!" he murmured—"Helen!"

The name cut like a knife as she listened. For one moment—one short moment only, yet long enough to hold a little part of heaven—she had seemed to stand to him in Helen's place.

Already she was awakened from her dream.

An hour passed, and still she knelt beside him, bathing his forehead and moistening his parched lips with ice.

Now and then low, incoherent words escaped him. Once or twice he appeared to be struggling with consciousness. Once or twice she fancied that love and gratitude were in the glance he turned toward her.

Then the door opened behind her, and Helen entered. She was very pale, and her eyes had in them a strange gleam. They rested upon Grace almost defiantly. With a swift, nervous motion, she unfastened the strings of her hat and tossed it from her.

"Has he spoken?" she asked, indicating her husband by a glance.

"Only to murmur your name," Grace answered. "I think once or twice he fancied I was you."

"Better for all of us if his fancy were true!" said Helen; and, as though inspired by some sudden resolve, she came close to where Grace, risen from her knees, was standing beside Harry's couch. "Better if you were Harry Reynolds' wife. Listen, Grace. You learned my secret last night. I was hard, and cold, and almost brutal, perhaps, in telling, but suffering isn't apt to soften such women as I am, and when you told me that you had promised to marry Harvey Barclay, I suffered in that moment more than you have suffered in a life-time. I don't know why I should appeal to you. I never loved you. I've nearly hated you, for you have everything in the world I most covet, and I have been, for many a day, Harvey Barclay's game. He tried to blind me to it; but he did not easily blind me, and I loved him, Grace. He is a bad, unscrupulous man, but he is the only thing on earth I ever loved. Swear to me you will not marry him. I can trust your word. Swear it to me, Grace. It is your fortune, not you, he covets. He will make misery of your life, as he has of mine; but I'm not hypocrite enough to plead with you for your own sake. It's for mine, Grace—for mine! Oh, he is all I have in the world! and if you cast him off, he'll turn to me again. In his soul he cares for me more than for anything save self. Tell me you will give him up. Swear it to me!"

"I can't swear it!" answered the girl, with white, shocked face. "I must be his wife now. There is no help for it. I did it for Harry's sake and yours!"

"And if I tell you that your sacrifice was useless? Oh, I see it all—the treachery by which he has won your promise. I can guess it all; but my lips are sealed. I am powerless to undeceive you. But you will listen to me, Grace? You do not love him. You will give him up when I tell you that he is false and cruel?"

"I cannot give him up!" repeated the girl. "My word is pledged!"

"Then break it!" said the older woman. "Break it, if you have any pity on my soul. Do you know what it is to love as I do? How could you know?" and she laughed a low laugh, terrible to hear. "Had you known, you would have murdered me rather than that I should have stolen from you the love and kisses of him who lies unconscious beside us. Yes, murdered me, as I could murder the woman whose lips should be upraised to meet Harvey Barclay's kiss. You tremble and grow white. You think that I am mad! I am not mad! Listen to me, Grace Hawthorne. You shall know all—why I married Harry Reynolds. I did it for Harvey Barclay's sake. I loved him; but we were poor—wretchedly, miserably poor, and he had not the courage to work for both. He told me that Harry Reynolds had a large and independent fortune—a fortune of which I might gain possession by having it settled upon me. We did not go beyond that, for we both understood what lay beyond. I was to begin life again with him; we were to go to some distant country and forget all we had, we loved and were together. This is no fit story for your pure ears. You see, I make a confession of my own infamy that you may guess at his. It was not wealth, not respectability and gratified ambition alone that I had at stake. They were but the stepping-stones to my higher greed. I loved him, and for his sake I counted a world well lost. And you would steal him from me now—now in the moment when I need him most. But you have heard enough! Your will give him up to-day—to-night—within the hour?"

The night had fallen, and the light, turned low, barely showed the two faces each to the other—each white with a ghastly whiteness; but on one was written a purpose born of desperation; the other a great horror and a great despair. This was the man who held her in his power—this was the woman for whose sake Harry had bartered her pure love. And Harry—ah, could he take up the first stone, when his own garments were soiled with the mud of his dishonor? Was there no purity, no goodness, no honor in the world?

With a low cry, which sounded through the quiet room like the despairing moan of a broken heart, she pushed past Helen Reynolds' dainty hand and fled as if pursued by demons, to the purer atmosphere of that portion of the house she might call as yet her own.

CHAPTER XXX.

Helen listened until the sound of Grace's footsteps died away. She crouched down on the floor there beside a chair, and buried her face in its cushions.

An hour passed, and except for the muttered, incoherent words with which her husband now and then broke the silence, there was no other sound within the room.

At last she rose, crossed to the mirror, and, turning up the light, carefully adjusted her toilet; then, turning to her husband's side, she stood looking down upon him. If he should die, her secret would be safe.

"If you were free," Harvey had said. "Oh, God! what was this horrible thought which was taking definite shape in her distracted brain? True, for the honor of his name, his lips might never open to betray her; but at any time he might learn—"

She checked the flow of her own thought with a shudder—not to herself would she admit that he might learn, lest horror should paralyze her strength. She must be calm—she must be able to think clearly, to act collectedly.

As yet she had followed none of the doctor's minute directions for his patient. Ringing the bell, she called to Andrew, and bade him lift Harry from the couch to the bed. The young man opened his eyes and spoke to him by name, then closed them again hurriedly; his consciousness seemed returning.

Administering the medicine, Helen seated herself in a low chair by his side.

Mr. Reynolds was better. Andrew told her. The physicians said there was no present danger. If he were kept quite free from excitement of any kind. The news of Mr. Harry's illness had been carefully concealed from him during the day. The physicians had pretended that they could allow him to see no one.

She listened silently to the news the old servant brought.

Ordering dinner served in her own room, she forced herself, when it was brought, to swallow a few mouthfuls of food and take a glass of wine.

It was past eight o'clock when the service was cleared away, and the doctor had not yet returned. It would not do to be absent at the time of his visit; and yet, at nine o'clock she must again confront the living spectre of her past.

She started. She had forgotten that she must have ready for him the sum he had required of her.

She rose and to her purse. It contained but twenty dollars. She examined her husband's clothes. The pockets held forty more. She still lacked forty of the needed sum.

Well, this must satisfy him for to-night. To-morrow she would send him what she now lacked. To-morrow! Oh, if to-morrow were to-day! If this terrible temptation which assailed her in all the might of its silence and its horror were dispelled by the light of another day!

Another half-hour passed.

Would the doctor never come? Yes! A knock sounded on the door.

She rose and admitted him for whom she had so anxiously waited. He entered with many apologies for his enforced delay.

He found his patient improving, he said. Doubtless by tomorrow his youth and splendid strength would have reasserted themselves. Already his eyes showed that his brain was recovering its normal condition.

But his examination was close and long.

Helen almost shrieked to him to go and leave her to herself as the hands of the clock moved toward nine.

If she did not meet Tom Windom at the appointed time and place, what action might he not take?

Later she might defy him, but just now each minute was more precious than gold.

The hour struck when at last Dr. Hope turned toward her. His keen, professional eye noted her pallor, and the excitement visible in every feature.

He bent and let his fingers meet at her wrist. Her pulse was beating high.

"Take care, Mrs. Reynolds," said, warningly, "or you will be my next patient. You must not let anxiety for your husband take this phase. He is doing better than I dared hope. A little care and nursing, and he will be himself again. Cannot some one take your place to-night? You are too nervous and overstrung."

"I would trust no one else," she answered.

"I will call early in the morning, then. Good-night!"

"Good-night!" she answered, mechanically.

The door opened and closed. He was gone. She listened to the sound of his retreating footsteps, as she had listened to those of Grace. She waited until all was still.

The hands of the clock showed ten more minutes gone. Catching up a cloak, she threw it about her and hastened down the stairs.

Grace met her in the lower hall.

"Helen!" she cried. "Is Harry worse?"

"No. But I must have air," she answered. "I am going into the garden."

And with the last words mingled the sound of the closing of the front door.

Once more, with hurrying feet, she went to meet the man whose word was her only law. Rebel as she would, her rebellion was as hopeless as that of the slave to his master.

He fastened tighter her chains, and she dragged them more hopelessly and more heavily than before. But the hour was ripening when she might strike off the fetters he had forged.

Had not Harry said: "If you were but free!"

She reached the place appointed. All was still and deserted.

She softly called his name. No answer came. Pacing to and fro, she waited.

Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed; but no footfall broke the stillness, no sound announced her waiting at an end.

Had he come? Had he gone? Vain the questions, save to offer fresh torture to her mind.

A half-hour went by, and she knew that she need wait no longer. Whatever his failure to meet her betokened, he would not come now.

Retracing her steps, she hastened homeward. As she reached the door she paused.

Better, perhaps, to turn and flee into the darkness than to enter that house to-night.

Her brain seemed on fire; every pulse was surging and throbbing. Her hands and feet were cold as ice.

But her hesitation lasted only for the moment. She turned her key in the lock and entered, closing the door noiselessly behind her, and quietly stealing her way up the stairs.

Noiselessly she opened the door of her own room, shut and barred it. She dropped the cloak from her shoulders to the floor, where it lay unheeded.

She walked to the bed and stood looking down at the young, handsome face, with its lines of restfulness and suffering softened by a quiet slumber.

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