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A
THRILLING DETECTIVE STORY.

DETECTIVE JOHNSON
OF NEW ORLEANS.

A TALE OF LOVE AND CRIME.

BY

HARRY IRVING HANCOCK.

No. 37.



NEW YORK:
J. S. OGILVIE, PUBLISHER,
57 Rose Street.

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HARRY IRVING HANCOCK.

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THE PEERLESS SERIES, No. 37. April, 1891. Subscription, \$3.00 per annum. Entered at New York Post-Office as second-class matter. Copyright by J. S. Ogilvie.

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DETECTIVE JOHNSON OF NEW ORLEANS.

CHAPTER I.

THE START OF A MEMORABLE TRIP.

TWENTY minutes to four. At the hour the "Mabel Girard" would start down the river with her valuable cargo of merchandise and her more precious freight of human beings.

The big boat shivered and shook like a tremulous thing of life. Dense, impenetrable clouds of smoke poured from three tall smoke-stacks which stood abreast a little aft of the well-house. There was a hissing sound of escaping steam. The deck-hands and some forty wharfmen ran hurriedly to and fro, loading bales, boxes, and barrels on to drays, wheeling the merchandise aboard the steamer, and there unloading it again; two of the steamer's officers stood by and bawled themselves hoarse with issuing orders.

The passengers who had not already embarked were going aboard in a leisurely fashion, for there was yet more than a quarter of an hour of grace. The "Girard" was one of the most palatial river-boats of her time, and seldom missed a full complement of passengers from her highest starting-point up the Mississippi, St. Paul.

One of the passengers in particular, who stood near the forward gang-plank, seemed in no haste to go aboard, and

it is with this young man in question that our story has largely to deal.

Reginald Prentiss was a typical young Southern gentleman of the ante-bellum period, tall, graceful, slender and well-formed, with a dark olive skin, jet-black hair, and expressive blue eyes, but without the faintest suspicion of beard or mustache.

He could not have been over eight-and-twenty and he dressed fastidiously in the neatest fashion of the period. As he walked about on the dock, one could see at a glance the easy and unrestrained carriage which everywhere betokens the gentleman to the manor born.

Reginald's home was on the shores of one of the numerous bayous to be found on the gulf coast near the Mississippi's delta. With his mother he was part owner of one of the largest Louisiana sugar plantations, which required the services of fully eight hundred slaves to keep it in running order. Prentiss, *père*, had died a dozen years ago, and left to his widow and son this magnificent estate, in itself a handsome and unfailing fortune.

The Christmas holidays were approaching, and this glorious season was to be as fully observed as usual in the Prentiss family; but yule-tide once past, Reginald was resolved to give the stately old mansion over into the hands of carpenters. It was to secure the larger portion of the lumber and building materials needed in the construction that the young Louisianian had come to St. Paul at a season of the year so unpropitious to warm-blooded Southerners.

“Ugh!” he muttered, turning his coat-collar up

around his neck, as a gust of wind swept down the wharf from the city, and seemed to seek him out among the piles of merchandise. "Thank Heaven, twenty-four hours will see me in warmer latitudes, and then the time will pass more pleasantly until I am in that good old home once more. But where can Elsie be?"

Elsie was a favorite cousin of his, studying at a seminary near St. Paul, who always spent the holidays at the Prentiss homestead in Louisiana. She had agreed to meet him at the boat, but so far Reginald had not seen anything of the young lady.

At last! Yes, she was coming. The sun was near the horizon, and already the day had begun to darken, but despite the semi-gloom he thought there could be no mistake. The *petite* figure and brisk, jaunty walk could belong to none other than Elsie Prentiss.

"I have been waiting for you ever so long," he said, stepping forward and raising his hat, "and this biting northern wind is really—"

He went no further. The young lady looked sharply at him, but without more than a momentary pause in her gait she tripped lightly over the gang-plank. Reginald saw that he had made a mistake; the young lady certainly was not Elsie.

Who, then, was she?

As the young lady turned for a moment to glance at the Southerner, he saw a face infinitely more beautiful than that of his pretty cousin Elsie, and of a radically different style of loveliness. Whereas Miss Prentiss had the typical Southern complexion and graces, the unknown beauty

whom he had so accosted was a pronounced blonde, with the prettiest of golden hair and the delicate pink-and-white face of her type.

“That’s not Elsie, I’ll be bound,” muttered Prentiss; “but she is as much more beautiful as day is lighter than night. I wonder who she is? May the fates will it that she and I are fellow-passengers the whole length of the river.”

He stood at the shore end of the main gangway-plank and gazed in upon the main-deck, in the hope that she would emerge from the ladies’ cabin. See her again he must and would, even if only once and at a distance. The prosaic occupation of watching his lumber loaded on to the “Girard’s” forward deck had lost its interest; he had ears and eyes only for this peerless woman, the sight of whom had driven all else out of his mind.

“Really, am I to be treated in this way by my nearest and dearest relative?” came in petulant tones from behind him.

“Oh, it’s you, Elsie!” said Reginald, absent-mindedly, as he turned and recognized his interlocutor.

“Yes, it’s I, Elsie,” the girl answered, with amusing indignation, “and I had to speak to you three times before you would look at me. I declare, Reggy, you’re looking in there again, and you don’t understand a word I am saying to you.”

“Yes, I do,” answered the young man, half turning to his pretty cousin, “but—”

“There! I thought I’d secured your attention at last, but you are gazing into the inmost depths of that horrid

old steamer again. Reggy, you really act as if you were looking into Paradise.”

“I’ve had a glimpse of it,” Prentiss answered, eagerly; “and, oh, cousin, I want you to use your woman’s wit in helping me. How opportune that you are here—and what a beauty she is!”

Elsie pouted.

“So that’s the secret of your incivility to me?” she demanded, sarcastically. “Why is it, I wonder, that directly a man falls in love he so completely ignores the rest of that happy creature’s sex?”

“You seem jealous, Elsie,” said her cousin, amusedly, partly turning toward her, but not for a moment relinquishing his watch on the steamer’s cabin.

“And why shouldn’t I be?” she demanded. “How do you know, Reggy, that I’ve not picked you out for myself? Cousins can marry, you know.”

“But you would not be so absurd, dear cousin.”

“And yet you doubtless expect that some woman will love you madly. Oh, you men are so consistent!”

“But we’ve known each other ever since we were mere babies,” Prentiss observed, good-humoredly.

“And that’s a good and sufficient reason why you shouldn’t want to marry me? Thank you, Reggy. I am going aboard now. Why do you stand shivering in the cold yourself? Old Boreas has positively turned your nose blue.”

“Really, I—I don’t know why I am standing here,” returned the young man, confusedly, offering his arm to his cousin. The absurdity of his standing at the gang-

plank, when his chances of seeing the unknown beauty would have been much better if he had gone aboard, struck Prentiss with the force of a sudden conviction.

“Who is your divinity, Reggy?” Elsie complacently demanded, when he had seen her comfortably seated in the upper saloon.

“My—er—what?” he queried, sharply, not altogether liking her question.

“Your divinity,” she repeated; “the young female person who has so completely ensnared you as to make you impervious to the ties of relationship. Of course,” sarcastically, “you won’t try to make me believe it was merely a beautiful horse. Horses don’t go aboard at this end of the boat.”

“A horse!” Reginald repeated, scornfully, glaring under lifted eyebrows at his pretty cousin. “No, no, Elsie, the most beautiful woman in the South.”

“But this is the North, dear; you forget that you are in St. Paul.”

“No woman as beautiful as she is could come from any section but the South—or the Orient,” Reginald declared, with the positiveness of conviction.

“She is dark, then, like yourself—and me?” demurely.

“No, cousin; as bright and beautiful and fair as one of our summer days; the perfection of loveliness in woman, a vision worthy of a Byron’s dream, a—”

“Please, Mr. Reginald Prentiss, where is my place in the presence of this peerless houri?” Elsie interrupted, with a teasing assumption of petulance.

“Cousin,” the young man responded, loftily, “you are

getting unbearably sarcastic—or jealous—I don't know which. I am going now to look after your baggage. How much is there?"

"Four trunks."

"Is that all?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"For a two weeks' sojourn? I should say emphatically that it was. I could carry enough for two men in one trunk."

"Men are so different," she answered.

"Yes, cousin; not so vain of personal appearance. *Au revoir.*"

Prentiss made his way to the main-deck below, intending to go ashore. As he reached the after gangway, he saw there was at least a fathom of space between the boat and the wharf. The gang-plank had already been pulled ashore, and, as he paused a second, he heard the clang of the pilot's bell in the engine-room. There was a rumbling motion that made the boat quiver slightly; the sound of escaping steam ceased suddenly, and the dock appeared slowly to recede. He had been too late to go ashore, and there was only a chance that the baggage in his charge was aboard.

"The forward part is too crammed with freight to find anything there," he soliloquized. "I think I'd best have a smoke before going back to Elsie to confess that I don't know whether her trunks are aboard or not."

He lighted a weed and stepped outside on the outer main-deck, though the wind was sweeping down the river with a frigidity that threatened to chill him to the mar-

row. Before the cigar was half finished, he threw it away and gave up the effort to smoke in disgust. He determined to go back to Elsie and invoke her aid in getting acquainted with the beautiful unknown one.

Accordingly, Prentiss ascended the broad flight of stairs and made his way to the spot where he had left his cousin. He soon found her, but she was not alone. There was a second young lady present, and, though her back was turned to him, his heart began to beat violently as soon as he spied her.

Elsie caught sight of him, and springing forward, she cried:

“Oh, Reggy, dear, I’m glad you’ve come at last, I want to introduce you to my dearest friend.”

The second young lady turned as Elsie spoke. The Southerner’s heart beat as if it would suffocate him. Elsie’s friend was, indeed, the unknown beauty who had captivated him.

“She’s coming to spend the holidays with us,” Miss Prentiss added.

Reginald bowed awkwardly.

CHAPTER II.

A GOOD TURN AND ITS CONSEQUENCES.

“OH! pardon me, Reggy,” Miss Prentiss added suddenly, with the dashing affability of a school-girl, “I’ve been thoughtless enough to overlook the necessity of an introduction. Dianne, my dear, permit me to present my cousin, Mr. Reginald Prentiss. Reggy, my best and truest school friend, Miss Lorraine.”

Reginald bowed less constrainedly now, and Miss Lorraine offered him the tips of a little gloved hand, a special favor of courtesy granted in recognition of his relationship with her school chum. The young man treated both ladies with the courteous deference and attention which marks the Southern gentleman when seen at his best.

There was a flush of happy satisfaction on his face which Elsie noticed, and she readily comprehended the situation.

“Oh, I do believe, Dianne, dear,” she began impulsively, “that you are the young lady Reggy was talking to me about. He—”

There was a look of mischievous malice in her eyes as she said this, but she got no further, for Prentiss shot a keen covert glance of warning at his audacious cousin and turned off his threatened *exposé* of his feelings by interjecting hastily:

“Yes, indeed, Miss Lorraine, I have been deeply annoyed and embarrassed by a painful mistake which I made

a little while ago. I believe you are the lady whom I intercepted and spoke to on the wharf."

"I believe you did, sir," returned Miss Lorraine, surveying him archly.

"It was wholly unintentional, I assure you."

"Indeed," curiously.

"I mean, Miss Lorraine," said Prentiss, correcting himself, with some accession of color to his face, "that it was altogether a mistake. I thought when I first beheld you that you were Elsie."

"There is some resemblance, to be sure," said Dianne, leniently; and so the matter was dropped. A word given quietly aside to Miss Prentiss made her cousin feel confident that she would not again attempt to betray his infatuation in his presence, but the young man was by no means sure that she would refrain from it in his absence.

Reginald Prentiss, after nearly thirty years of bachelorhood, serene and undisturbed by any intense longing for feminine participation of his many joys and few sorrows, had at last become deeply infatuated with a mere school-girl in years. Dianne could not have been more than eighteen, he felt, as he gazed upon her young, fresh, rosy face and girlish form; but, despite what seemed to him a great disparity in their ages, he was prepared to throw himself at her feet with his three decades of life, and with it, whatever the future held in store for him—whatever it might bring him besides the radiant creature who had crossed his path hardly an hour before.

It was love at first sight on his part, and a deep, lasting love too. Wiseacres may sneer at the existence of such in-

stantaneous passion; indeed, they always have sneered, and always will; but in this the wiseacres have always been wrong, and always will be. With such impulsive natures as that which possessed Reginald Prentiss, love, when it does come, must date from the first contact with the loved one, though it grows more intense as it progresses. When he first encountered her at the boat landing he had felt a thrill responsive to her being. The first words she uttered to him in the upper saloon of the steamboat had forged and bound his fetters, and he felt himself her slave.

And Dianne? Was she aware of his suddenly conceived devotions? Did she respond, ever so little, to his love?

Had young Prentiss been as familiar with the ways of women as he was with most of the ways of the world, he might have sufficiently discovered her nature to have perceived that she could love with the same intensity that stirred the depths of his own nature now for the first time.

Did she care for him? Did she even like him? These questions unceasingly presented themselves to his mind.

He was uneasy in Dianne's presence. The two girls chatted unrestrainedly, addressing themselves to him with no greater frequency than a recognition of his presence demanded. He was grateful to Elsie for thus leaving him to himself for the time being, for it gave him opportunity to covertly study his divinity. More than that, it occurred to him to observe whether his silence and assumed moodiness appeared to pique her.

Apparently, Miss Lorraine did notice his silence, for, after the lapse of a few minutes, during which the young

ladies kept a running fire of questions, answers and sallies, the divinity turned to him with:

“ You must find us stupid company, Mr. Prentiss. You haven’t said a word for a quarter of an hour. Are you usually so taciturn?”

“ I have never attended a seminary, you know,” he answered evasively, not knowing what to say, and instinctively disliking to talk about himself.

But Dianne put on an air of great dignity.

“ Then, Mr. Prentiss,” she said, teasingly, “ you assume that all seminary girls are necessarily voluble.”

“ I didn’t say that,” Reginald protested.

“ But you meant it, did you not?”

“ By no means; I merely intended to—”

“ Intended to say that you are moody and unsociable, as you always are,” put in Elsie, who could not from the nature of things keep quiet more than a few moments at a time.

“ You know better than that, cousin,” he answered, reproachfully; “ I am not always unsociable; never intentionally so with ladies.”

Elsie’s only answer was a defiant shake of her head, as if she were routed, but not convinced.

But after that things went more smoothly. In some way or other, Reginald soon found himself the central figure in the conversation that followed. The time passed so quickly that none of the trio could believe their ears when, at seven o’clock, the clanging of a gong in the hands of an ebony-hued darky proclaimed the fact that dinner was served in the main saloon under the deck. Reginald es-

corted the ladies to the table, giving his divinity the seat of honor on his right. Awake to the great responsibility of his temporary position as Dianne's provider and protector, he did all he could to ingratiate himself in the little beauty's favor. Apparently with considerable success, too, for she attended all his remarks and attempts at appropriate conversation with a closeness that flattered him.

Prentiss was exultant at the ease with which he found himself becoming Dianne's friend. He fancied that it was all very plain sailing, and promised himself a trip to New Orleans that should be one long dream of ideal courtship, hasty though its inception had been. In his calculations, the young man entirely ignored his cousin; but Elsie soon made herself felt, and with crushing effect. As the trio were leaving the table to go above, that young lady whispered in his ear:

"Reggy, dear, if you want to go about this in the right way, don't spoil your chances at the outset. Leave us, and don't come back until you've had time to smoke a cigar or two. If she sees too much of you in the first evening it may prejudice your chances in the end."

The young man hesitated. The proposition was not pleasing to his vanity.

"Then you understand—" he began.

"That she is the divinity you were raving about," Elsie finished, with a significant look, and in tones that did not go above a whisper. "Yes, dear, and may you succeed; she's a noble girl."

"God bless you, Elsie," murmured Prentiss, squeezing his cousin's little hand with a grateful pressure. And, ex-

cusing himself to Dianne, who had not, of course, heard a word of the whispered conversation, and who did not appear to notice it, he left the ladies where he had first found them together, in the upper saloon.

There was a good-sized cabin forward on the lower deck, and in those days before the war, when gambling was freely tolerated on the Mississippi River boats the forward apartment was always well filled with knights of the green cloth, who did a thriving business with greenhorns. The bar, too, was open at all hours, and scenes of debauchery that would hardly be credited in this age were then enacted day and night.

Reginald Prentiss, like most of the Southern planters of that time, was a frequent traveler on the river boats, and to him this was all an old story. He was not surprised when he entered the forward saloon to find that at every one of the half score of tables a game was in full blast.

Poker appeared to be the predominant game, but in his slow promenade through the apartment Reginald saw three or four faro "layouts," for this latter game had slowly but surely gained a hold on the patrons of the Mississippi boats.

The element of chance was even stronger in this latter game than in poker, and all the extravagant combinations which were possible at the time lent more zest to some minds than the stereotyped game of "draw."

The stakes were high on every table, and whisky—good, bad, indifferent, and worse than indifferent—was being imbibed freely by two thirds of the players and spectators. A few of the more opulent—or more lucky, which amount-

ed to very much the same thing—were emptying bottles of champagne with a recklessness that bespoke big losses—and colossal heads the next morning.

“ I kin fix yo’, sah, berry soon, if yo’ like to play,” a grinning colored attendant whispered in Reginald’s ear.

But the young man had no desire to play, and the darky lost the expected tip.

Prentiss’s eye had wandered to a group that sat at one of the furthest tables.

There were four men in the party. Two, in appearance, were typical slave-drivers, men who bought and sold negroes on speculation. A third was a strikingly handsome young man, with a clear olive skin and the darkest of hair and eyes. His features were finely chiseled and his pose and bearing were of an ultra-dignified order. His clothes were of the finest texture and make, and altogether this young man had every appearance of being a gentleman born.

Only one thing marred the prepossessing appearance of this young stranger at the table. His watch chain and the rings which glittered on several fingers were very massive, altogether too loud.

A taste for such ponderous jewelry, and under such circumstances, clearly bespoke the confirmed gambler to the observant man of the world. That this was true in this instance there could be no doubt, for he handled the cards with the utmost *sang froid* and pocketed the stakes when he won with an air of placid unconcern.

And that he did win much more frequently than any one else at the table was plain to the most listless observer.

But it was neither of the three we have mentioned who interested Reginald Prentiss particularly.

The fourth man in the game would have attracted the attention of an experienced on-looker much more readily than either of the other players. He was a young, boyish-looking fellow with sunny hair, clear blue eyes, and a face so open and frank that any one would have trusted in him on first sight. Shown in plain relief against his three companions this youth seemed like a rose among thorns.

“More like the man who fell among thieves,” muttered Prentiss as the former simile came into his mind.

There was something strikingly familiar in the face of this handsome boy, who could not have been more than twenty years of age. The likeness to some one he had seen before haunted Reginald. It was some time before his recreant memory could locate the object of his fixed attention.

“It must be—yes, it is Frank Streator,” Reginald finally decided, and became more interested than ever in the game.

It was evident that Streator was losing badly, and Prentiss became suspicious that the other three were leagued against him.

The Streators had a plantation in Louisiana, not far from the Prentiss lands. Though Reginald had not seen Frank for several years, they had once been intimate friends, after the fashion of large boy and small boy.

Reginald moved around slowly, in order not to attract attention to his movements, and finally gained a position whence he could overlook the cards held by the dark young stranger.

But the other was a careful player, who knew better than to take too many risks at cheating in the days of ready pistols and bowie-knives. At last, however, Reginald saw the opportunity for which he was watching. It came about in this manner:

The young gambler, he of the fastidious dress and massive jewelry, on the first draw of the new hand, secured a pair of aces, a pair of fours and a six spot. Discarding all but the aces, he drew again. A third ace and two useless cards were the result. He now held three aces.

Streator, indiscreet and much excited, "raised" several times, until over \$1,000 were on the table.

"He must hold good cards," thought Reginald; "now let us see if he will win."

But he who held the three aces seemed not a particle disconcerted. Carelessly he paid in his wagers, and seemed to have no anxiety as to the result. Finally he called the boy.

"Four kings!" cried Streator, flushed and exultant.

"That goes ahead of me," said one of the drivers calmly, throwing his cards down upon the table.

"And ahead of me, too," drawled the second driver in the same indifferent manner, not taking the trouble to show his hand.

"Good!" muttered Reginald under his breath.

But, with his eyes fastened attentively upon the movements of the black-haired gambler, he was prepared for what followed.

The latter, with a movement so quick as to almost escape detection, dropped one of his useless cards, picked up a

fourth ace from the seat of the chair in which he sat, and threw down the quartet of single spots.

“Lost!” groaned Streator. “A little more of this will ruin me.”

But the apparent winner did not seem to hear him, and nonchalantly stretched forth his hand to gather in the pile of bank-notes and gold.

“Hold! On your life don’t touch that money!”

The gambler’s self-possession deserted him; but for a moment only. He turned apprehensively toward the speaker, and seemed to cower, but immediately regained his composure.

That moment, however, had sufficed for Reginald Prentiss to reach the table at a single bound, and seize the stakes from beneath the hands of the man who had so fraudulently won them.

“You have dared to interfere, sir,” said the gambler, haughtily, as soon as he had recovered from his momentary fear.

“I have,” thundered Reginald, “for you have dared to cheat a friend of mine.”

“I have dared to cheat?” reiterated the gambler with a fine simulation of scornful contempt.

“Yes,” responded Prentiss, “and you are an arrant knave. You are sitting on some extra cards this minute. I saw you pick that fourth ace out from under your leg.”

Fully two score of men had crowded around the table by this time, and excitement was running high.

“Pull him out of the chair!” shouted one man.

“Shoot him!” suggested another.

“Lynch him!” prompted a third.

But the exposed swindler paid no attention to these threats.

Slowly and coolly drawing a revolver from his pocket he leveled it at Reginald's head.

“Put that money down. One!” he commanded in low tones, but there was not a tremor in his voice.

Reginald quietly pocketed the money and folded his arms across his breast. In his calm, defiant look there was no tinge of fear.

“Put that money down. Two!”

Every one present felt that a tragedy was about to be enacted, yet no one offered to interfere. There was a breathless silence, and all seemed spell-bound.

“Put it down. Th—”

But that three was never counted.

An empty champagne bottle flew through the air, and was shivered into fragments by violent contact with the would-be murderer's head. It was hurled with unerring aim, and did its work well.

The gambler sunk to the floor, with an involuntary groan, blood pouring from two or three ugly cuts in his scalp. The revolver fell from his hand and discharged itself harmlessly, the bullet imbedding itself in a leg of the table.

The owner of the weapon, nothing daunted, though considerably hurt, was on his feet like a flash. Drawing a bowie-knife from its sheath at his waist, he rushed upon Reginald.

But a detaining hand seized him by the coat collar, and a second time his attempt at murder was foiled.

“If you don't stop these antics, into the river you go, and double quick,” said the gambler's captor threateningly.

The last speaker was a tall, broad-shouldered man, with a frame that bespoke extraordinary strength. His uniform proclaimed him to be the captain of the boat.

A mate and several deck-hands came running up at this juncture. The captive was disarmed, and, with an ugly shake and a parting admonition to behave himself, was released from the iron grip that had held him powerless.

CHAPTER III.

CHALLENGED.—BLISS AND ITS RUDE AWAKENING.

REGINALD had stood impassively through it all, leaning against the wall of the cabin with his arms folded.

No sooner had the baffled gambler been released by the captain and slunk away to the other side of the cabin to join his two friends, the seeming slave-drivers, than Frank Streator hastened to the side of the friend who had come to his rescue at so much personal risk.

“Reggy, old fellow, you’re a trump!” he exclaimed, as he grasped the young planter’s hand. “But I am sorry,” he added, “that it was necessary to involve yourself in a scrape of this kind.”

“On the contrary,” Reginald replied, “I am very glad to have been on hand to save you from these sharpers.”

“But he may challenge you, Reggy.”

“And suppose he does?”

“Then you must fight him.”

“Not necessarily.”

“But the code?”

“The code,” Reginald interrupted, “only bears upon gentlemen.”

“But you are a gentleman,” answered the youth sadly, “and I do not see how you can escape fighting if he challenges you.”

“But he is not a gentleman,” the young planter an-

swered, promptly, "or he would not have cheated you at cards. If he challenges me, I shall demand the best proof of his social position before accepting."

"Oh!" said Streator, dubiously, and it was plain that he was not satisfied.

"Reggy," he began, slowly, as if anxious to put his proposition in the most favorable light, "if this fellow does want to fight, you can of course meet him by proxy."

"How and why?"

"I got you into this scrape through my own idiocy," Streator rejoined, earnestly, "and therefore it is no more than right that upon me should fall the consequences."

"Enough of this," said Prentiss, impatiently, "if I am to fight, I will do it myself. You are but a boy, Frank, and I doubt if you understand the use of any one weapon. I am fairly skillful with them all, and can undoubtedly take care of myself."

"But think of your mother, my dear fellow; how she would grieve."

"She might grieve if I fell in a duel," Reginald made answer, "but if I ran away from one, she would feel that my father's name had been dishonored."

"But, Reggy," persisted the youth, "it is not running away; it is not cowardice to fight by proxy. I have brought this upon you, if it comes; and I should be a poltroon indeed, if I permitted you to face the music I have played."

Reginald smiled slightly at the other's metaphor, but answered readily:

"Frank, I shall insist upon standing up for myself, if I

am challenged, and if I accept; so say no more. It will avail nothing. If I should, by the merest chance, happen to fall, see my mother for me—you know what to say to her—and remember that I have always been your true friend.”

“I have abundant proof of that,” said Streator. His utterance was choked, and he did not check the tears that came to his eyes.

The young gambler with the profusion of heavy jewelry meanwhile had been engaged in an animated though low-toned conversation on the further side of the saloon with the two slave-drivers for companions. One of the latter came over to where Prentiss stood, and said:

“I presume, sir, that this young gent as was playing with us will represent you in a little affair we have on hand.”

Reginald bowed stiffly. The driver was a big, coarse-looking fellow, shaggy and unkempt, and dirty withal, though he affected a resplendant elegance of dress that ill became him.

“Young gent,” said the driver, turning to the boy, “if you’ll come to my state-room, or into the bar, we can talk over this little matter.”

“Won’t that corner over there do as well? We shall not be disturbed there,” said Streator, who heartily disliked the idea of any tendency to sociability with this coarse-grained ruffian.

“Jest as well, I reck’n,” said the man sulkily, as if divining what was in the boy’s mind.

“Remember, Frank,” whispered Prentiss, “just what

my position is in this matter; and, above all, don't give either of our names until we are convinced that my challenger is a gentleman."

"And what weapons had I better name?" asked Streator, also in a whisper.

"Rapiers; they are the fairest weapons to fight with, and we can easily procure a pair in New Orleans."

"But suppose your man isn't going that far?"

"He must if he wants to fight me. As the challenged party, I have the right to name the time, place and weapons."

The slave-driver had already taken a seat in the corner indicated, and there Frank Streator joined him. The details were quickly arranged. The big fellow objected to rapiers, but consented when told that no other terms would be accepted.

"My principal desires to withhold his name for the present," said Streator, haughtily, "and will not fight in any event unless convinced that your man is a gentleman."

"My man makes the same conditions," said the driver, with an offensive leer.

"Then that ends the matter for the present," Streator rejoined, disdainfully. "See me in this cabin, one hour before we reach New Orleans, and remember you must satisfy us that your principal is a gentleman."

"I reck'n I can do that," the driver answered, grimly.

Frank joined his friend, and together they started for the upper saloon. On the stairs Prentiss unintentionally jostled the man who had challenged him.

“ We shall soon meet on equal ground, I understand. Look out for yourself then,” hissed the latter.

“ When I am satisfied that you are a gentleman,” said Reginald, coldly, looking the other full in the eye, “ I will meet you. It shall be to the death, if you wish.”

“ Ay, to the death it shall be!” rejoined the gambler, savagely.

“ My cousin and a school-girl friend are on board,” said Reginald to Frank Streater, as they walked along toward the main saloon. “ We will spend the rest of the evening with them; but mind, not a word about our escapade.”

“ By no means,” replied Frank, warmly.

Dianne seemed more than pleased at the return of her new-found admirer, and when Elsie had an opportunity she whispered in her cousin’s ear:

“ You have done splendidly, Reggy, my dear. She has looked toward the stairs at least twenty times in the last hour. Follow my instructions and she’ll be yours soon enough.”

“ Then you have given up the idea of claiming me for yourself?” he asked, roguishly. But he felt exhilarated and happy, and devoted himself to Dianne Lorraine with a courtesy and a sincerity that could not fail to make an impression upon her.

There was an orchestra in the cabin, but the sounds of the music only served to give greater privacy to the conversation in which the two couples indulged. At eleven the ladies retired, and an hour later Reginald and Streater turned in for the night.

The days and evenings that followed were one long

dream of bliss to Reginald Prentiss. He had eyes and ears for none but Dianne. Even what had taken place during the first night on the "Girard" seemed almost obliterated from his memory. His thoughts seldom reverted to the duel which must be fought upon his arrival in New Orleans. Reginald's nature was one of those which rested completely in the Bible maxim, "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

Even when he momentarily reflected on the probable deadly conflict that lay before him it caused him little uneasiness, and no pain. If he came from the meeting alive, then the road would be as clear as ever for his marriage with Dianne Lorraine, if he could win her. She was a Southern woman by birth, tradition and instincts, and a death brought about by her lover in a fairly fought duel would cast no stigma upon him in her eyes.

On the other hand, should he fall, and it was more than possible that he would, then the loss of this beautiful woman under those circumstances could not grieve him. So for all these reasons, the approaching "affair of honor" cast no gloom over his spirits, and his dream of bliss was, for the time being, undisturbed.

On the night before the morning when the "Mabel Girard" would steam into New Orleans, Frank Streater came to him with an anxious face, and said:

"I'm afraid that other fellow has procured a pair of foils somewhere and is coaching up with his second. As I came by one of the forward state-rooms down below, I heard a clashing from within that made me suspicious. You had better practice with me, if only with canes."

But Reginald smiled good-naturedly, and answered carelessly:

“Don't let your fears get the better of you, Frank. I have fenced in Paris under the best instructors, and there is where you see good work done with the rapiers. To my mind the fact that our man is practicing is a confession of his lack of skill and confidence.”

And so the matter was dismissed for the time being.

Reginald Prentiss, fascinated from the first by the beautiful Dianne Lorraine, was now completely in her gentle power. It is a curious paradox that the proudest natures are the most humble in love. He worshiped this brilliant girl, and his devotion extended to the minutest of her attributes. A handkerchief which she had inadvertently dropped during a conversation with him on their second evening on board the “Girard” he had picked up covertly and treasured ever since. Its perfume reminded him of Dianne, and in the retirement of his state-room he kissed this simple bit of muslin with a passion he would not have dared to betray to her.

“If it were not for the possibility of a duel,” Prentiss mused after Streater had left him, “I would make the effort this evening to make Dianne my own beyond the question of a doubt. If it were not for this nasty business, I might perhaps take her to my home as my affianced wife.”

But Reginald knew there was a chance that he might not come away from a meeting with the gambler whose name, even, was unknown to him at present.

“If the fellow is a gentleman, from a social standpoint,

I must fight him; although, if he be, as I trust, a professional blackleg, then I can not and will not. Three days at the most, if I am alive, and I can know the best or the worst from my darling.”

It was the suspense, not lack of confidence in himself on the field, or in Miss Lorraine's affections, that made Reginald fretful on the last night of that memorable journey down the Mississippi. He joined Dianne and Elsie, who, with Frank Streater, were ensconced in their favorite corner in the main salon.

But try as he would he could not shake off the feelings that overpowered him. It was not a dread of the outcome of the morrow that disturbed him, but a consciousness of the fact that at the time when he most wanted to lead Dianne aside and whisper his love in her ear, and he could not in honor do so. Indeed, he was superstitious enough to feel that, if he did, it might invoke a wrath from above or below that would effectually cut off all his hopes of winning the beautiful girl.

It is no wonder that Prentiss was glad to retire that evening when the time came; but he was up betimes the next morning, after a not very restful night. The boat was already made fast and the passengers were going ashore. He found Elsie readily enough, and on looking down the boat he saw Dianne some distance away.

She was talking in an animated way with the gambler who had challenged him.

There appeared to be great cordiality between them, and no little display of affection on Miss Lorraine's part.

Reginald's quick eye took in every thing, his head seemed

to be turning with a sudden rush, and his heart beat so violently that it threatened to suffocate him.

Had Dianne, then, already a lover?

Were his hopes to be blighted by a blackleg?

Or was it possible that Dianne was a clever adventuress in league with the gambler?

No! Perish that last thought! She was as good and pure-minded as she was beautiful.

But Miss Lorraine was coming toward him. He would soon fathom the mystery that surrounded her connection with that flashy young gambler.

“Oh, Elsie, dear,” she cried, impulsively; “I’ve had such a surprise! Gasparde has been on the boat almost the whole trip, and I never knew it until five minutes ago. Oh, Reginald—I—I—mean, Mr. Prentiss,” she stammered, confusedly, and then added: “I am sorry you could not have seen him. I wanted him to meet you, but he was in a hurry to get ashore, and promised to call on us at the hotel this afternoon.”

“And who is he—this Gasparde?” Reginald asked, calmly, but with a heavy sinking at the heart.

“Only my brother,” Dianne responded quickly, as if she comprehended what was passing in his mind, “but a very good and kind brother.”

“Your brother?” the young man asked, hoarsely, though he tried to control himself.

And Dianne wondered what made him so suddenly silent and gloomy.

But poor Reginald. What a storm of conflicting emotions was raging within him. If he killed Gasparde Lor-

raine what was there left to him of hope? Dianne could never be his, and she would loathe her brother's slayer.

On the other hand he could not refuse to fight.

“When I am satisfied that you are a gentleman I will meet you. It shall be to the death if you wish.”

These had been his words to the gambler. He could not declare that Dianne's brother was not a gentleman. Whichever way he turned for relief from this horrible predicament, Prentiss could see none.

Streator came up at this juncture and said:

“Ladies, you must excuse Mr. Prentiss and myself for an hour or two as we have business of importance on hand. We will see that you are provided with a carriage, and then rejoin you at the hotel later.”

This said, Streator picked up Elsie's wraps and traveling-bag and started for the gang-plank. Reginald performed a like duty for Dianne, and the young ladies were soon provided with a conveyance, and were on their way to the hotel.

The young planter had but a vague realization of the things that had just transpired. He believed that he had seized Dianne's hand and kissed it at parting, but whether he really had, he was not positive.

“Now, Reggy,” said Streator, after the girls had departed in the conveyance, “I have arranged to meet our men, the gambler and the driver, at a coffee-house on Sterling Street. There your challenger proposes to establish his reputation to your satisfaction.”

“I am already satisfied that he is a gentleman, social-

ly," replied Prentiss, "and I will fight him as soon as he pleases."

Frank was astounded at his principal's sudden change of base, but wisely said nothing.

Reginald had determined not to kill Dianne's brother under any circumstances.

Rather than that, the field of honor should be his own grave.

With this resolution firmly fixed, the young planter followed his friend and second down the street.

CHAPTER IV.

A LIFE FOR A LIFE—WHOSE SHALL IT BE?

“ I BELIEVE you are positively blue,” said Frank Streator, after the friends had gone a little way in silence.

“ If I am, perhaps there is a reason for it,” was Reginald’s answer.

“ I should say so,” ejaculated Streator.

“ What do you mean by that?”

“ Why, Reggy, do you think I am blind to your warm side toward that girl?”

“ Comparisons are odious,” was the response; “ so are such metaphors.”

“ But, assuredly, old fellow, aren’t you head over heels in love with Miss Lorraine?”

“ That is rather a direct question,” rejoined Prentiss; “ but suppose I am, why should I be so blue about it?”

“ Perhaps you are afraid you won’t come out of this scrape alive,” suggested Streator, compassionately.

“ On the contrary, my dear boy, I am not a particle uneasy about the possible outcome of the matter.” And Reginald tried to manifest a cheerfulness he did not by any means feel.

“ Then,” persisted the youth, “ are you afraid she would look upon you with disfavor, simply because you fought a duel?”

“ Dianne is a Southern woman,” Prentiss answered,

“and has all the instincts of her sectional traditions. If I ran away from a meeting of honor, it would make her detest me as nothing else could. If I am out of spirits, and I don't deny that I am, it is not because I think she abhors duelling.”

“He calls her Dianne already,” mused the boy. “Then he is thoroughly caught, and it is something in connection with that girl that makes him so dispirited at a time when he should have all his wits and courage about him.”

And Frank Streater was right, though he had no clearer idea of the real cause of his friends perturbation than before. He was filled, nevertheless, with terrible misgivings, and pictured to himself a most horrible death for the young planter. The boy felt that he had been instrumental in making this deadly meeting necessary. He thought about it ruefully as the two walked on in silence for a few moments.

“Reggy,” he broke in at last, unable to bear the torture of his thoughts any longer, “I want you to reconsider your decision. Let me fight in your place, and if zeal counts, I will not disgrace your coaching in the encounter.”

“I thought I had already given you a final answer!” said Prentiss, in some surprise.

“Yes, but I beg you to reconsider,” urged the boy. “I shall not feel reconciled with myself unless you do.”

“I can not let you fight in my place,” answered Reginald; “it would be deliberate murder. Why, you don't know the first principles of rapier practice.”

“Very true, but I might prevail upon them to substi-

tute pistols," pleaded Streator. "I certainly know how to handle fire-arms."

"Possibly," assented Reginald, impatiently, "but I doubt if you can shoot as well with pistols as our man, whom I am convinced is a gambler by profession, and a cool, desperate one at that."

"But I am cool," protested Frank, with an impulsiveness that readily belied his words.

"Then show a little of it now," returned the planter, "instead of wearying me before the fight with useless dissension."

Streator bit his lip in disgust at his inability to carry his point, and lapsed into silence as moody as that of his companion.

In a few minutes they reached Sterling Street, and a short walk brought them to the coffee-house. The seeming slave-driver was impatiently pacing the sidewalk outside, while his principal, the gambler, was seated at one of the windows, smoking reflectively, and apparently without an unpleasant thought on his mind.

Reginald was as capable of as much dissimulation as his enemy, and the two met coldly, without any display of feeling.

"You now have an opportunity to satisfy yourself of my position in the world," said the gambler. "I have written a few addresses on the back of my card, and if your friend will make the few calls necessary, I think he will be abundantly convinced."

"I have no longer any doubts in the matter," said Prentiss, calmly, waving away the pasteboard without looking

at it. "I am satisfied that you are a gentleman, Mr. Lorraine, and I am ready to give you all the satisfaction you desire."

The gambler looked surprised.

"How do you know my name?" he inquired.

"I accidentally discovered it, and I am very sorry that we are under the necessity of crossing swords."

"Then you wish to beg my man's pardon, and turn over that stake money?" demanded the driver, insolently.

"On the contrary, the money is at the victor's disposal," said the planter; "and as for apologizing, I can not consistently when I should be perfectly ready to repeat my offense under similar conditions."

"Then there is nothing to be done until our seconds have purchased the rapiers," said Lorraine.

"Only one thing more. As I know your name, permit me to hand you my card."

The other received it courteously and read the name, but Reginald could see no signs of recognition on the gambler's countenance.

"Now, young gent, if you'll come along with me we'll buy the blades," said the driver, who seemed somewhat wearied with the long interchange of frigid civilities.

Streator bowed and followed the other second into the street.

Reginald took a seat at one of the windows of the coffee-house and lighted a cigar. From where he sat he had a good opportunity to study the other's face without danger of detection.

"Who could believe that fellow to be Dianne's brother?"

thought Prentiss. "Why, they are as different as day and night. For, while he is cold, calculating and revengeful, she is the exact reverse in every way."

It was indeed, hard to believe; but he had Dianne's word for it, and that was all he needed.

To the young planter, who deliberately resolved to meet death himself rather than kill his opponent, this period of waiting seemed like an interminable age. In reality, the seconds were gone less than an hour. When they returned, Streator carried a long slender bundle under one arm.

"Once more, sir, I ask you if you want to beg my man's pardon and stop the fight?" demanded the driver, striding over to where Reginald Prentiss sat.

"I have no excuses to make," rejoined the planter. "Has Mr. Gasparde Lorraine weakened?"

"By no means," shouted the gambler, springing to his feet with alacrity. "All I want is a fair field and no favor, and the swords will settle the rest."

"Then all is ready, I believe," said Streator, speaking for his friend.

"Our carriage is at the corner below here," said Lorraine's second, and they went out into the street.

"Our carriage is up at the other corner, Reggy. I did not want to attract any attention by going together. We will meet them on the field," Frank explained.

"Very good," assented his principal. "And where does the meeting take place?" he inquired, as they seated themselves in their conveyance.

"In the country, about six miles out of the city."

“ In a retired spot, I hope.”

“ So secluded that there will be no danger of spectators.”

“ And you have seen to engaging a surgeon?”

“ Assuredly; two of the best in New Orleans are already on the way in a third carriage.”

“ And of course they know where we are going?”

“ They do.”

“ Then I don't see that there is anything more to be said about the matter. The rest will develop itself when I cross swords with Lorraine.”

And Reginald settled down in his seat, and pretended to enjoy his cigar. But he chewed the end of it nervously for a while, twisted the wrapper, and finally was obliged to throw the weed away altogether.

Frank noticed all this, and was not a little disturbed by what he was constrained to believe a sign of weakness in his principal. It was not a weakness born of fear; that he knew, but he could not imagine a plausible reason for his friend's uneasiness.

“ Prentiss, my dear friend,” said the boy, impulsively, when he could no longer bear the silence, “ what is the trouble with you? You are not yourself, and you will not be in condition to fight unless you can cheer yourself up. You are troubled. Can't you confide in me?”

“ I would confide in you readily, my boy, if there was anything to confide,” was the unsatisfactory answer.

“ But there is something the matter,” asserted Streater. “ You have a reason out of the ordinary for not wanting to fight this Lorraine fellow. Now, haven't you?”

“Ye-e-s,” dubiously.

“And I ought to know about it, in case anything happens to you. Oh, by Jove! Lorraine, Lorraine; that’s the girl’s name, and the fellow’s too. Have they anything in common?”

Reginald faltered, looked away from his questioner, and then said, brokenly:

“They are brother and sister, Frank. Can you understand my position, now?”

“That you love the girl and must fight her brother?”

“Exactly.”

“Then, Reggy, my dear friend, for the third time, I urge you to let me take your place. I do not urge; I command you to do it.”

“But how would that help matters?” Prentiss inquired, almost listlessly.

“You can’t kill the brother of the girl you love,” asserted Streator, with the vehemence of conviction.

“As well do that as let you do it,” was the answer.

“I can’t present my side of the case to your satisfaction,” said the boy, “but without more ado I insist upon having my way.”

“And I insist that you shall not,” quoth Reginald.

“Frank, you came here as my friend. Act that part to the end and you have my gratitude. Don’t ‘insist’ any more, for it is useless.”

So they rode on in comparative silence for upwards of an hour. Their way was south, along the levee for a good part of the distance. Then an abrupt turn to the westward took them through a small forest which shut out

the sight of the water. On the other side of this forest was a narrow strip of field, higher and dryer than much of the surrounding country.

It was here that the meeting had been arranged to take place, and the surgeons were already on hand. Nothing had yet been seen of Lorraine and his friend, but this was explained by the fact of their having taken a different, more round-about course.

“We haven’t heard from the other party yet,” said one of the medical men, coming forward as Reginald and his friend alighted.

“They’ll undoubtedly be here soon,” the young planter replied.

“You’ve been getting up a pleasant reception for us, I see,” said Streator, with a touch of good-natured irony, as his eye fell upon the lint, bandages, thread and surgical implements spread out upon the ground.

“These things are very apt to be needed,” said the man of medicine, griml

The roll of wheels here diverted the attention of everybody to an approaching carriage, which contained Gasparde Lorraine and his friend.

“On hand, I see; you haven’t shown the white feather so far,” grunted the slave-driver, as he surveyed the quartet of men awaiting them.

There was no reply to this. It merited none.

The gambler said nothing, but as soon as he had alighted walked along over the ground to study its formation.

Reginald, who had already attended to this preliminary, took off his coat. Other garments followed, until he

stood in his shirt and trousers, Frank Streater superintending these preparations. To give the planter's sword freer play the boy ripped off the shirt sleeve with his knife.

Gasparde Lorraine followed suit, and in less than five minutes after his arrival both men were stripped, each had examined his rapier carefully and made sure of its quality, and they awaited the pleasure of the seconds.

"Gents," said the driver, "there is just one more chance for Mr. Prentiss to apologize. If he will do that, and hand over the stake money he stole from our table, then his apology will be accepted by my man."

"There is no desire to do either," said Streater, looking at his principal for his cue; "the fight must go on, unless Mr. Lorraine withdraws the challenge."

"Which Lorraine won't do to-day."

"Then let us get our men in position."

Silently the duelists faced each other.

Both were splendid specimens of physical development. Reginald was taller and heavier than his opponent, but in all other respects they appeared evenly matched. Calm and determined, they took their places.

"Guard!" shouted the gambler's second.

Prentiss and Lorraine touched each other lightly with the tips of their rapiers, to make sure that the distance was correct.

Then the blades clashed together over their heads as they drew themselves into position.

"Are you ready?" asked the slave-driver.

"Quite ready," came from both men.

“ One!”

“ Two!”

“ Three!”

Again the blades clashed; this time with rapid and resonant ring. The bodies of the duelists seemed enveloped in flashes of steel.

It was a life or a life! Which would succumb?

“ Reggy is deathly pale, but he is cool; he has the best chance,” thought Streater, as he watched them.

“ If I can't tire him out and wound him slightly, I must let him kill me,” was the thought uppermost in Reginald's mind. “ I can't run Dianne's brother through, God have mercy on me!”

CHAPTER V.

A DASTARDLY TRICK AND A PATHETIC SIDE SCENE.

FOR several minutes there was no change. Both men seemed to be watching for an opening in the other's guard, but found none.

There was a sharp, quick interchange of blows. Thrust followed thrust, parry succeeded parry, and feints were freely made.

But to Frank Streator it was plain that Lorraine was forcing the attack, and he wondered at it for he had every confidence in Reginald's skill as a fencer.

At last, by a dexterous twist, the young planter disarmed his adversary, whose sword was sent flying through the air a distance of twenty feet ere it struck the ground.

"I await you, sir," said Prentiss, indifferently, lowering the point of his blade with a slight salute.

As Lorraine walked slowly to the spot where the sword had fallen, his second followed; and, under pretext of examining the rapier, he found opportunity to whisper:

"He's a better man than you, Gasparde. Watch your chance, or he'll finish you when you show signs of getting tired."

"What do you mean?" whispered the gambler, cautiously.

"I mean he's only playing with you."

"For what purpose?"

“To run you through when you are too tired to look after yourself.”

“Do you think he can best me?”

“If you ain't careful he can.”

“And am I not careful?”

“That ain't the word. Tricky is what I mean.”

And the slave-dealer gave his principal a knowing look.

“And that will lead to shooting, probably,” said Lorraine, slowly, as if measuring the chances involved in the driver's proposition.

“So much the better if they do shoot,” was the quick response; “we lead at that game.”

“How are you provided with fire-arms?” asked the gambler, in the same low tone that both had previously used.

“I've got a pair of navies,” answered the wretch.

“That is well,” responded Gasparde, “for I didn't think to bring any kind of a weapon with me. If there is any trouble, I will turn to you; hand me one of the irons, quick, and don't wait for a signal to shoot. I follow you. If I can run Prentiss through, he's as good as a dead man at the start. Then—”

“Then I'll make quick work of the boy with him,” the slave-dealer chimed in, excitedly. “After that we'll both turn our attention to the sawbones and the hackmen, if they show any signs of interfering.”

The conversation had been a hurried one, and the gambler and his second, meanwhile, bent the rapier, felt of its edge and point, and as soon as their plans were made they

appeared to be satisfied with its condition and joined their opponents.

It would seem strange to any man possessing the slightest feelings of honor that Gasparde Lorraine could deliberately contemplate such a vile piece of treachery, when Reginald, had he wished, could have finished him at the time of disarming.

Frank Streator was thoroughly suspicious of the gambler and his companion, and had watched them with a feeling of great uneasiness.

“Look out for them, Reggy,” he whispered; “they are plotting something over there that doesn’t bode you any good.”

“Let them plot,” answered Reginald, listlessly; “I don’t care much how it comes out.”

But the boy did. He strolled slowly, as if without definite purpose, past the surgeons, who were watching the proceedings with at least a professional interest, and whispered to the nearer:

“I suspect those fellows. Will you see fair play?”

“We are armed,” returned the surgeon, “and can be depended upon as gentlemen if there are any signs of crooked business.”

That satisfied Frank, who strolled back to his principal.

The opponents again took their positions, found their distances as before, and waited for the signal.

“Guard!” shouted the gambler’s second.

Reginald’s lowered blade shot through the air and glistened over his adversary’s head.

But Gasparde Lorraine made a rapid thrust straight at the young planter's heart.

Quick as a flash, Prentiss let the point of his rapier fall, and the weapon clashed harmlessly as he veered abruptly to one side, and thus foiled the dastardly attack.

Yet not quite harmlessly had their swords met, after all, for Reginald's right hand was bleeding profusely from a deep cut across the back, where the point of the gambler's weapon had penetrated.

The driver, who believed that shooting must now ensue, sent both hands to his hip-pockets. Streator and the surgeons did likewise. There was a moment of glaring mistrust and apprehension on all sides.

But Reginald was equal to the occasion.

"I am satisfied that it was due to a mistake, or over-excitement," he said, calmly. "Pray let us go on before my hand gets in too bad trim."

Streator was much disgusted, and would probably have protested against carrying on the fight, but the other second quickly called "Guard," and counted rapidly, "One, two, three!"

The conflict of the blades rang out again on the still morning air, but there was a new significance in the adroit movements of Reginald Prentiss.

His eyes glittered, his lips were compressed, and his former moodiness had disappeared.

He was leading now; he was on the aggressive, and his rascally adversary was put to the utmost test of his skill.

One, two, three, four! One, two, three four! One, two, three, four!

Reginald had purposely dropped into one of the manual drills of his old French fencing-master, and the reason and effect of this were soon apparent.

Lorraine, parrying the thrusts as best he could, began to look for each movement of that drill in regular order, and they came in unflinching sequence until—

Until the young planter saw his opportunity, made a new thrust that confused the gambler, who parried so clumsily that, ere he could recover, Prentiss had driven his sword into his side.

Gasparde fell backward with a groan of acute agony, and the physicians rushed up to him.

Reginald had let go the hilt of his weapon, which now stood upright in the wounded duelist's body.

“Well done, Reggy!” said Streater, approvingly, as he hurried over to his principal.

But the young planter's face was ghastly pale.

“I shall live, Frank,” he murmured, brokenly, “but my last hope of happiness went with my sword a moment ago.”

“You have wounded that scoundrel,” said Frank, soothingly, “but you can yet win the girl.”

“How?”

“By showing her what a wretch her brother was, and by telling her that he forced the duel upon you.”

“Impossible!” Reginald groaned.

“And why impossible?”

“Where is the girl, Frank, who could believe her brother a villain? Even if she could be convinced of it, would

any good woman in this broad land turn against her brother's memory and marry the man who had killed him?"

There was an awful impressiveness in the speaker's tone and manner as he asked these questions. Frank perceived that what he had intended as consolation was only goading his friend to deeper despair.

"I had determined to let him kill me," Reginald went on, after a pause, "but when he made that cowardly attack on me before the signal was given, my blood boiled, and I forgot that he was Dianne's brother—I forgot everything—in a frenzied resolve to pay him for the treachery."

The planter spoke with a bitterness which Frank greatly preferred to his previous wretchedness. But the old despair came back with thoughts of Dianne's sweet face, and Reginald Prentiss, proud man though he was, was nevertheless a pitiful sight to look upon.

The slave-driver, in his turn, was dumfounded. He appeared too much astonished to speak. The overthrow of his plans had been sudden, complete, and stupefying.

The surgeons meantime had carefully withdrawn the sword from Gasparde's side, uncovering a gaping wound, from which the blood poured with sickening copiousness.

"It's a bad cut," said one of the men of medicine, after a minute examination, "but with proper care he will pull through in a fortnight or so."

"He doesn't deserve to have got off so lightly," said the other surgeon to the disconcerted driver; "he's about the most scoundrelly man I ever saw in a duel!"

The driver, who appeared to have lost all courage with

the unfavorable turn of affairs, said nothing. He even pretended not to hear.

“Take me to some good hospital,” Lorraine whispered, faintly. “I want good attendance, and I have the money to pay for it.”

The gambler's injuries were soon attended to as well as could be done with the limited material at hand. He was carried to his carriage, one of the surgeons and the discomfited second accompanying him back to New Orleans.

Reginald drew the other doctor aside and asked:

“Will he die?”

“The chances are good that he will live, but we can not say positively for two or three days,” was the answer.

“To what hospital have you sent him?”

“To St. Mark's, a private institution.”

“See here, doctor, that man has a sister. Do you think she ought to be notified of her brother's condition and whereabouts?”

“Why, bless your soul, no!” said the medical man, warmly; “it would only upset the girl when there isn't any need for it. Then the girl's presence might not have a beneficial effect on the fellow either. Give me her address, and if it is necessary I can send for her.”

“No,” answered Reginald; “I can keep myself informed of Mr. Lorraine's condition from day to day, and I will see that the lady is sent for if her brother's life is in any danger.”

The surgeon shrewdly suspected there was some strange reason for Prentiss' reticence, but he manifested no surprise and asked no questions.

Two hours later Elsie received a note at her apartments in the hotel which read as follows:

“ I must stay in the city with Frank for a few days. Will endeavor by all possible means to be home by Christmas. I think you and Miss Lorraine had better start today. Please ask her to accept my apologies for necessarily withdrawing my escort.

“ REGINALD.”

“ Oh, dear! I never knew him to act that way before,” said Elsie, when she had read this short missive through. “ And it is particularly strange conduct for a young man who is in love.”

“ Is he in love, Elsie dear?” asked Dianne, quietly.

But there was an unwonted amount of color in her face as she put the question. And Miss Prentiss perceived, when too late, that she had put her foot in it in her precipitation.

“ Why, to be sure he is,” she answered, seeing that an evasion might lead to even worse complications.

“ In love with whom, dear? Is it a secret?”

“ Why, goosey,” responded Elsie, “ you know as well as I do.”

“ I protest that I do not.”

“ Dianne, it’s your own sweet self, and none other.”

“ Oh!” said Miss Lorraine, curtly, but she colored painfully.

Elsie felt wonderfully ashamed of having thoughtlessly broken Reginald’s injunctions of secrecy; but she hastened

to repair the damage she had previously done his cause by saying:

“Dianne dear, don’t ever let Reggy know that I told you this, for I didn’t mean to. It escaped me so quickly that I didn’t realize it until the mischief was done. But, my dear friend and sister, if you can ever come to love Reggy, do so with all your heart, and I will always bless you. He’s a dear, good boy, and as worthy of you, Dianne, as you are in every way worthy of him. A better man doesn’t live. At least, I believe it.”

“It surprises me, then, that you don’t love him yourself,” was Dianne’s answer.

It was thoughtlessly said, but the shot went straight to its mark. A tear glistened in Elsie’s eye, her lips quivered and she turned away. But not before her friend saw it all.

Dianne was at her side in a moment, shamed and repentant.

“Elsie dear, don’t feel hurt. I didn’t mean it; I take it all back. I see how unkind I was. You love Reginald, and yet you would give him up.”

The storm-clouds had been rapidly gathering, and now they broke loose in a torrent of tears.

“Dianne, I do love him; indeed, I do!” sobbed Elsie; “but I will readily give him up to you. I am not as worthy of him as you are, and he would not be as happy with me.”

“You are far more worthy of him than I,” Miss Lorraine protested, warmly, “for you are willing to give him up—”

“And make him happier by doing so,” interjected Elsie. “Were he not happy, I could never be.”

“You are a noble girl, my darling,” said Dianne, with great warmth. “Such women as you are deserving of the princes of the earth or of heaven. So you would sacrifice yourself for Reginald?”

“And count myself the happier for doing so,” Elsie rejoined, wiping her swollen eyes in an endeavor not to belie her words. “And, Dianne, darling, you do love him, you will love him, and make his happiness your one care in life. Tell me, promise me.”

The unhappy girl fell on her knees, and wildly besought her friend to make Reginald Prentiss happy as she only could.

“I shall soon forget him,” Elsie declared, almost incoherently, “but he will never love any one but you. He will be constant, he will be good and true to you, and you will both walk hand in hand in a paradise of your own making.”

Dianne bent over the kneeling girl, kissed her, and lifted her to her feet.

“I will, Elsie; I will, my darling, if he asks me to,” she promised.

And Elsie Prentiss gave up forever the man she loved, without a murmur, and without another visible tear. How many of our mothers and sisters have similar pages in their life's history? Ah! how many of God's noblest women have sacrificed the truest, the tenderest passions of their heart of hearts to make the oftentimes selfish object of their devotion happy?

This unselfish little woman had, through it all, borne nobly the pain of Dianne's conquest of Reginald, and had her friend not made that ill-timed, heedless remark, she would probably have kept her secret forever within that anguish-racked breast.

CHAPTER VI.

WHAT BECAME OF THE MONEY.—A TERRIBLE ORDEAL.

ON that same afternoon Elsie and Dianne left New Orleans for the Prentiss plantation. By rail they traveled as far as the Streator plantation, whence the remainder of the journey consisted of a carriage ride of eight miles.

Reginald, who did not deem it best to meet Dianne until her brother's recovery was positively assured, took rooms with Frank Streator at a not very pretentious hotel near St. Mark's Hospital.

In the evening Frank learned at the hospital that Gasparde Lorraine was in a fever. Further than that the resident physician was uncommunicative; he would not hazard an opinion as to the wounded man's chances of recovery.

On the strength of this news Prentiss passed a miserable night of it, tossing restlessly in his bed for hours, and it was not until daylight that sleep first visited him. Slumber gained under such circumstances is generally heavy, and it was in Reginald's case. The sun was high when Streator broke noiselessly into his chamber and woke him up with:

“What do you think, old fellow? Your man has passed safely through the fever, and is resting quietly. The head-nurse told me herself that in a few days Lorraine will be as well as ever.”

This was good news to Prentiss, who, under its stimulus, arose, dressed and eat a hearty breakfast.

“ I don't know how I came to do it,” he said, reflectively, over their cigars afterward.

“ Do what?” Frank inquired.

“ Why, run Lorraine through.”

Streator shrugged his shoulders and answered:

“ It was a case of superior swordsmanship, I should say. That is what you went there for.”

“ Not at all, my dear boy; on the contrary, I went there with a very different intention.”

“ You certainly didn't go there to let him do for you?” said the youth, incredulously.

“ Strange as it may seem, that was precisely my plan.”

Streator looked aghast. It was some moments before he could grasp the idea. In his astonishment he forgot his cigar. The glow on the end of it paled gradually into a gray tint.

“ See here, Reggy,” he finally blurted out, “ you don't mean to say that you went into a duel with the actual purpose of letting an amateur fencer run a long blade through your body?”

“ I certainly did,” Reginald answered, momentarily amused at his friend's consternation.

“ Rather than kill that girl's brother, you would let him kill you?” demanded Frank, still incredulous.

“ Yes.”

“ And why didn't you?”

“ That's what surprises me now. But when he played that cowardly trick on me I was fiendishly enraged. I

parried his blow, and from that moment I went in for blood.”

“ And you got it.”

“ I did.”

“ And then collapsed, and wished yourself wounded in his place.”

“ Not quite so bad as that,” replied Reginald. “ What the doctor said on the field gave me hope that it would all come out right. The news you brought me last night put me in the dumps again, and I didn’t sleep much through the night, but the encouraging news you brought me before breakfast has made a new man of me.”

Frank had by this time mastered his intense astonishment sufficiently to think of his cigar. He puffed and pulled, but no smoke came from it. While fumbling for a light another question popped into his head.

“ Reggy,” he asked, “ what has become of the money that caused all this row?”

“ I have it here,” replied Prentiss, drawing from an inside pocket a well-filled wallet. “ There was considerable specie in that pile, but for convenience I got the purser of the boat to put it into bills for me. Here it is.”

“ But I don’t want it,” protested Frank, pushing away Reginald’s hand.

“ As the victor,” was the response, “ I have a right to dispose of it as I think best. Take it.”

“ I don’t want it, and I won’t touch it,” Streater repeated, again pushing his friend’s hand away.

“ But it’s yours by right,” urged Reginald. “ If it

hadn't been I shouldn't have interfered at all in that little game. You held the highest hand that was dealt."

"I know it," assented the youth, "but I won't touch a penny of it, and you might as well stop trying to make me. Money that has brought a wound to one man, and possible loss of happiness to another, can do me no good. It would positively be a harbinger of ill-luck."

Prentiss was about to return the wallet to his pocket, when another thought struck him.

"Frank, my boy, I will make a compromise with you. Accept what you contributed to the table for that hand, and I will do whatever you wish with the rest."

"That isn't a bad idea, Reggy. How much is there?"

"Just twelve hundred and eighty dollars."

"Of which I put in a fourth; that made my ante three hundred and twenty dollars."

"Here it is," said Reginald, quietly, counting out the bills and pressing them into the boy's hand.

"And now," said Frank, "hear my conditions—you must put the rest of that money by until you get an opportunity to do some great good with it. I intend never to go near a gaming-table again, and I mean to make a decent use of the last money I have won at it. It shall be a fund to do some good for some deserving person or persons when you encounter such."

"Spoken like a man, every word of it!" cried Reginald, enthusiastically. "Now, come out with me and I will bank this money at once."

The business was accomplished in less than half an hour, and the friends had nothing to do except idle their

time away and get frequent bulletins as possible from St. Mark's.

At four in the afternoon they learned Lorraine had another slight touch of fever, but, on the whole, the symptoms were very favorable.

On the 24th of December, the third day after the duel, the gambler had so far recovered from the effects of his wound that he was permitted to sit up for an hour in the afternoon. All danger of a relapse or of any serious complications of any nature being now practically past, Reginald decided not to delay his journey home any longer. He would see Dianne, tell her all, and, if needs be, say the final and lasting good-bye to her, the parting that should break his heart.

Acting on his friend's request, Streater bought a case of wine and sent it anonymously to St. Mark's for the sole use and benefit of Gasparde Lorraine.

Christmas morning! The friends were up bright and early, for their train started at seven o'clock. It was an hour's ride by rail to Streater's, and from there it was nearly two hours more by carriage, owing to the low, marshy condition of the soil in that sugar-growing district.

"Poor Reggy looks as if he were riding to his own funeral," thought Frank, as he gazed at his friend's moody, woe-begone countenance. "And the worst of it is, I am afraid the last rites will be said over his broken heart when he tells that girl, and throws himself on her pity."

And here the thought that he himself was the wretched

cause of all this misery to the young planter filled Streator with a strange species of self-aversion.

“Anyway, it’s an ill wind that blows no good,” he thought, while casting about in his mind for a ray of comfort. “If nothing more is gained, it has completely weaned me from the gambling-table. But poor Reggy! He is almost heart-broken already, for there is little hope for him. I would give up my life willingly, if it would aid him at all in realizing that faint hope. Henceforth I shall be his guardian angel, if a man can be considered in that light.”

Frank Streator was addicted to confused metaphors and quaint thoughts, even in the most critical of times. It was one of the symptoms of his early, undeveloped manhood.

A shriek from the engine’s whistle, a rumbling and jolting of car-wheels, and a perceptible diminution in the train’s speed told them that they were nearing Streator’s, as the little station was called. In another minute the two disconsolate fellow-travelers were standing side by side on the platform and the ramshackle train was slowly puffing out of the station again.

“Merry Christmas, Mas’r Reg’nald,’ an’ a Merry Christmas tuh yo’, Mas’r Frank! It done do an ole man’s eyes good tuh see sech fraish young faces in dis yer gloomy kentry.”

An old negro was shuffling along the platform toward the young men, bowing obsequiously and grinning almost from ear to ear as he spoke.

“And a right Merry Christmas to you, Uncle Damas-

cus," said Reginald, kindly, laying his hand on the old darky's shoulder.

"And the best of wishes from me too, uncle," supplemented Streator.

Whatever brutes may have done in times past, Southern gentlemen were never other than kind to faithful slaves.

"Missy Elsie, she done tole me tuh come ovar heah suah wid de kerridge; she say she know' yo' wouldn't keep away on Chris'mus," said he of the name of Damascus, with another series of ground-scraping bows.

"And Miss Lorraine is at the house, too, is she not?" Reginald asked.

"Yes, sah," said the aged negro, with a knowing wink at vacancy.

The parting between Prentiss and Streator was a rather mournful affair. Both tried to look cheerful and unconcerned, but the attempt was a lugubrious failure.

"I'll come down and see you to-morrow or the day after, and may God help you through the coming ordeal," said Frank, as Reginald was getting into the carriage.

Uncle Damascus cracked his wip, and the horses started off at a slow jog. The young planter tried to enjoy a cigar on the homeward ride, with but indifferent success; his mind was constantly occupied with what he should say to Dianne.

It was nearly ten o'clock when the Prentiss mansion was reached. Reginald's mother welcomed him in the hallway. She was a motherly woman, stout, of matronly appearance, and seemingly about fifty years of age. With

her was Elsie, and the young man wondered at the singularly quiet demeanor of his pretty cousin.

“Dianne is in the library, reading,” said the latter, almost in a whisper. “Go to her as soon as you have gone to your room and dressed. Why, Reggy,” she added, catching a better glimpse of his moody face, “you look as if this were anything but a happy home-coming for you!”

“Go into the library with Miss Lorraine,” he said to Elsie, when his mother started to return to her room, “but leave us soon after I come in.”

And Elsie obeyed, wondering what it could all mean.

The task of dressing was a feverish one, but the young man was presently arrayed to his satisfaction, and came down-stairs to enter the terrible ordeal whose outcome he only too plainly saw.

Dianne was ensconced in a snug chair near a cheery grate-fire. She had laid aside her book when the young man entered and rose to greet him with a glowing face.

“You have played truant for a long time, Mr. Prentiss, but you have come in time to make my Christmas more pleasant.”

Reginald bowed and tried to speak, but could only say:

“I am very glad of it.”

Then, noticing that Elsie had left the room, he came to the point at once.

“Miss Lorraine,” he said, “I have a great deal that I feel obliged to tell you, and I hardly know how to begin it.”

“Indeed!” in some surprise.

And she did not relish altogether his tone and manner.

“Miss Lorraine,” he began again, with some difficulty, “a sense of duty as host in this house will not even permit me to defer till to-morrow what I have to say. Mine is a horrible position indeed, and at the outset I beseech your charity.”

“One would think you a criminal, and I your judge,” Dianne began, but another look at his intensely solemn face checked further levity on her part.

“I fear that before I am through you will regard me very much in that light,” he answered, sadly; “but please be seated, for it will take you some time to hear me out.”

She resumed her seat at his request, and Reginald stood leaning against the mantel, studying the ceiling, the carpet, anything but her face, as he resumed:

“What I have to tell you first, I should, in the natural course of events, postpone until you were better acquainted with me. I say it now, not so much in justification of myself as that you may have a better comprehension of my position.

“Do not think me premature, Miss Lorraine, nor yet believe me lacking in courtesy or consideration. I may as well come to it at once. Since the first evening of our acquaintance I—I—I have loved you.”

He was looking into her eyes now. Those words, so often uttered under the happiest of auspices, had fired him. The passion they generated in him blinded him for a moment to all other recollections.

Dianne, too, was impassioned by this avowal, abrupt though not unexpected. She had been gazing at her hero,

but her eyes fell to the carpet. Impulsively, tenderly, though perhaps unconsciously, she raised her hand and gently rested it on his arm.

Too chivalrous to allow her to commit herself to any greater extent, under the circumstances, Reginald went on:

“I do not ask you, indeed I beseech you not to make any reply until you have heard all. I simply ask you to believe implicitly if you can what I have told you, Di—Dianne.”

It was the first time he had addressed her by her Christian name, and it gave him a momentary thrill of pleasure.

“I now come to the second part of what I have to tell you.

“On that same evening when we first met, I became involved in a dispute at a card-table. It resulted in a challenge, which I agreed to accept. The duel was fought on the outskirts of New Orleans. When I knew all the circumstances I would gladly have averted the encounter had it been possible to do so; but an apology from me was the only way in which I could accomplish it. As I had done nothing inconsistent with my sense of etiquette or honor, I could not avail myself of that means out of the difficulty. We fought; I ran my opponent through with a sword, and he was taken to the hospital, where he will gradually recover.”

“That was an unfortunate affair,” said Dianne, quietly; “but it had a much happier ending than many duels. No one can blame you, I am sure, if you acted up to your best sense of right and wrong.”

“But you will blame me, Miss Lorraine—Dianne. You will despise me when you know the rest.”

“I think not. Why should I?”

“Because—because—the man I wounded was—was—your brother.”

“My brother? Gasparde, my brother?” shrieked Dianne, bounding to her feet. “Oh, this is some cruel hoax! Tell me it is, tell me it is, Reginald, and I will forgive you the pain you have caused me!”

She looked appealingly into his sad, handsome face, but there she found only too plainly the confirmation of his words.

“I ask you to believe that I love you truly, Dianne,” he said, in subdued tones, “and I ask you to believe that had there been any possible way of avoiding an encounter I would have found it.”

“You love me, and yet you would kill my brother? Monster! You paradox of lover and friend, let this interview cease at once. I must leave this house at once. Its atmosphere stifles me!”

There was a sudden vehemence of anger and passion in the infuriated woman's tones that awed the man who stood before her.

Reginald sunk into a chair, his head fell forward into his hands, and he did not know when Dianne left the room.

CHAPTER VII.

FRANK STREATOR'S ACCOUNT OF THE DUEL.

DIANNE'S suddenly formed resolution to leave the Prentiss mansion was as suddenly carried out. She hastened to Elsie and then made known her intentions.

"Why, my dear girl," said that young lady, very much surprised, "you look as wild as Lady Macbeth herself might be supposed to look. What has happened, darling?"

But Dianne made no answer. She sunk into a seat in Elsie's cosy little boudoir, where the dialogue was taking place, and buried her face in her hands.

"I wonder what Reginald has told her," thought Miss Prentiss. "It must be something he has said or done that has caused this sudden resolve, and yet Reggy can't have been ungentlemanly to her. It's contrary to his nature to say hard things to any woman under the sun. Can it be that he has already proposed, and that she has taken it into her head to reject him, and leave the field, as she supposes, clear to me?"

"Dianne, darling," she said aloud, "can it be possible that my cousin has already asked you to be his wife?"

"No," answered Miss Lorraine, hotly, but without looking up.

"Dianne, do tell me what this is all about, unless you wish to drive me wild."

“Ask Mr. Prentiss; he may tell you,” was the only answer.

“Oh, dear; then it really is something Reggy has done,” thought Elsie, and then aloud: “Is it really so bad that you must leave us on Christmas, of all the happy days in the year?”

“I really must,” said Dianne, looking up with a white, hard-set face. “When does the next train go?”

“The only one back to New Orleans to-day leaves Streater’s at four. But I must go and tell auntie. She will not hear of your going.”

“Then I beg of you, dear, if you really do love me, not to say a word to her until it is time for me to go. Don’t make it too hard for me to bear, dear.”

Elsie, sorely perplexed and deeply grieved at this sudden turn of affairs, knew not what to do, and stood for several minutes fixedly watching her school chum’s face.

But Dianne’s countenance was sphinx-like in its immobility. It betrayed nothing more than the deepest anguish of soul; it gave no clew to the cause of the suffering.

At noon the girls had a lunch served in the boudoir, which room the guest steadfastly refused to leave until it was time for her to dress. At two o’clock, Mrs. Prentiss was made acquainted with Miss Lorraine’s determination. She perceived the futility of remonstrance and made none. The carriage was ordered, and Dianne presented herself before her hostess for leave-taking. Elsie insisted on accompanying her to the station, but her friend emphatically overruled her.

“Ask your cousin the name of the hospital,” said Miss

Lorraine, and Elsie, much mystified, departed to find Reginald.

“St. Mark’s,” she said, returning a few moments later.

Dianne drew on her gloves and went down-stairs, followed by Elsie, whose face presented a picture of acute woe. Mrs. Prentiss, having already said good-bye to her guest, did not reappear and Reginald was not to be seen. He had wisely concluded that it would be as well to keep to his room until after she had gone.

“Good-bye, dear,” said Miss Lorraine, her white face bearing the same rigidity it had worn ever since her interview with Reginald in the library. “Good-bye; we shall meet again at the seminary when the holidays are over.”

“Good-bye, darling,” sobbed Elsie, her self-restraint breaking down at the last moment. Poor, unselfish little woman, her heart was almost breaking now, when she realized the consequences to Reginald of Dianne’s going away.

Uncle Damascus presided on the box of the same carriage that had brought the young planter home in the morning. The aged coachman looked grouty enough at having been taken from his family circle just in time to lose the Christmas dinner with which the Prentiss slaves were always provided on that holiday.

Miss Lorraine entered the vehicle and arranged herself among the cushions. Then she kissed her hand to the sobbing Elsie on the veranda, who returned the salute lugubriously, and then the horses started off on a slow trot down the long graveled drive-way.

The curtains parted at a chamber window, and the pale

anguished face of a man peered yearningly after the carriage. He stretched out his arms, moaned brokenly, "Oh, my love, my lost love!" and watched the carriage out of sight.

But Dianne knew nothing of this. She was undergoing the acutest mental torture, for she, miserable, unhappy woman that she was, was constrained to believe that she had given her love to an unworthy man—a fiend in human shape, who could prize her only as a beautiful woman.

How she got to the end of her ride she never knew. Not once did she change her position ever so little among the cushions. She saw nothing on the way, looked neither to the right nor the left, but remained with her eyes fixed, unseeing, on the empty seat before her.

Streator's was reached at last, and the platform was deserted. Dianne passed into the little waiting-room, and there, by a stranger fortuity of circumstances was Frank Streator. He was puffing consolation from a short briar pipe, but he put it down on the settle and came eagerly forward.

"Miss Lorraine," he said, lifting his hat and stretching out his hand, "something told me you would be here, and I came on purpose to see you."

"Then I presume you know why I am here," she said, coldly acknowledging his salute, but not troubling herself to offer her hand.

"I was Mr. Prentiss's second," said the boy, simply.

"Then you were also leagued against my brother for his destruction?"

"Leagued against him? No, indeed; the challenge

came from him. My friend did not even agree to fight him until satisfied that he was a gentleman, and entitled to such a meeting."

"Gasparde a gentleman!" she echoed, with haughty disdain, and added with vehement incivility, "Why, he is more of a gentleman than either or both of you. He would not be guilty of such cruelty to a lady who was to be his guest, and he would not abet such a deliberate insult."

"My dear Miss Lorraine, I fear you do not at all understand the case," said Streator, struggling to be calm.

"Mr. Prentiss has told me," she replied, "that they quarreled over cards, that my brother was forced to challenge him, and that he fought Gasparde, knowing him to be my brother, and knowing me to be his and his mother's guest."

"That's just like Reggy," Frank broke in impatiently; "he was too much of a gentleman to tell you what could only make you despise your brother. Why, Lorraine acted the part of an arrant knave. He cheated—"

"Stop, sir!" cried Dianne, facing the youth with flashing eyes. "I will not hear another word. You would not dare to so insult me if Gasparde were here."

"You have done my friend an injustice," said Streator, excitedly, "and, by heavens, you shall hear me to the end! Do you think I will see Reginald Prentiss so bitterly calumniated in your heart when he is so little deserving of it? Reserve your judgment, Miss Lorraine, until you have heard my version of this affair, a version which Pren-

tiss was too noble-hearted to give you, but which I, as his friend, am determined that you shall know."

"I am helpless," said Dianne, bitterly, "and can not but hear if you insist. But you may say all you wish, deliberately lie, if you will, and it will not clear your blood-stained friend in my eyes."

"You must hear me," rejoined the boy, "even though I clearly see I can not forestall your prejudice. It is a long story. Please be seated."

Dianne glared at him for a moment, but silently took a seat, and Streator did likewise.

"In the first place," he began, "Prentiss was not playing, I was. Your brother and two of his friends were my companions—Prentiss was only a spectator. I was losing heavily. Your brother was winning in the same ratio, and I was fast becoming ruined. At last, I had the highest hand possible but one; that hand which would make mine worthless your brother secured by duplicates which he secreted under his leg. That would have defeated me, and robbed me of considerably over \$1,000 which I had honestly won. Reginald Prentiss, the best friend a man ever had, detected the fraud, and came to my rescue at the risk of being shot for his interference."

"And do you expect me to believe this?" Dianne asked, bitterly.

"I am not yet through with my story," answered Streator. "Reginald, when he discovered how infamously I had been swindled—"

"Stop, sir!" cried the girl, looking with her blazing, dilating orbs directly into Streator's eyes. "You shall

not couple the word 'swindler' with Gasparde's name; no, not if I have to so far forget myself as to stop your lying tongue by pulling it out.'

"Reginald seized the stake money from under his hands," Streator went on, ignoring the interruption with provoking coolness, "and then Lorraine pointed a pistol at his head, and ordered him to put the money down. Your brother would have been a deliberate murderer if a well-aimed champagne bottle had not struck him on the head and felled him to the floor."

Gasparde, when he met Dianne on the boat, had accounted for the scar on his head by saying it was the result of a foolish wrestling bout, but of this Miss Lorraine hardly thought now.

"When he rose to his feet," Streator resumed, "he drew a knife, and again tried to murder my friend, but the captain of the boat collared him and threatened to throw him into the river, as he deserved to be. Then came the challenge."

"Which your friend, Mr. Prentiss, made such good use of," Dianne rejoined, tauntingly.

"Which my friend, Mr. Prentiss, would have given all he possessed to have been able to honorably decline," supplemented Frank.

"Go on," said Dianne, cuttingly; "I am anxious to have the recital done with."

"I now come to the strangest, most incomprehensible part of it all, Streator went on, without looking at his companion. "When Reginald Prentiss discovered his opponent to be your brother, he went to the place of meet-

ing determined to die himself sooner than deprive you of even such a brother as Gasparde Lorraine."

"Indeed?" demanded Dianne, loftily.

"As his friend," answered the boy, "I know that to have been his purpose."

"He so thoroughly and nobly carried it out," said Dianne, with bitter irony.

"It would have been carried out," was the quick answer, "if Gasparde Lorraine had possessed ever so small a fraction of the honor and generosity which actuated his opponent in that duel. It was fought with rapiers. Reginald acted only on the defensive until he saw an opportunity to disarm the man who was seeking his life. Then your brother's sword went flying through the air and the noble fellow whom you have so misjudged might have killed him on the spot had he been so inclined."

"It is a wonder he did not, since he subsequently tried to," said Dianne, studying the floor.

"He did not subsequently try to," corrected Streater, "though I should have not blamed him if he did. It came about in this way: When they faced each other again Lorraine had seen enough of the other's superior swordsmanship to know that he had no chance in a fair fight; he aimed a cowardly blow at Reggy before the word had been given. Had it not been for a most skillful parry on my friend's part, your noble brother would have been successful in his third attempt at murder."

"It would be hard to imagine what more terrible charges you could bring against a man so superior to your friend, but I doubt not your fertile imagination will yet

serve you to that extent," said Miss Lorraine, looking at the other calmly.

"From the nature of things this conversation can not be a cordial one," the boy rejoined, "and it will not surprise me if it is hardly courteous either."

"Is not your little narrative yet ended?"

"Not yet, though there is little more to be told. Reginald overlooked Lorraine's cowardly attack, though his right hand was badly cut in avoiding it. Perhaps you noticed the scar when you met him this morning?"

Streator looked searchingly at her as he put this question. Dianne had seen the scar, remembered it, but gave no sign, made no answer to her interlocutor.

"They had faced each other again," the boy went on, "and I saw a change in Reggy. He was enraged at Lorraine's treachery, as what man would not have been? To make it short your brother's lack of skill with the rapier cost him a wound he richly deserved. He was taken to an hospital, and Reggy would not leave New Orleans until assured that he was out of danger. The last thing my friend did yesterday was to order a case of wine sent anonymously to the hospital for Lorraine's use during his convalescence. As his recovery is now assured, you need give yourself no alarm about a brother who is doubtless very dear to you."

Dianne was silent. Her anger had gone, and with it much of her disdain. Frank Streater had so much modified his manner that she could find no protest had she wished for being angry with this boy, whose sole offense after all was to see justice done his tried and trusted friend.

“I am very sorry, Miss Lorraine that this interview was necessary,” Frank went on after a pause. “I have been forced to say many things for which I shall not blame you for being angry with me. Believe me, I should not have permitted myself to offend you had it not been for my desire to right a friend who risked his life to save me from losing my money.”

“Do you ask me to believe my brother no better than a criminal?” asked Dianne, with something of her former hauteur and disdain.

“I do not urge it upon you in that light,” was the answer. “I have only told you the facts of a dramatic episode just as they really occurred. I do not even ask you to believe me, though I assure you that everything I have narrated did happen. Since Reginald Prentiss preferred to spare your feelings, I have felt called upon to state his defense to you.”

“And why, do you think, did he not attempt to exonerate himself, if such exoneration were so easy?”

In spite of herself, a self-conscious blush rose to the fair girl's forehead as she put this question, whose answer she so well knew.

Frank saw the blush, and he understood it.

“A gentleman's courtesy to a woman whom he esteems,” he answered, “would in a case like this prevent him from explaining that which his friend need have no hesitation in making clear.”

The shriek of a whistle, followed by the rumbling of cars, announced that the over-due train had arrived at last.

Frank arose, and his companion did likewise.

“If I have been a trifle more plain than courtesy would ordinarily permit, remember, Miss Lorraine, that I plead justice to a friend as my excuse.”

“I thank you,” was all Dianne could say.

His earnest words had made an impression upon her that she hardly strove to shake off.

Unceasingly during that hour's ride back to New Orleans did her mind grasp the problem.

Frank Streator's very impulsiveness, backed up by his appearance of great candor, inclined her to believe in him to a certain extent.

But on one point she was not convinced. No one could make her believe her brother really guilty of dishonorable conduct.

“I don't wish to do injustice to any one, but there is a great deal of mystery here,” she thought. “However, I shall be with Gasparde soon. He will tell me the truth; he will clear up everything.”

CHAPTER VIII.

“YOU ARE NOT MY SISTER, LEAVE ME!”

WHILE Dianne was still thinking over the strange events which had come to her knowledge within the past few hours, the train rolled into the depot at New Orleans.

She gathered up the few possessions she had with her, and alighting from the train, engaged the first cab-driver whom she encountered.

The St. Mark's Hospital was not far away, and when she made known her relationship to the wounded man, the head nurse showed no hesitation about admitting her to see him.

Gasparde was sitting up, though still pale and weak from the loss of blood and the run of the fever. About the first thing that Dianne noticed was a small bottle of champagne, which had been opened and which stood on a table at the side of the invalid.

Then she remembered what Frank Streator had told her of Reginald's anonymous kindness toward the brother of the woman whom he loved.

There might have been some signs of surprise in Lorraine's eyes when he first saw his sister coming into the ward where he was, but an observant person would have read no pleasure there.

But Dianne was not accustomed to demonstrations from him, so she came forward and kissed him, saying simply:

“ I have just learned that you have been wounded, Gasparde, and I came here at once. ”

“ I thought you were out in the country stopping with friends, ” he said, receiving her indifferently.

“ So I was, dear, ” she answered, somewhat evasively, “ but it was near here, and so I heard all about your being wounded, though not until to-day. ”

Dianne had determined not to tell him who her informant was until he was better able to bear the shock the news might impart, and Gasparde was too listless to inquire.

“ You seem quite comfortable here, ” she said, looking about her at the appointments. “ And I see you are provided with champagne, ” she added.

“ Yes, of course, but I shall have to pay just double price for the wine and everything else when I leave, ” Lorraine answered, with a sleepy yawn.

She saw that he did not suspect his supposed enemy of sending the champagne, and she did not enlighten him for the present.

“ I wish they would let a fellow smoke a cigar, but they are so devilish strict in here, ” he observed wearily, after a brief pause in the conversation.

“ You will soon be out of here, dear, ” Dianne answered, soothingly, “ and then you can have everything you want. I will engage apartments somewhere in the city, and I shall make you very comfortable during your convalescence. ”

Gasparde's only answer was a short little grunt, which did not convey any particular meaning.

The conversation flagged for the next half hour. For different reasons neither cared to talk much that day.

Let it not be supposed that Dianne Lorraine was not anxious to know her brother's version of the duel, but she did not think it wise to broach the subject until he was better able to stand that excitement such a conversation and the confession she had to make would entail.

At last the head nurse came in and said:

"I am sorry to cut your visit short, Miss Lorraine, but your brother needs rest free even from the slightest excitement more than he needs anything else at present, so I think you had better go. You can come again to-morrow at the same hour."

Dianne rose submissively.

"How soon do you think Mr. Lorraine will be in condition to be removed to his own quarters?" she inquired.

"Doubtless in a week," the head nurse answered, and escorted her to the outer door of the hospital.

Dianne was glad to reach the outside air, and for good reasons.

She had longed to throw her arms around Gasparde's neck and implore him to tell her all. She could not endure to believe against reason that Reginald had willfully wronged her brother. If Gasparde would tell her all the circumstances, she felt confident that they would not be altogether unfavorable to the young planter.

Did she love Reginald Prentiss now?

Ay, she did, and passionately, fondly, enduringly. She had striven that morning to hate him, but even her almost

indomitable will could not altogether triumph over her love and crush it out.

Yet her love was to be her curse, her bane. Gasparde and Reginald had crossed swords on the field of honor, and that, to her mind, meant a feud between the families which for generations could not be wiped out.

Dianne longed to exonerate her lover in her own mind, and that was the extent of happiness she could hope for in this world. Yet even so much would be sweeter to her than any one else could guess, and with it she would try to be content.

Marry any one else she could not, and she believed that in the next world, where there are no enmities, no feuds, she could find the happiness denied her in this, in a celestial wedlock with the only man she had ever loved, the only man she ever could love.

She called on Gasparde the next day, and again on the next, and so on. Meanwhile, she had been actively engaged in preparing a suite of apartments in a quiet but by no means unpretentious portion of the city.

On New-year's-day she had the happiness of seeing her now rapidly convalescent brother installed in his own rooms.

"Are they not sweet?" asked Dianne, surveying the apartments after she had helped Gasparde in from the carriage.

But that worthy only yawned and stretched, and man-like sat down to smoke a cigar, the first since his illness.

Seeing, in even his careless, indifferent mood, that Dianne

was greatly disappointed, he eventually tried to salve her wounded feelings by saying:

“After all, my dear girl, I’ve been in worse apartments than these in the course of my short but erratic career. By Jove! it really does seem, now I come to look around me, that you must have had me in your mind every move you made. You have put in just what I wanted, even to the *escritoire* in the corner there, which will come in very handy to me.”

All of which mollified Dianne greatly, and caused her to feel that Gasparde was not by any means the least appreciative of brothers.

The next day was fine, and, to her great joy, the invalid was able to take a short drive with her in a livery-stable carriage which she had retained in his name for his stay in New Orleans.

When he came back to the house, Gasparde seemed so tired that his ever-attentive sister insisted on his resting at once. To this plan he demurred, however, saying:

“I suppose the *escritoire* is well stocked with stationery?”

“Yes, dear.”

“Then have the goodness to get the key and unlock it. I wish to write a few letters.”

Dianne looked anxiously at her brother, who was more flushed than she liked to see him.

“If the letters are not private—” she ventured.

“Well?”

“I was going to suggest, dear, that you dictate your let-

ters to me. I do not like to see you tiring yourself until you are stronger.”

Gasparde shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

“Bah, Dianne, my dear, you are altogether too considerate of me. I intensely object to being coddled for the rest of my natural days. Bring the key and unlock the escritoire.”

There seemed to be no help for it, so Dianne did as desired, and seated herself near by, anxiously watching her brother all the while, afraid lest he should overdo himself in his weak condition.

But, to her relief, he only wrote three letters, and each seemed confined to a few words. He wrote slowly, and with trembling hand, but in half an hour the task was done, and he laid aside the pen with a sigh of relief.

“Have you finished, dear?” she asked.

“Yes; call Jennie and send her to mail these letters at once.”

Jennie was a mulatto girl, their only servant. Dianne did as directed, and the letters were soon on their way to their several destinations.

“I have asked a few friends to call upon me,” Gasparde said shortly, by way of explanation.

“They will not come for a few days, I trust.”

“And why not?” he demanded.

“Because I do not think you are quite strong enough yet to receive visitors.”

“Confound it, Dianne, why will you insist on making a baby of me?” he queried petulantly. “They will probably be here to-morrow, so let me hear no more about it.”

Before noon the next day two young men called. Gasparde introduced them to his sister, and then took them immediately to his room, where they remained over an hour.

They were gentlemanly enough in their deportment, and certainly very fastidious in their dress; but for some reason inexplicable to Dianne, she was not favorably impressed with them, and regretted that they were Gasparde's friends.

At three o'clock the third man called. He was a short, stout, puffy man, apparently past forty, with a red, bloated visage that bespoke a tendency to apoplexy. In manner he was unmistakably a trifle coarse, but as if aware of his deficiency, he tried to gloss his mannerisms with an assumption of gentility that sat but illy upon him.

"Captain Linscomb, my sister," said Gasparde, who was unquestionably very affable with his third visitor.

The captain bowed low, and then cast a look of too manifest admiration upon Dianne, which somehow made her shudder. The visitor entertained himself with a few minutes' conversation with her, but she was so unfavorably impressed with him that she found it impossible to treat him very graciously.

"This way, captain," her brother said at last, leading the way to his room.

"I wonder where Gasparde made the acquaintance of such men," Dianne thought, when, much to her relief, she was left to herself again. "I don't fancy such fellows coming here. They do not appear to be gentlemen, though, of course, they are, or Gasparde wouldn't know them."

With this loyal conclusion Dianne tried to content herself.

The captain was closeted with Lorraine until after five. When they came out again the visitor seemed loth to leave, and, seating himself in the parlor, tried to draw Dianne out again with about as much success as on the former occasion.

Seeing, however, that he had not created much of an impression, Captain Linscomb took his leave of her, and then of his host, giving the latter a significant look as he was shown out by the mulatto.

“Dianne, how do you like the captain?” asked her brother when the visitor had departed.

“I don’t like him at all,” was the very prompt answer.

Gasparde arched his eyebrows and looked inquiringly at her with the plainest displeasure.

“Captain Linscomb is a friend of mine, and a splendid fellow, too. I wish you would alter your opinion of him very materially.”

“I can not,” she returned, shortly.

“But it is necessary that you should.”

“Necessary?”

“Yes, very.”

“I do not understand you.”

“Then it is just as well that you should understand me at once,” said Gasparde, who was manifestly ill at ease.

“The captain has been so good as to ask for your hand in marriage, and I told him his suit would have my hearty sanction.”

Dianne started and turned ghastly pale. She did not

make any outcry, though she was thoroughly frightened.

“I thought you would be astonished,” said her brother, dryly. “But you needn’t be horrified at the idea. The captain will make a model husband.”

“Never, for me,” gasped Dianne, with a shudder.

“Why not?” he demanded, angrily, rising to his feet and pacing the apartment. “I tell you, girl, I, too, have set my heart on this marriage, and it must come off; the sooner the better.”

“Oh, Gasparde!” moaned Dianne, “how can you be so unkind?”

“Unkind?” he queried, savagely, pausing to look at her with haughty disdain.

“It is unkind,” she answered, angrily, rising to her feet; “and more than that, I will tell you it is fiendish conduct in a brother. Why, he is not a gentleman in any sense of the word. If he were, he would not have made such a proposition after seeing me but once.”

“Captain Linscomb not a gentleman?” shouted Gasparde, thoroughly losing his self-possession. “Why he belongs to one of the first families.”

“One of the first families where?” asked Dianne, scornfully.

“Why—why, here in New Orleans,” Gasparde answered, plainly disconcerted by the question.

“It is strange then,” she returned, ironically, “that I never so much as heard the name before.

“That makes not the slightest difference,” he returned with savage emphasis, “I have told Captain Linscomb

that you will marry him inside of three months, and do it you must."

"Must!" repeated Dianne, wrathfully, facing her brother with all the scorn and dignity of outraged womanhood. "Then hear me; I will not!"

"And if you please, why not, miss?" queried Gasparde, sneeringly.

"In the first place, because I do not love him, and never could under any circumstances."

"Then you love some one else—some worthless scamp?"

It was Dianne's turn to be disconcerted. But only momentarily; she quickly recovered her rigid self-possession.

That moment, however, sufficed to show her keenly observant brother that his shot had told well.

"Ha!" he cried. "I have the truth. Who is he? As your brother I demand to know."

"Then you shall know," Dianne replied, drawing herself up proudly. "His name is Reginald Prentiss."

Gasparde staggered as if she had shot him. His face became purple with passion, and he clinched his hands so tightly that his nails dug into his palms, as he shouted:

"Why, I hate that man above any other on the face of the earth!"

"I know it," she answered, calmly; "I was his mother's guest, and he came to me and told me all."

"But perhaps you do not know that he tried to kill me by unfair means."

"On the contrary," Dianne answered, coldly, "I have heard that you attempted his life in a scoundrelly manner."

“Scoundrel!” roared her brother. “You dare apply that word to me? He told you to do it, I presume.”

“Wrong again. He was altogether too courteous and considerate to attempt to prejudice me against my brother. No, I got my information elsewhere.”

“This has gone far enough,” said Gasparde more calmly, but regarding her with a dangerous glitter in his eyes. “You must renounce this Prentiss fellow forever.”

“After what has passed between you and him, I do not expect to marry him,” she rejoined, coldly. “Indeed, I have given up any such idea.”

“And you must marry Captain Linscomb at the earliest day possible.”

“I have already told you that I will not. I repeat it.”

Gasparde caught her by the wrist and looked searchingly into her eyes. Then, satisfied that her determination was not to be shaken, he ran into her room, returning with her wrap and hat.

“Since you are no longer a sister of mine,” he declared, coldly, “you must leave me.”

At this, Dianne turned even paler than before.

“Oh, Gasparde, my brother!” she wailed, “I—”

“Silence! Not a word from you!” he hissed. “Here, take your things and leave the house at once, for good and for all.”

“Oh, Gasparde, do not be so unkind,” cried Dianne, throwing her arms around his neck. “Only let me remain to nurse you back to health and then I will go, if you wish.”

“No; now,” he replied, briefly.

“But who will look after you?” she pleaded.

“Friends whom I can trust are safer than a sister whom I can not,” he said, cruelly.

Without another word Dianne snatched her wrap and bonnet, rushed into the hall-way and rapidly descended the stairs to the street door.

“Go to your lover!” shouted Gasparde over the balustrade. “And give him warning that I intend to kill him in forty-eight hours, by fair means or foul!”

CHAPTER IX.

A HAVEN AMONG FRIENDS.

DIANNE hurried into the street with her brother's passionate words ringing in her ears.

It was not so much his words, though, as the tone in which they were delivered that rankled through her brain.

Her head was in such a whirl that it was some time before she could realize anything more than the bare significance of that which had just happened—that they were parted forever, she and her brother, for the reason that she could not bring herself to receive the addresses of a man whom she had seen but once, yet whom she detested with an instinctive loathing.

She had not gone far when a sudden dizziness compelled her to sit down on a step in the nearest door-way.

Dianne pressed her cold fingers against her throbbing temples, and endeavored to think rationally.

What should she do? Where should she go?

Alone now and seemingly an outcast in a great city, the course she could or should pursue did not seem very clear.

One thing she realized, however.

She must find at least a temporary place of shelter, and that at once.

Night was coming on fast, and she dared not remain much longer on the streets, where she feared she would only expose herself to insult, perhaps violence.

From going to a hotel she shrunk instinctively. To go to a large public-house alone and unattended, would, she knew, subject her to suspicion, and, possibly, to as much insult as if she were wandering about the streets.

Yet what could she do?

Her brother's doors she realized fully were closed against her, save on terms against which her whole woman's nature rebelled.

To a hotel, then, she must look for shelter. Be the idea ever so disagreeable and distasteful to her, she shuddered at the thought of remaining in the street any longer.

But where should she go?

Hoping for inspiration of some sort, or the discovery of a suitable hotel near at hand, she arose from the step and endeavored to walk resolutely away.

Despite her endeavor, however, the poor girl faltered and tottered, until she feared that some passing policeman would espy her and arrest her for drunkenness.

And then another truth, and an appalling one in her case, dawned upon her. She had left her purse behind her and had not even enough money with her to purchase a supper.

Alone, friendless, and moneyless!

"Oh, what shall I do?" she moaned, despairingly, leaning against the side of a building at the corner of the street.

Night had now descended, and the city was wrapped in a darkness that was relieved only here and there by the feeble and fitful glimmer of a street-lamp.

The few passers-by in that little thoroughfare glanced

curiously, some suspiciously, at the well-dressed young woman who stood there in that attitude of despair, but none of them questioned her nor asked if they could be of assistance, and Dianne was grateful for their silence.

Suddenly she became aware that some one had passed by her side, and she heard a shrill voice say:

“I’s e foun’ yo’, Missy Dan, an’ I’s e powerful glad, I is!”

There was something very familiar in the tones, and looking around, Dianne saw the upturned, eager face of the mulatto girl, Jennie.

“I’s e powerful glad I’s e foun’ yo’,” reiterated the latter.

Dianne was surprised at the girl’s appearance and puzzled over the other’s evident attempt to find her whereabouts.

“Did my brother send you to find me, Jennie?” she asked.

“Who? Massar Gaspar’? No ’ndeedy. He’s too powerful mean, he is, a reg’lar no ’count, and I’s e glad yo’ done left him, I is.”

“Hush, Jennie; you do not know what you are saying,” rejoined Dianne. “But tell me, who sent you, if he did not?”

“Reck’n nobody didn’ sen’ me. Jess kem myself, an’ I’s e pow-powerful glad to fin’ yo’.”

Dianne was mystified at the singular conduct of the mulatto girl, as well she might be, but the latter soon recollected her mission, and ran on glibly:

“I wor in yo’ bedroom, Missy Dan’, when I heah yo’

no 'count brudder tell yo' git out, and nebber show yo' face agin. Den I heah yo' go, an' I done see dat yo' lef' yo' money behin', an' I jest watch my chance to slip down de stairs and follow yo'."

"My purse, did you say?" exclaimed Dianne. "Give it to me at once, and I will reward you for your thoughtfulness."

Jennie handed the purse to Dianne, and, resolutely holding her hands as far behind her back as she could to avoid any chance of Dianne's slipping the promised reward into her hands, the mulatto girl breathlessly continued:

"Dat white debbil wid de brack soul, Mass'r Gaspar', he done see me a-tryin' ter sneak down de stahs, an' I'se afraid he gwine ter stop me, but he jess scowl a scowl as brack as de debbil hisself, an' say somethin' ugly, an' I jess floo ter de street as fas' as eber I could."

"You have done me a great service, Jennie," said Dianne, deeply touched by the slave-girl's fidelity in her hour of need. "I should have been lost indeed without this money, and you must let me give you this five-dollar bill for yourself."

"No, no, Missy Dan'," protested the girl, drawing herself from the proffered money, as if she feared it would contaminate her. "No, no, Missy Dan', yo' need it all, an' I isn't allowed ter hab no money anyway."

Dianne persisted, but the mulatto was resolute in her refusal to take the money.

"I doan' want it," she declared, "but I'se gwine stick ter yo' till I see yo' hab a place ter stay."

“But you will get yourself into trouble if you stay too long away from the house,” urged Dianne.

“De missus done say dat you’s e a puffec’ lady, an’ she doan’ git mad when I tell her whar I’s e bin, I reck’n.”

The girl was so determined that Dianne found it useless to remonstrate against the proffered service. Indeed, she was very glad to avail herself of the girl’s assistance.

“Whar is yo’ gwine to?” Jennie demanded.

“I don’t know,” Dianne returned, slowly. “To some hotel, I suppose. But I don’t know which one.”

“Hasn’t yo’ got no frens yo’ kin stop wid?” queried Jennie, sympathetically.

“No, not one in New Orleans. Yes, I have, though,” Dianne exclaimed, eagerly. “I have friends whom I haven’t seen in years, but I am sure they will gladly shelter me for a little while at least, that is, if they are still living here.”

“Dat’s w’at you’s e better do, den,” Jennie sagaciously observed. “Yo’ wait right here, Missy Dan’; I’s e gwine ter fin’ yo’ a kerridge.”

“Not just yet, Jennie. I must see a directory first, and find out where these friends live.”

They walked along together until they came to a drug-store, where Dianne consulted a directory and found the address of Major and Mrs. Delaporte.

Jennie quickly found a cab, and saw Dianne comfortably ensconced therein, after the driver had been directed where to go.

“Now, run home, Jennie, before your mistress misses you, and God bless you!” was Dianne’s parting salutation.

The mulatto caught Dianne's hand, imprinted a fervent kiss upon it, and then turned and ran down the street as fast as her short legs would carry her.

The driver closed the door with a bang, jumped upon his seat, and the cab rolled away.

Dianne had now more time to reflect upon what her future course should be.

"Fortunately, I have over three hundred dollars in here," she said, squeezing the well-filled little purse tightly. "I can at least thank Gasparde for having always been liberal in the matter of my allowance. If this were his money, I should not feel so free to use it; but he is the guardian of that which belongs to me in my own right, and I can use this money with a full conscience."

The cab rattled rapidly through the streets, and, in a short space of time, it paused before a large and comfortable mansion on Ruggles Street.

"This is the place, miss," said the driver, opening the door and helping her to alight.

Dianne paid the cabman, and then ascended the steps.

On the door-plate was the name of Delaporte, and she pulled the bell.

A colored servant came to the door, and, when Dianne asked for his mistress, she was shown into a little reception-room.

The door opened a few minutes later, and a stout, pleasant-looking woman of middle age entered.

"You wish to see me?" she inquired, and then a look of recognition came into her eyes.

"Why, I really believe you are Geraldine's child!" ex-

claimed Mrs. Delaporte, rushing forward, with both hands extended.

“ I am Dianne Lorraine.”

“ I was sure of it,” returned Mrs. Delaporte, effusively. “ You are the image of your poor, dear mother, and I am delighted to see you, my dear, after so many years.”

The motherly woman kissed Dianne affectionately on both cheeks, and then assisted her to remove her wraps.

“ Now I shall not ask you a single question, or say another word until I see you eating your dinner,” said Mrs. Delaporte, decisively. “ The major and I dine late, you know, and really we must not keep the poor, dear man waiting another moment; he will be famished, and I am sure you must be.”

“ But I am not in a suitable costume,” objected Dianne.

“ Costume? Fie! You are looking charming in every way, my dear girl, and the major will be enraptured over this relief from the tedium of the evening. Come right in, my dear; we are dining alone.”

And, without waiting for further remonstrance, her kind hostess led Dianne into the dining-room and triumphantly introduced her to Major Delaporte.

The latter was a tall, broad-shouldered, vigorous-looking man in the full prime of life. With ready and convincing courtesy he bade the girl to be seated, and made the two waiters bestir themselves with so much alacrity that Dianne, almost before she realized it, was partaking of a famous dinner, and answering her hostess's questions with an entire absence of reserve.

“So you have quarreled with your brother, my dear,” observed Mrs. Delaporte, when she had drawn Dianne’s story out. “Well, I can remember you as a little girl, and you were always amiability and sweetness personified, so I am sure it is Gasparde who is in the wrong. Ah, what a violent temper he had, as a boy!”

“I shall be mortally offended with you if you don’t at least pass the winter with us, Miss Lorraine,” the major put in, with such kindly decision that Dianne felt at home at once.

Mrs. Delaporte seconded her husband’s wishes with such vigor and warmth that Dianne was forced to very gratefully yield, for the time being at least.

When the meal was over, they left the major to his wine and cigars, and went to the parlor, where he joined them an hour later.

Major Delaporte was a ready and fluent talker, and full of fun and anecdote, while his wife was so sympathetic and kind that Dianne was put entirely at her ease before she had been in the house an hour.

When she retired that night in the prettily appointed chamber prepared for her, Dianne Lorraine felt positively happy with her new-found friends, and fell into a slumber that was filled with pleasant dreams.

Meanwhile other events were taking place that evening which had much to do with the shaping of her destiny.

Elsie Prentiss, by dint of persistent questioning, had forced Reginald to confess the part he had played in the departure of Dianne from the Prentiss mansion.

“ You knew he was her brother before you left the boat that morning, didn't you?” demanded Elsie.

“ Yes; what of it?” he answered.

“ Why, you foolish boy, if you had consulted me, as you should have done, this never would have happened.”

“ How could you have helped it?” asked Reginald, perplexedly.

“ I should have succeeded in stopping the duel in some way,” Elsie replied, with a positiveness that was not to be shaken.

“ Well, I am afraid it is all over, and so are all my hopes.”

“ You foolish boy, you needn't sigh in that dolorous way. Perhaps I can help you out.”

“ If you only could, Elsie! But I don't see how.”

“ I am going to New Orleans in the morning,” Elsie responded, with an air of great determination.

“ To see Miss Lorraine?”

“ Most assuredly. What else?”

“ But you don't know where to find her.”

“ I shall find her, nevertheless.”

“ And may I accompany you?”

“ You? Certainly not, unless you want to spoil everything. Haven't you blundered enough already, Reggy?”

“ I am afraid I have,” admitted that young man, with a despondent sigh and a crestfallen air.

And so it was settled that Elsie should go to New Orleans by the first train in the morning, a purpose which Miss Prentiss carried out without flinching.

CHAPTER X.

ELSIE'S ARRIVAL.

ELSIE reached New Orleans just before noon, and then her troubles commenced.

She had not the remotest idea where to find Dianne, but she had set her heart on discovering her whereabouts, and the task must be accomplished.

"I suppose I might just as well go to a hotel in the first place," Elsie concluded, and so entered a cab, and was driven to the same house where she and Dianne had stayed upon their arrival from St. Paul.

A light luncheon was partaken of, and then Miss Prentiss began to deliberate upon the work before her.

The idea of going to the hospital where Gasparde Lorraine had first been taken occurred to her as the most sensible thing to do.

She called a carriage again, and was driven to the hospital.

"Yes, a Mr. Lorraine was here," said the resident physician, in answer to her inquiry; "but he recovered enough to be removed."

This was as Elsie had expected, so she inquired if Mr. Lorraine's present whereabouts were known.

The physician opened his memorandum-book and copied an address on a slip of paper which he handed to Miss Prentiss.

“Unless he has moved, you will find him there. His sister is also with him,” said the resident physician.

“It is his sister I wish to see.”

Elsie said these words with a painfully red face, as the thought occurred to her that very likely the man of medicine imagined she was in search of a recreant lover, instead of a very dear friend of her own sex.

In fact, this was just the thought which had come to the physician, but he bowed his fair visitor out, and she entered the cab again.

After a few minutes more of riding, she alighted at the address given her at the hospital.

Yes, the landlady informed her that Mr. Lorraine had apartments in the house.

“Will you please send my card up to Miss Lorraine?” asked Elsie.

“I—I do not think Miss Lorraine is in,” stammered the woman.

“Very well, then, her brother will have to do.”

The landlady looked as if she were about to open her mouth, and then, apparently, changed her mind and left the room.

“Mr. Lorraine says he will be right down, miss,” said the woman, returning to the parlor presently.

But then it occurred to Miss Prentiss that she had been guilty of a very ill-advised action.

“I wonder what Reggy would say to me,” she thought. “The idea of my sending my card to a man with whom my cousin quarreled and whom he wounded in a duel!”

But the next thought presented her justification.

“Of course Reggy knew that if I were coming to New Orleans to Dianne I should be more than likely to encounter her brother. But, good heavens! suppose the foolish boy had accompanied me, as he wanted to? What a scene there would have been when the two men met! After all, I don't see how Reggy can blame me for what I am doing. I am here in his interests.”

Her further reflections were cut short by the entrance of a dark, stern-looking young man, who bestowed a frigid glance upon her as he crossed the apartment.

“Am I right in supposing you to be Miss Prentiss?” he demanded, in a tone that was polite, but frigid.

“Yes, I am waiting to see Mr. Lorraine,” she answered, frightened in spite of herself by the austerity of the man who confronted her.

“I am he. How can I serve you?”

Still that cold, hard tone, and Gasparde seated himself a few feet away and looked at her in anything but an encouraging manner.

“I am here to ascertain if you know the present whereabouts of your sister, Dianne. Probably you know that she is my dearest friend.”

Gasparde Lorraine heard her patiently through, and then answered, simply:

“I know nothing of her whereabouts.”

“Oh, very well, thank you,” said Elsie, rising with great dignity.

“One moment, please, Miss Prentiss. Do not misconstrue my words into a slight or an insult. If I could serve

you in this matter, I would do so, but I really haven't the faintest idea where my sister is."

"Can you tell me how soon you are likely to know?"

"Really, that is impossible. Miss Lorraine and I have had a difference of opinion, and I have no reason to hope that I shall see her again in the near future."

Elsie was dumfounded, but she managed to thank him for the information, and took her departure. Gasparde followed her to the door, and bowed her out with studied frigidity.

Elsie was about to enter the cab again, when she heard a shrill voice pipe out:

"Wait a bit, missy. I'll be dar direckly."

And looking up, Elsie saw, to her astonishment, a little woolly head protruding from one of the windows.

Eager to get information from any source, Elsie waited patiently.

The mulatto girl, Jennie, soon reached the sidewalk and said:

"Missus done tole me yo' was lookin' fo' Missy Dan. Dat debbil ob a brudder ob hern kain't tell yo' nuthin'."

"Can you?" queried Elsie, eagerly.

"Reck'n I kin, missy."

"Where is she? Tell me quickly!"

"On Ruggles Street, missy."

"Yes, yes; what house?"

"I done t'ink de family call Delap'ot."

"Delaporte, you mean?"

"Yes, missy; dat's de name."

Elsie slipped a coin in the girl's hand, directed the driver, and hastily entered the cab again.

In a few minutes she found herself waiting for Dianne, in the cosy reception-room of the Delaporte mansion.

Miss Lorraine did not keep her old school friend waiting long.

The two girls flew to meet each other half way. There was a warm embrace, and then explanations were in order.

"How did you come to call upon me, and how did you know where to find me?" Dianne asked.

"A mulatto girl in the house where your brother has rooms told me where to find you; and I came because I have at last succeeded in getting Reginald to confess his part in such a shameful affair."

"Hush!" interrupted Dianne, with dignity. "I am compelled, from all I have heard of the affair, to believe that Mr. Prentiss distinguished himself by much more gentlemanly conduct than did my brother."

Elsie was silent, knowing well that this was no time for her to be too voluble.

"Did—did you—" Dianne began.

"Did my cousin send me to you?" returned Elsie, divining her friend's meaning. "No, dear, I came myself, and on my own account. I don't want any estrangement between you and me."

"Never fear that," replied Miss Lorraine, gently, and then added:

"Of course you know by this time that I have separated from my brother?"

"Yes," answered Elsie, who was dying to know if the

details of the quarrel presaged favorably for Reginald's cause.

Dianne, who had no secrets from her bosom friend, proceeded to tell her all about it.

"And do you know," she added, "my brother attributed my refusal to see that brute Linscomb to a stronger feeling on my part for Mr. Prentiss."

"Indeed?" queried Elsie, who was secretly delighted at this information.

"Yes, dear, and I have something to tell you that I really think you ought to know. Just as I was leaving the house Gasparde bellowed down the steps that he would find my 'lover,' as he termed Mr. Prentiss, and take his life."

"Oh, pshaw!" exclaimed Elsie, forgetting her words, in her own strong faith in her cousin. "Reginald is no baby. I have heard his friends say that it would be difficult indeed to find a finer swordsman or more deadly shot in the whole South."

"Gasparde is very deadly in his hatreds," returned Dianne, slowly, "and has taken part in at least half a dozen duels which had fatal terminations."

"But," Elsie objected, "Reggy has already shown that he can take care of himself where your brother is concerned. Forgive me, Dianne, for reminding you of this, but I want you to feel sure of Reggy's safety. And he will not kill Gasparde, either; depend upon that. He has already had the opportunity, and refused. He would never do it, Dianne; for your sake he would not."

"Your cousin is a noble fellow, indeed," admitted

Dianne, sorrowfully. "Oh, that this had never happened!"

"It will all come out right in the end," predicted Elsie, confidently. "When it does—for I am sure it must—I shall be happy indeed, dear, with you for my cousin."

But Dianne shook her head positively.

"It can never be, Elsie. I know that Mr. Prentiss has honored me with his love; he has told me so, and I esteem him very highly for his qualities. But there is a stain of blood between us, and he and I must be strangers hereafter."

Elsie did not altogether wonder at these feelings, and she was altogether too sensible to urge Reginald's justification upon her friend at that moment.

"Come to my room, dear," said Dianne; "we can talk more freely there."

So upstairs they went, and in the privacy of Miss Lorraine's chamber the two girls discussed the affairs nearest their hearts for more than an hour.

"All my possessions are still with my brother," said Dianne, at last. "I need my trunks and what is in them, but how shall I get them? After what has passed I do not care to encounter Gasparde again."

"Send for your trunks at once," responded Elsie, promptly. "I am sure Mrs. Delaporte will be glad to put her coachman at your disposal."

This advice, after a little hesitation, Dianne decided to follow.

Mrs. Delaporte, when approached, was only too glad to

aid her guest. She not only placed her carriage at her guest's disposal, but sent her colored maid inside.

In a little over an hour the carriage returned, with both of Dianne's trunks strapped on in the rear.

"Did my brother let you take everything?" Miss Lorraine asked of the maid.

"Yes, missy."

"Did he make any objections?"

"No, missy."

"Did he have anything at all to say?"

"Nebber a word, missy, 'cept dis."

The maid held forth an envelope.

It was directed to Dianne, and in her brother's handwriting.

She snatched it eagerly, and then held it unopened, looking significantly at the maid.

The latter, who was a well-trained domestic, took the hint and left the room at once.

As soon as the girl had gone Dianne tore the envelope with feverish eagerness.

Only a card was found inside.

Gasparde's name was engraved on one side, and on the reverse he had penciled these words:

"Good-bye—farewell."

The card fell from Dianne's hands, and Elsie reached forward to pick it up. As soon as she saw those words, she comprehended her friend's feelings.

"Never mind, Dianne darling. You are in the right, and everything will come out right in the end."

“But he is my brother, my only relative,” said Dianne, falteringly, “and he has cast me off forever. I know his firmness only too well, and though I know myself to be right, this is hard to bear.”

“He will relent, never fear.”

“If I only could believe so, I should not mind this, but I repeat that I know him too well to hope,” returned Dianne, with a bitter smile. “He is the kindest of brothers, while he can have his own way, but I have crossed his will, and he will never relent, or forgive.”

Elsie strove persistently to comfort and console her dearest friend, and to some extent succeeded before dinner.

Just before that meal was served hospitable Mrs. Delaporte came to Dianne's room to receive her second guest.

“You must stay with us several days at least,” she said. “Dianne is to be with us the whole winter—we shall not let her go—and you must see her here frequently.”

“But I have a year more to attend the seminary,” objected Dianne, feebly.

“Nonsense,” responded Mrs. Delaporte, energetically. “You are already a woman, and must have done with childhood.”

They went down to dinner with that question still unsettled.

The major was in his jolliest mood, and he and his amiable wife dispelled the gloomy spirits of their guests, and, for the time being, made them thoroughly happy.

But a cloud was gathering over Dianne Lorraine's head, of which her friends little dreamed.

CHAPTER XI.

TWO CONSPIRATORS GET THEIR HEADS TOGETHER.

At the time with which this narrative has to deal the Pelican Club was one of the most prosperous clubs in New Orleans, though not one of the most pretentious.

It was a second rate resort for young men about town and the scions of many of the "best" families in the city were enrolled upon its list of membership. Though not famous for its cuisine or wines, the Pelican was noted for two things—the excellence of its "hard" liquors and the exciting game which was sure to be in progress at all except a very few of the twenty-four hours.

But, for once, we find it in the afternoon in a quiescent state.

Captain Harvey Linscomb was the only member of note present.

He was a short, thick-set man of apparently about forty years of age, with a sensual and bloated face and all the other evidences of a life of liberal self-indulgence.

He had been drinking heavily, for an ordinary man, but the liquor seemed to have but little effect upon him. Indeed, it was a matter of common remark that, if he were thrown into the same quantity of whisky which he consumed daily, his chance of escaping drowning would be small.

Captain Linscomb was the sole survivor of an old family

that had once been prominent and honored in Louisiana, but he had sadly digressed from the ways of his ancestors.

When he first came into possession of the family property it had amounted to a considerable fortune. Just how much of this he still possessed no one knew.

He had the reputation of being very successful at the card-table, and was known to always have enough money for his needs, for which reason he was accepted as a very agreeable companion at the Pelican.

Another fact which made him both respected and feared by most of his fellow-members was his record as a duelist. He had been concerned in a half score "affairs of honor," and never had his opponent been known to leave the field alive.

Linscomb was leaning back in an easy-chair near a large, low window, opening out upon the street, and at his side sat a young planter named Peyton.

"You don't play very well, that's a fact," the captain was saying to his companion.

"It's no use to play against you, at any time," protested Peyton. "One would think you in league with the devil himself, you have such marvelous luck."

"Eh?" growled Linscomb, "what's that about the devil?"

"No offense, I assure you," was the quick response. "I merely meant that your luck is so great that it is inexplicable."

"Do you mean to insinuate that I cheat?" demanded the captain, with a savage oath.

“Nothing was further from my thoughts, on my honor,” protested Peyton, paling slightly.

It was plain that Linscomb was either in a quarrelsome mood, or else had a deeper reason for bullying the young planter.

“Bah! What was it you lost to me last night?” queried the captain.

“Nothing, of course. A mere bagatelle—only \$1,400. But that makes \$10,000 I have lost to you inside the last fortnight. A year of that business would ruin me. Really, captain,” added Peyton, with a laugh that was forced, “you are a luxury from which most men had better abstain.”

Linscomb eyed his victim savagely.

“Do you mean to tell me that you refuse to play with me in the future?” he almost roared.

“Oh, by no means, my dear fellow,” responded the younger man, soothingly.

“If I thought you did—” began Linscomb.

But succor had come to the young planter.

The captain felt a hand laid on his shoulder, and a well-known voice inquired:

“Quarreling as usual, my dear Harvey? One of these days you will meet your match, and the Pelican will know you no more. But come, let us drop nonsense, and have a drink.”

“With all my heart,” responded Linscomb, with great promptness. “Here, Ben”—to one of the colored attendants—“get the steward to let us have a full bottle of whisky, quick, and no fooling about it!”

“Any soda with it, sah?” inquired the boy.

By way of answer the captain threw his cane at the unfortunate Ben, with such an accuracy as to hit that youngster very sharply on the head.

“Bring that back to me at once,” shouted Linscomb, and Ben returned with the stick as he came.

“Don’t you know yet that I never take anything with my whisky?” demanded the captain, applying the restored stick sharply about the darky’s legs.

“I done t’ought p’raps de odder gen’leman like soda wid his,” blubbered Ben, getting out of the way of the cane, and forthwith departing on his errand.

The liquor was brought and placed on a table between the men.

“Well, how are things going, Gasparde?” inquired Linscomb, filling his own glass and passing the bottle.

“Poorly,” was Lorraine’s answer—for the new-comer was he—“poorly. We must make up our minds to act more resolutely, or we shall not succeed.”

Here Lorraine paused and cast a glance at Peyton, with such a significant look at the captain that the latter took the hint and said, brusquely:

“We wish to be alone, Peyton.”

The young planter nodded ready acquiescence, and drank the whisky which he had poured out for himself with such haste that he coughed repeatedly and nearly strangled.

“Now, what have you got to tell me?” inquired Linscomb, as soon as Peyton had betaken himself out of hearing.

“Nothing very encouraging,” replied Lorraine, crossing his legs and lighting a cigar.

“You said last night the girl had left the house.”

“So she did.”

“And hasn’t returned yet?”

“Hadn’t up to a half an hour ago.”

“That’s devilish bad,” muttered Linscomb, adding a string of unprintable oaths.

“Any idea where she is now?” queried the captain, when he had exhausted his ready stock of expletives.

“No, but I heard from her yesterday, though I didn’t tell you so.”

“How?”

“A coachman and maid came after her things.”

“And didn’t they tell you where she was?”

“Not a word.”

“Why the devil didn’t you ask them, then?”

“Because they would have been sure to tell Dianne, and I don’t want her to think I even care about her whereabouts. The less interested I appear, the quicker she will tire of her freak, and want to come into my good graces again.”

“You’ve got the right idea, by Jove!” assured the captain, nodding approvingly.

“I even went further in my little game,” Lorraine resumed. “I wrote ‘good-bye’ on the back of my card, and sent it to her with her baggage.”

“I’m not so sure that was wise,” returned Linscomb, shaking his head dubiously. “You see, my dear boy, if the girl has a bit of pride—and, if she hasn’t, she isn’t fit

to be my wife—she won't come back to you so readily after getting a direct cut of that sort."

"She must come back, she must do as I want," returned Lorraine, resolutely, compressing his lips with decision.

"Why are you so anxious to have me marry her?" inquired Linscomb, looking at his companion searchingly.

"Why are you anxious to marry her?" returned Lorraine.

"Because," returned the captain, with an easy laugh, "because she is about the prettiest and most wholesome girl I ever saw in my life, and I am just about of a good marriageable age, too. Besides that, I can take good care of a wife, and flatter myself I would make a very fair sort of husband. I—"

Lorraine interrupted his friend with a loud, harsh laugh.

"Spare me the recital of your many virtues as a husband," he said, impatiently. "Did you know that Dianne is worth three hundred thousand dollars in her own name?"

"No—is she?" questioned the captain, with an attempt to look indifferent.

But the look of avarice which crept into his eyes showed itself too plainly for concealment.

Lorraine laughed discordantly again, and went on:

"Of course you know it, Linscomb. If you said you had imagined her to be a poor girl, I should not believe you. Now, she is worth three hundred thousand dollars the day she becomes of age or gets married. Do you understand me now?"

“ I think I do. You are her guardian?”

“ I am.”

“ And by marrying your sister to me you can thus place three hundred thousand dollars in my hands.”

“ That’s the size of it, Linscomb.”

Gasparde Lorraine leaned back in his chair and studied the other’s face intently.

“ You aren’t doing this out of pure friendship?” demanded Captain Linscomb, after a few moment’s pause.

“ Not altogether, but largely so.”

“ You want a return of some kind, I suppose.”

“ Certainly.”

“ Let me see if I understand you,” rejoined Captain Linscomb, leaning forward, and looking very intently into Lorraine’s eyes. He spoke in very low tones as he went on:

“ You propose to induce your sister to marry me. Now, with her, I get a snug little fortune of three hundred thousand dollars. You, as her guardian, can so arrange matters that I can control the entire sum. You need money, or at all events, want it—which is the same thing—and you look to me to marry your sister, and then give you a share of the handsome little purse which she brings me. Do I understand you rightly?”

Gasparde assented.

“ Then,” resumed Linscomb, “ the only question that remains is, How much do you want?”

“ Just an even half,” returned Lorraine, meeting the other’s eye squarely.

Linscomb let loose a string of oaths.

“ You might as well ask for the whole, Lorraine. You want too much.”

“ You get one hundred and fifty thousand and one of the finest-looking women in the South,” retorted Gasparde, coolly.

“ That’s very true, but you want too much for your share.”

“ You get the girl and half her money if you help me as I wish. Without my help you get neither the girl nor the money.”

This was a very forcible way of putting it, and had the effect of making Captain Linscomb reconsider.

“ I consent to your terms, my dear Gasparde,” he announced, after a little reflection.

Gasparde grasped him by the hand.

“ Assure me on your word of honor,” he said.

“ I promise you upon my word of honor that I accept your terms, and will carry them out,” replied Captain Linscomb very soberly.

How lightly any honest man, who had overheard their dialogue, would esteem their word of honor probably did not occur to either of this precious pair of rascals.

“ We must strike while the iron is hot; in other words, we must lose no time until the job is done,” Lorraine declared.

“ What shall we do first, then?”

“ Well, first of all, if Dianne doesn’t come back to-day, we must find out where she is.”

“ Quite so,” assented Linscomb.

“And when we do find her whereabouts,” resumed Lorraine, drawing his chair very close to that of his companion, “we must contrive to spirit her away.”

“Too summary, altogether too summary,” objected Linscomb. “If we act like ruffians we shall force the girl into a corner, and she will turn upon us and upset our little game. Try to think of something better.”

“You didn’t wait for me to finish,” retorted Gasparde, calmly; “we’ll have her stolen and carried off to some dirty hole, on a pretense of wanting to rob her of her jewelry. Then, my dear captain, I will go to the house where she will have been stopping and inquire for her. I will tell the people there how penitent I am for quarreling with her, and entreat them to let me see her.”

“Superb!” laughed the captain; “go on.”

“Of course they will tell me that she has disappeared,” resumed Lorraine. “Of course I shall be distracted at the news, will suspect foul play, etc. Then you and I will search the city despairingly, and you shall rescue her, my dear captain. A week’s confinement in some wretched place will humble her spirit, and your heroic rescue ought to complete the conquest.”

“Excellent!” commented the captain, with considerable enthusiasm. “But suppose she refuses to believe my heroism genuine? She may even see through the whole scheme.”

“If she does,” retorted Gasparde, dryly, “then she will see, this sister of mine, that you and I are two men who are not to be baffled, and she will sensibly give in to us.”

“You are a born campaigner!” declared the captain, enthusiastically. “Let us begin business at once.”

“We must first find out where this perverse girl is being sheltered from me.”

“Exactly,” assented the captain.

The two rascals arose and marched arm in arm out of the club.

CHAPTER XII.

FIRST STEP OF THE CONSPIRACY.

DIANNE stood in the vestibule, attired for the street.

The last light of the day was fading, but there was still a mellow, western horizon.

“Going for a walk, dear?”

Elsie had come upon her in the vestibule.

Without waiting for a reply, Miss Prentiss ran on.

“Wait a minute, dear, until I get on my wraps.”

But this Dianne knew was a sacrifice on her friend's part. Elsie had complained of feeling tired and wretched all day. Miss Lorraine would not listen to her proposal.

No, dear, I shall be back early, and will come to your room before we have to dress for dinner.”

With which words Dianne sped down the steps and was out of sight around the corner.

Walking rapidly on, Dianne's brain was filled with an active current of thoughts.

Her estrangement from her brother she was beginning to regard with great indifference. With the consciousness of outraged dignity she now cared little how long it was before she saw him again.

At the same time another consciousness was forcing itself upon her. Pleasant or unpleasant, it was a fact that Elsie's face served every hour of the day to suggest a face which she had seen before and longed to see again.

Yes, it was really true that Dianne, in spite of what had happened, in spite of all her scorn on leaving him, was absorbed by a longing to behold Reginald Prentiss again.

That she was prepared to let him bridge over the gulf which lay between them is not so certain, for Dianne Lorraine was richly endowed with family and sectional pride, and could not so easily accept the love of a man who had fought her brother, whatever the circumstances might have been.

Yet the fact remained that, with her, Reginald was the highest type of a hero she had ever discovered.

He was courteous, chivalrous, generous, noble, and, although it is not certain whether she would have shown him the least cordiality, yet Dianne was absorbed by a desire to once more behold her ideal.

That she could easily do so by making her feelings known to Elsie, Dianne well understood, but she was too proud to confess to the longing, and altogether too uncertain how she should treat him after all.

All these thoughts passed through Dianne Lorraine's head as she walked rapidly along.

Where she was going she had little idea, but the air was cool and bracing, and the brisk walk made her feel more at ease. Though she had not the least idea of meeting Reginald Prentiss in New Orleans, she nevertheless gazed as keenly as she dared at all passers-by.

After half an hour's brisk walk, it occurred suddenly to Dianne that she must retrace her steps and hurry back to the Delaporte mansion if she would be in time for dinner.

She had thus far paid no attention to the direction or the neighborhood in which she had been walking, and now, as she looked about her, she gave a frightened little gasp.

The houses were low and squalid looking; the people passing her on the street were of the most mongrel description.

Knowing that her watch, her jewelry and her purse would prove a rich prize to evil-minded and covetous people, Dianne gazed about her in a really frightened manner.

What was the best way out of the neighborhood, she wondered. By what route could she return to a more respectable portion of the city and excite the least comment?

As if in answer to her quandary, she perceived that a closed carriage, evidently a private vehicle, was slowly following her down the street.

As it came nearer Dianne saw that there was both a white man and a negro on the box, which gave her an added sense of security.

Dianne thought the driver must have divined her purpose, for the carriage drove up to the sidewalk near her, and the white man alighted, touching his cap to her deferentially.

“Do you want a cab, lady?” he asked, throwing open the door invitingly.

“You are just in time,” she answered, eagerly.

Had Dianne studied the man's face at all, she might have seen a look of evil importunity in his eyes that would not have pleased her.

But the relief of finding so opportune an avenue of escape from the suspicious neighborhood into which she

had wandered was the only sensation of which she was conscious.

“Drive to Major Delaporte’s house, Ruggles Street,” she said, and entering the carriage, sunk on to the cushions of the rear seat.

“You hear, Pomp?” demanded the man who had opened the door. There was mockery in his tones, but Dianne did not hear it, or else did not notice it.

“I heah, mas’r,” was the negro’s grinning response, as he gathered the reins.

“All right, then; off we go!”

The carriage started away, and as it did so the door was banged suddenly to and Dianne found the white man on the seat at her side.

Almost before this fact impressed itself upon her startled mind, she noticed that her unknown companion was pulling down the curtains as if to conceal his proceedings from the street.

Dianne, though very much frightened, quietly reached for the door-handle. She grasped it, but found to her surprise she could not make the door swing open.

It was so dark inside the carriage with the curtains drawn that the man could not see what she was doing. He must have divined it, however, for he reached over and forced her hand away from the knob.

“It’s no use, lady,” he said, doggedly. “The door’s fastened all right, an’ I reck’n you ain’t goin’ to git out till I says so.”

“You have no right to keep me in here. This is an outrage,” protested Dianne, indignantly.

“Sho! You don’t say so,” was the coarse rejoinder, accompanied by a brutal laugh.

“Let me out!” shrieked Dianne.

“Can’t do it, lady,” responded the other, doggedly.

“You shall,” she answered, tearfully, but she realized her utter helplessness.

“Now, keep quiet,” urged her unknown and unseen companion.

“I have a brother and friends who will think your life none too large a price for this outrage,” she declared, angrily.

The man seemed amused at this, for he laughed uproariously in a coarse, brutal way, that grated on the nerves of the sensitive girl beside him.

“I don’t reck’n they’ll never know nothin’ about it,” he replied after awhile.

Dianne’s heart sunk within her.

Did he, then, mean to murder her?

“Where are you taking me?” she asked, less firmly than before.

“To a place where you will be treated like a queen if you only pays for it.”

Perhaps, then, he only meant to rob her, after all.

“You want the valuables I have with me?” she queried.

“That’s jest it, lady.”

“And after you have them, what then?”

“You’ll know that later,” was the non-committal response.

Dianne’s heart sunk again.

Yet she resolved to make one more attempt at escape.

"Taking a deep breath, she shouted, with all the power of her lungs:

"Police! help! murder!"

"Oh, that's all right," was her companion's cheerful rejoinder, and he did not attempt to hinder her. "Yell all yo' want," he went on. "The wheels is makin' so much noise that no one won't hear yo'."

This, Dianne realized, was only too true. The carriage was rolling and clattering along at a terrific rate, and the noise of the wheels on the pavements was almost deafening.

She must think of some means of escape.

This was not long in presenting itself.

"Let me go," she said, appealingly, "and I will give you my watch, jewels and money. I will also promise you that I will say a word about it to no one."

"Sorry, but I can't accommodate you," was the prompt and disheartening response. "I've known ladies to make sech promises before, and then forgit all about 'em when they got away."

Dianne was silent after that.

Oh! that she had some kind of a weapon about her, even a penknife. She would have sprung upon the fiend beside her and made short work of him.

The man, too, was silent, but he lifted the curtain a little from time to time and peered outside.

"We're gitting near home," he announced at last, and then Dianne felt—for she could not see—that he was feeling for something in his pockets.

When he produced the articles for which he was searching, she felt that he was shaking something, probably a bottle.

Then a sickening smell arose within the closely confined carriage, and she felt a sponge pressed close to her nostrils.

She made a faint but ineffectual struggle, and then, sinking down in his arms, she lost consciousness.

* * * * *

When Dianne came to again she was in total darkness.

She was lying on something soft, which, upon investigation, she found to be a mattress spread upon the floor.

The apartment was close and stuffy, and the heat and lack of ventilation oppressed her in her dizzy condition.

She was seized with a terrible sickness, and felt too weak and feeble to stir at first.

Gradually, by a strong effort, she gathered strength enough to remove her street wraps, which were oppressing her in the intolerable stuffiness of the room.

Her head ached and throbbed violently, but she mustered strength enough to get upon her feet and start upon a tour of investigation.

The apartment was a small one, and evidently, from the abrupt slanting of its walls, next to the roof.

She found the door and tried it, but it was so securely fastened that it did not even rattle under her attempt to open it.

She groped about for a light and matches, but found neither.

Then looking overhead she could faintly discern the sky

and stars through the smooched and dirty panes of a skylight.

Oh, to reach it and get upon the roof, with ever so little a possibility of reaching the ground below!

She groped about her once more, but could find nothing on which to stand to reach the skylight.

Then the dizziness and sickness returned, and she sought the mattress again.

Unconsciousness came on once more, and she was lost in deep, dreamless sleep.

A great mercy to her, indeed.

* * * * *

When the dinner hour came the inmates of the Delaporte house gathered at the table.

All except one.

“Where is Dianne?” demanded the major, noticing her absence at once.

“She went out for a walk,” Elsie replied, “and promised to come to my room before the dressing time, but I have seen nothing of her.”

A shade of uneasiness came to the major's face.

The truth was, the good man had developed, later in life, into a pronounced epicure, and the thought of delaying his most beloved meal preyed upon his patience.

But when they had waited half an hour impatience gave place to vague alarm.

“Go to Miss Lorraine's room and see if she is there,” Mrs. Delaporte commanded her colored butler.

But when the aged servitor returned to the room his countenance was anything but reassuring.

“Missy Dan ain’t dar at all,” he declared.

“Is the door unlocked?” questioned Mrs. Delaporte.

“Yes, ma’am, but dey’s nobody inside.”

Another half hour passed, and still no signs of Dianne.

“Let us have dinner as quickly as possible,” said the major, “and then I will go out and try to ascertain what has become of her.”

They eat, but it was a gloomy meal and a short one. Even the major for once had little appetite.

When it was over he drew on his top-coat, pressed his hat squarely on his head, placed a revolver in his pocket, and left the house abruptly.

But he came back a few hours later, and, learning that Dianne had not returned in the meantime, he became gloomy and unresponsive, merely admitting that he had heard no tidings of her.

And Elsie, now thoroughly and terribly convinced that foul play had overtaken her dear friend, was wrestling mentally with a great problem.

Should she send for Reginald?

CHAPTER XIII.

UNAVAILING SEARCH.

It was a sleepless night in the Delaporte mansion.

The major and his wife and Elsie sat up until well into the small hours of the morning, but no tidings came of Dianne, and when they at last retired it was only to rise again with the first indications of the late winter morning.

Major Delaporte had lost his usual composure and dignity. He looked haggard and worried, and was altogether restless.

As for the ladies, it was easy to see that they had spent their retirement in tears.

An early breakfast was ordered and served.

The disheartened trio sat down to the repast, but their appetites had deserted them, and hardly a morsel of food was touched, although the major managed to dispose of considerable quantities of coffee and brandy.

When he had finished with these stimulants he left the room to give some orders, and then rejoined his wife and Elsie in the library.

“Now tell us, August, all that happened last night,” began the former lady.

“There isn’t much to relate,” responded her husband, gloomily, “save a long round of unavailing search.”

“What steps did you take?” questioned Mme. Delaporte.

“ I walked about for some time,” answered the major, “ and then I engaged a carriage. Driving to all the police stations, I discovered that nothing had been heard of such a young lady as I described, although, when I reported her disappearance, the officers promised to do all in their power to find her. “ Then I drove to the hospitals and investigated all of the accident cases which had come in during the day and evening, but still found no traces of the dear girl. I next went to look up a good private detective, but could find none of enough skill to satisfy me. I have just sent the coachman, however, after a couple of gentlemen in the secret line, who I think will be able to help us considerably.”

The trio in the library had not waited very long when the detectives were announced.

They were Messrs. Johnson and Farrar, two quiet, energetic-looking men, whose appearance greatly impressed the ladies with confidence in their shrewdness and skill.

Messrs. Johnson and Farrar listened with great intentness to the details with which the major provided them, interspersed frequently with additions and amplifications from Mme. Delaporte and Elsie.

Both of the detectives asked questions freely, but Johnson did most of the questioning, and appeared to be the senior in point of authority.

Johnson displayed a habit of biting his finger-nails constantly, but this did not prevent him from putting all the questions he thought necessary, though he did not offer any comment upon the facts presented to his notice.

When it came Elsie's turn to speak, she thought it best

to tell unreservedly all the details of Dianne's quarrel with her brother, which she did.

"I know the fellow," said Farrar, quietly, when Gasparde's name was mentioned. "He passes for a gentleman, and no doubt he was born one, but he is a gambler and a confirmed duelist, and a tough citizen all around."

"Then he will bear watching," said Johnson to his colleague, speaking in an undertone, but loud enough for the others to hear.

"It is barely possible, Major Delaporte, that it is all a false alarm," added Johnson. "The young lady may have taken it into her head, for some unaccountable reason, to visit friends or relatives, and she may not have had time to come back and let you know."

"It is hardly possible," murmured Mme. Delaporte.

"It is now a little after eight," Johnson went on, still addressing himself to the major, "and it is nearly time for the first mail delivery. You may receive a note from Miss Lorraine which will dispel your fears and render our services unnecessary."

This was a forlorn hope, but Dianne's friends grasped it and waited for the mail with all the patience they could summon.

The mail came at last, and in it several letters, but none from Dianne.

"Then we will get to work at once," said Johnson, as he and his colleague arose and took their hats in their hands.

"One moment, if you please," interrupted Major Delaporte, and the detectives turned and waited.

"What course do you intend to follow?"

“That would be unprofessional in us to tell you now,” replied Johnson.

“Oh, bother professional conduct!” exclaimed Major Delaporte. “I beg your pardon, gentlemen,” he added immediately, “but will you not tell me what, in your opinion, has become of the young lady?”

“Since she undoubtedly wore her jewelry, and probably had more or less money with her,” replied the detective, slowly, as if carefully weighing his words, “I think it extremely probable that she has been set upon by some of the thieves in which the city abounds. Her jewelry would prove so rich a bounty that they would go to any risk to get possession of it.”

“Do you—do you think the poor girl has been murdered?” faltered Mme. Delaporte, tears springing to her eyes.

Messrs. Johnson and Farrar looked thoughtful for a few moments, and then the latter slowly replied:

“No, for if she has been abducted, and I think it highly probable that she has been, then they can not fail to perceive that Miss Lorraine is a lady of high quality. They would know that, if she were murdered, the crime would undoubtedly be traced to them, through the efforts of her influential friends, and the thieves would know only too surely what would be their fate.”

“Do you think they may set her at liberty ultimately, even if you do not succeed in finding her?”

“It is not at all improbable that they would do so,” replied the detective gravely, “but we must find her before

that time comes, to save her from the continued horrors of her imprisonment, and the possibility of further harm."

"I have great confidence in your ability and skill, gentlemen," said Major Delaporte, with a low bow, "and your success shall be most beneficial to both of you, I assure you."

"You shall hear from us as frequently as possible through the day and evening," responded Detective Johnson, "and I trust before dark to bring the young lady back to you."

"God speed you!" rejoined all three in chorus, and the detectives took their leave.

Then began a lonesome and unavailing vigil in the Delaporte house.

The major withdrew to the smoking-room and smoked himself into a headache, while the ladies retired to an upstairs apartment and spent the forenoon in a more or less vain attempt to keep each other's spirits up.

Mme. Delaporte had already become so fond of Dianne that her love for the young girl was second only to Elsie's. And added to this was the horror of having a guest disappear so mysteriously from her household.

The morning passed gloomily, and, when the usual hour for luncheon had arrived it was ignored by all.

Early in the afternoon a servant rapped at the door of Mme. Delaporte's apartment.

"Come in," was the eager response.

"Mass'r major done wan' ter see yo' in de libr'y," said the servant, poking his head in the door.

“Has Miss Lorraine come yet?” questioned Mrs. Delaporte, springing to her feet.

“No, missus.”

“Come dear, we must go down at once,” and Mme. Delaporte suited the action to the word, closely followed by Elsie.

In the library they found Major Delaporte seated at his desk, on the opposite side of which sat Detective Farrar.

“Any news?” gasped Mrs. Delaporte.

The major shook his head gloomily.

“I have only come to report progress,” explained Farrar.

“But you haven’t made any?”

“I should have said, madame,” explained the detective, “that I have come to advise you what we have so far done on the case.”

“Let us have it at once, please,” interjected the major.

“We first took up the theory of abduction for the purpose of robbery,” Farrar went on. “Our familiarity with the class of people engaged in this line of work, and the terror in which they stand of us, made the investigation easy. So far we are convinced that Miss Lorraine was not abducted for the mere purpose of robbery, as we have been to all of the dens in which we know such kind of work to be carried on. I shall keep at work on that line a little while longer, however, and my partner, Mr. Johnson, has begun a quiet investigation of Mr. Gasparde Lorraine’s conduct of late.”

“I am convinced that you will find in him the real cause of Dianne’s disappearance,” put in Elsie eagerly.

“Why?” questioned Farrar.

And then Elsie told him the particulars of her cousin's quarrel with Gasparde Lorraine, the duel and its outcome, not even omitting the story of Reginald's love for Dianne.

“I wish you had told me this earlier,” said Farrar gravely when she had concluded. “It might have made our work easier from the start and more quickly productive of satisfactory results.

“Then you really think there is good reason to believe the Lorraine fellow guilty of this outrage?” queried the major.

“It looks to me now like a very clear case,” responded Farrar.

“Then, damme,” roared the major, bringing his ponderous fist down upon the desk and springing to his feet, “damme, I'll settle the whole affair in the shortest time possible.”

“What are you going to do, major?” queried Mme. Delaporte apprehensively.

“Call the d—d rascal out,” roared the major, with a face of purple hue.

“What good will that do?” asked Farrar quietly.

It occurred to Major Delaporte that he had inexcusably used an oath in the presence of ladies.

After apologizing for this breach, he turned to Farrar and answered:

“Why, sir, only a white-livered scoundrel would presume to take such measures with his own sister, or any other woman. I am going to see him at once, and give

him the choice between returning Miss Lorraine to me and meeting me in the field.”

The detective bit his finger nails, and looked perplexed.

“I am afraid such a course would only serve to injure our case,” he said quietly, after a little thought.

“How, sir?” demanded the major.

“Well, in the first place,” replied Farrar, “from what I know of Gasparde Lorraine, the man who goes to him to ‘talk fight’ will get all he bargains for. The fellow has figured in many duels, and has never been known to show the white feather.”

“So much the better, if he will fight,” returned the major warmly. “A fellow who will with his own sister such a dastardly trick is dangerous to the whole sex. I shall take pleasure in downing such a scoundrel.”

“He is a skillful shot, and you can not be so sure of downing him,” answered the detective. “And as to your chivalrous promptings in the matter, you had better put them one side. You have engaged our services, sir, and to our discretion should be left the task of guiding the case. Your interference, I fear, would only complicate matters.”

“Very well, then,” replied the major, after a pause. “I have every confidence in the skill of Messrs. Johnson and Farrar”—with a bow to the detective, which was returned—“and I will wait a full week to see what progress you make. If, at the end of that time, we have not heard satisfactorily from Miss Lorraine, I shall take occasion to wait upon her brother, and either exchange shots with him or shoot him at sight.”

This was said so decisively that the detective knew Major Delaporte could be depended upon to keep his word.

“We will do our best in the week you give us then, sir,” he said, and took his leave.

Farrar called again just before dinner, and reported what discoveries they had made, which seemed few and insignificant.

Late in the evening Messrs. Farrar and Johnson put in appearance together.

They had watched and investigated both Lorraine and Liscombe, they said, and, though they had as yet discovered nothing suspicious about these gentlemen, the investigation would continue unremittingly.

Meanwhile Elsie, who had found a trustworthy messenger in one of the slaves of the major's household, had engaged him to carry a letter to Reginald in the morning.

She had written him quite fully of Dianne's disappearance, and ended the letter with these words.

“The dear girl is in great peril, and I am confident you alone can save her. The detectives have failed so far, but where their skill fails them, I feel sure your love will not. Come at once.”

CHAPTER XIV.

ON THE SCENT.

REGINALD had risen early in the morning, and his favorite horse stood already saddled before the house.

It was his intention to ride over to the Streater plantation, get Frank, and spend the morning in a ride about the country, with a possible chance of a few shots at stray game.

When he had finished his early breakfast he emerged from the house with his gun, which he strapped across the saddle, and then mounted.

The morning was fine, with just enough of crisp cold in the air to make the exercise in the saddle exhilarating.

Whipping his horse into a brisk canter, he soon covered the distance between the two plantations.

As he passed the little railroad station of Streater he heard his name shouted, and saw the station agent running toward him as fast as his lame leg would permit.

“There’s a nigger just come in on the last train, sah,” puffed the station-master, “an’ he says he’s got a letter to carry down [to yo’. I saw yo’ goin’ by, an’ called yo’.”

Turning his horse’s head about, Reginald rode leisurely back to the station, where he found the slave awaiting him.

“From Elsie,” was Reginald’s thought, upon beholding

the superscription. "May the fates grant that she has summoned me to New Orleans to meet Dianne!"

He tore open the envelope and read.

His face was overclouded, and as he read on he turned pale. When he had finished the perusal there was a hard, set look about his mouth.

He turned to the station agent and demanded:

"How soon does the next train leave for New Orleans?"

"'Bout an hour, sah," was the answer; "that is, if she ain't late."

Reginald crumpled the letter, jammed it in his pocket, and headed the horse toward the Streator plantation.

Down came the whip with a savage crack on the animal's flank, and that usually sedate animal was thereby startled into a great demonstration of speed.

When he drew up before the house the horse was covered with foam and sweat.

Frank, who was ready and waiting, and who was a good deal of a horseman, eyed both rider and beast rather dubiously.

"I am afraid you've taken a good deal out of your horse, old fellow," was his salutation, as soon as Reginald drew rein and leaped to the ground. "I would recommend, old man, that we call a few minutes' halt and give one of my 'boys' time to rub your beast down. He isn't fit to go another step in the condition he's in now. You shouldn't ride so hard."

"Oh, bother the horse! I can't help it if I've killed him," Reginald responded, impatiently. "Have one of your boys put him in the stable indefinitely, please."

“And my own, too?” asked Frank, looking surprised.

“If you love me, yes. And then get one of your men to go over to my house, with a message to my mother to send my trunk to the hotel in New Orleans.”

“Any further orders?” asked Frank.

“Yes; if you are willing to go to New Orleans with me hurry to your room and get on a presentable rig.”

Thoroughly astonished, Frank carried out his friend's wishes, and then led the way to his room.

“Another duel?” the boy asked, as soon as they had gained that apartment, and locked the door.

“No; something more serious than that,” rejoined Reginald.

“Must be something mighty grave, then,” muttered Frank, struggling into a white shirt.

“It is,” was Reginald's answer, and then, as his friend continued hurriedly dressing, he read Elsie's letter aloud to him.

“So we are to play the knight-errant, eh?” queried Frank, a good deal astonished.

“More in the detective line, I should say—with possibly the rôle of avenger,” Reginald added, grimly.

“I am ready now,” said Frank. “I will get mother to send my trunk up on a later train.”

Together the friends hurried to the depot.

The train was only a few minutes late, and they reached their hotel before the morning was gone.

Frank went out and purchased such articles of clothing as Reginald immediately needed for the improvement of his appearance.

Then they got into a carriage and rode rapidly to Major Delaporte's house.

They were shown into the reception-room, where they were soon joined by Elsie, and later by Major and Mme. Delaporte.

"I have sent for my cousin—and his friend—because I believe they can help us a great deal in finding Dianne," Miss Prentiss explained to her host and hostess. "From what you already know I think you will agree with me that Reginald will work more earnestly than the detectives, who have only the incentive of earning money."

"I am expecting them soon," rejoined the major, "and then Mr. Prentiss and Mr. Streater can talk the matter over with them."

The detectives soon arrived, and were invited to join the group. They hung back at first, at the sight of strangers, but the major called out, reassuringly:

"Come right in, gentlemen. These are two friends who are going to help us out, if they can."

"By fighting duels?" queried Farrar, dryly.

"This gentleman is Mr. Prentiss," responded the major. "He has already crossed swords with that scoundrel, Lorraine, and I doubt not, is ready to do it again if occasion arises. And this other gentleman is Mr. Streater."

The detectives shook hands with the new-comers, and then Johnson gravely asked:

"In what way do you think, gentlemen, you can help us?"

“That I do not know as yet,” replied Reginald. “I was sent for, and so came.”

“Sent for by Major Delaporte?”

“No; by me,” interjected Elsie. “I thought he ought to be sent for, because I know his earnestness could be relied upon.”

“Without a doubt,” replied Johnson, dryly. Like nearly all detectives, he was not overpleased with the idea of outside help, which was, in his vocabulary, but another name for interference.

“Well, gentlemen, let me hear your report,” put in Major Delaporte. “Since you have come alone it is useless to ask if you have found Miss Lorraine.”

“Not yet,” answered Johnson, with professional gravity. “But we are shadowing both Lorraine and Linscomb, in the hope that their movements may lead us to Miss Lorraine.”

“Then you are convinced that her brother knows where she is?” asked Reginald, thoughtfully.

“Not convinced,” answered Johnson, cautiously. “We have good reason to think so, I may say, but we make it a rule never to be sure of anything until we know it positively.”

Farrar nodded his head approvingly, and Mrs. Delaporte looked on hopefully.

But Reginald was vexed over the uncommunicativeness of the detectives. He did not permit himself to betray his annoyance, however, for he did not dare to do or say anything which might anger the professional gentlemen and thus diminish Dianne's chance of a speedy rescue.

Johnson and his colleague went on to describe their meager discoveries, but were uncommunicative as to what their next steps would be.

Reginald, to whom their professional matter-of-fact way was slow torture, broke in:

“Gentlemen, can you not outline some work in this matter which my friend and myself can do, without offending or interfering with you?”

Johnson and Farrar deliberated for a period which seemed like an age to the impatient lover.

“Ye-es, I think we can find something for you to do,” Johnson at length replied.

“Then, for Heaven’s sake, name it at once!”

“It is this,” said the detective: “It is barely possible that we are all mistaken, and that Mr. Lorraine has had nothing to do with this affair. Therefore, while my partner and myself are following up the young lady’s brother and his friend, it can do no harm if you and Mr. Streator search the slums.”

“In what way?”

“Well, go at the matter cautiously and carefully. You are probably well enough acquainted with New Orleans to know where the worst holes are. Go into them, together; make inquiries for a young lady answering to her description, and give out that you are willing to pay a substantial reward for her release—the amount you can best decide yourself.

“Make all inquiries in good faith, and do everything earnestly. Let the people among whom you make your inquiries see that you mean just what you say, and will

pay the reward promptly, and no questions asked. I think you will agree that even to pay a large reward will be much better than to let the lady suffer imprisonment in quarters that must be highly disgusting to her."

"Far better," rejoined Prentiss, earnestly; "I will gladly pay five, even ten thousand dollars, to get her free within a few hours."

The detectives shook their heads.

"That is too much money, far too much," Farrar put in. "If you offer such sums, and her captors hear of it, they will at once decide that Miss Lorraine is a very valuable piece of goods, and they would undoubtedly take extra precautions to hold her, and demand an even higher price than you have mentioned."

"Exactly," assented Johnson. "Offer five hundred dollars at the start, and stick to exactly that figure. Then if you meet any one who can negotiate with you, don't allow the fellow to raise the price another dollar, but intimate to him that any delay will destroy the value of the lady's release."

"We will follow your instructions to the letter," said Reginald, rising, "and I am very grateful to you for your hints."

"Here, let me place a brace of revolvers at your disposal," said Major Delaporte, unlocking his desk and taking forth a pair of handsomely mounted weapons.

Prentiss and Streator pocketed the pistols with thanks, and then hurried from the house to commence operations at once.

"Whither away?" demanded Frank.

“To Miller’s Lane,” was Reginald’s response. “Doesn’t that strike you as as good a place as any to begin with?”

“That it does, old fellow. Lead the way, and we will search the city through, if need be.”

“We may have to, many times,” replied Prentiss, with a sigh.

“What do you think of the programme that fellow has laid out for us?”

“I think he and his partner have reserved the best end of it for themselves,” Reginald answered. “But then nothing is sure as yet, and you and I may stumble upon the dear girl most unexpectedly.”

Reaching Miller’s Lane, the two entered a low resort for flatboatmen, known as the “Gringoes’ Retreat.”

Both spent money freely, in an endeavor to make the *habitués* of the place communicative, and both took different characters aside, one at a time, and questioned them minutely.

But the search in the place was unavailing. No one would admit knowing anything of Dianne Lorraine’s whereabouts, and even the offers of money did nothing toward refreshing their memories.

From the Gringoes’ Retreat Prentiss and Streator visited several of the dance-halls frequented by the worst elements of the city, but even here their efforts did not meet with success.

Wearied with their unrewarded search, the friends went to the most respectable restaurant to be found in that neighborhood and partook of a somewhat unsavory meal.

“What do you think of it now?” Streator inquired.

“The least said about it the better,” was the discouraged response.

“But you don’t propose to give it up, Reggy?”

“Give it up? No, not if it takes weeks, months, to find her; but think of the tortures, the miseries, the poor girl is undergoing.”

Frank nodded his head compassionately, and silently offered his friend a cigar.

The two lighted their weeds and sauntered forth to recommence their search.

It was dark now, and down the dimly lighted streets the friends could see that all of the dens were lighted up and doing a rushing business.

“We ought to succeed much better now than in the day-time,” suggested Streator, encouragingly, “for all the ‘queer’ people in New Orleans must be astir in their favorite resorts by this time.”

They visited three dance-halls in succession, putting their questions cautiously, but without success.

No sooner had they entered the fourth, however, than a seedy-looking young fellow came up behind them and leaned nonchalantly against a wall.

“Don’t turn round, boss. Don’t look at me at all, but talk low. Air ye lookin’ fer a girl?”

“Yes,” was Reginald’s eagerly whispered response, as he obeyed his interlocutor’s request to look the other way.

“A little bit of a bright blonde beauty?”

“The same!” ejaculated Reginald, now hardly able to refrain from looking at his questioner.

“ Will it be worth money to ye if I succeed in takin’ ye to a place where you’ll find her?”

“ Indeed it is. Show me the way at once.”

“ Hold on, friends. We must come to terms fust. It must be onderstood that I gets five dollars, anyway, and twenty-five if I succeeds.”

“ Yes, yes, you shall have it; lead the way without losing a moment, I implore you.”

“ Softly, friend; some one may be pipin’ us. I’ll go out in a few minutes, and then ye comes out and ye finds me on the sidewalk.”

The seedy young man straightened up and moved away, and then, after what seemed like an interminable age to Reginald, their volunteer guide left the dance-hall.

The two friends followed, and once outside they saw the seedy young man walking down the street, as if leading the way.

Without approaching too near their guide Prentiss and Streator followed on in his footsteps, the former with palpitating heart and feverish pulse, and the latter far from calm.

CHAPTER XV.

A RAY OF HOPE THROUGH A DREARY SOLITUDE.

IT was daylight when Dianne gained consciousness again. Whether she had slumbered or had fainted, she knew not, and wondered but little at first.

It was some moments after she awoke before she became fully aware of her surroundings.

Dianne remembered, in a half-stupefied sort of way, that something disagreeable had happened the night before, but it was some little time before she realized all.

At last she arose to a sitting posture on her mattress and looked about her.

Like a flash all the incidents of her capture came back to her.

She remembered all, even the coming to in her wretched quarters during the night, and the then impossibility of learning very much about her surroundings.

As she looked about her now, there could be no doubt in her mind that she was confined in a most despicable place.

It was unquestionably an attic or loft, and the miserable apartment was not over twelve feet square.

There was not a window in the room, and the only light that was admitted came through the skylight which she had so ineffectually tried to reach during the night.

Her head was still aching violently, and the sensation of nausea had not entirely disappeared.

The mattress was the sole article of furniture which the room contained, so it took her but an instant, when fully awake, to comprehend her surroundings.

While she was wondering what to do, and whether there was any possible avenue of escape, she heard two distinct clicks at the door.

One was unmistakably the turning of a key, and the other the sudden withdrawing of a bolt on the other side.

In another moment the door was open, and a fat black arm protruded into the room, passing in a plate of food and a tin pail.

This done, the arm was quickly withdrawn again, and the key clicked in the lock.

Dianne, as soon as she comprehended that the door of her jail was open, had sprung quickly to her feet.

With a low cry, in which hope and terror were commingled, she threw herself against the barrier, just as the key was being turned.

In another instant the ominous thud of an iron bolt slipping into its socket greeted her ears.

“Let me out!” she wailed, hammering the door with her tiny fist. “Let me out! oh, please let me out!”

“Yo’ keep still in dar, or I’ll ’tend to yo’ quick ernuff.”

“Let me out, won’t you, please?” Dianne moaned, despairingly, in response.

“I’s’e’ll punch yo’ hed, if yo’ doan’ keep quiet!” admonished the same gruff tones without.

But Dianne had recognized a woman’s voice, and she now hoped wildly for succor on account of her sex.

“You are a woman!” she cried. “I know you will let me out. You must. It is horrible in here!”

“Doan’ t’ink I dar to let yo’ out dis day,” came the reply, and Dianne heard the shuffling steps of her jailer moving away.

“I’ll pay you anything you ask to let me out!” she cried, eagerly, but the woman on the other side of the door was evidently out of hearing, and there was no response to this offer.

With a cry of despair and abject terror, Dianne threw herself upon the mattress, and sobbed violently for many minutes.

When she had become calmer, she endeavored to think of her chances of escape.

“I can pay them well to let me go,” she reflected, and then came the thought: “What if I have been robbed!”

Nothing was more likely. A single glance showed that her jewels were gone.

“Did they get my purse?” she wondered.

Investigation showed that either her abductor or her jailer had most certainly obtained possession of her purse and its contents.

“Then I am in a most hopeless predicament,” she sobbed to herself. “I have no valuables about me to offer for my release, and they wouldn’t trust me to go to my friends to get a reward.”

She could think of no course which promised her freedom, so after a few moments she began to wonder what kind of a breakfast had been brought to her.

Moving toward the door, she found that for the present she need not fear starvation at least.

The plate contained a nice juicy steak, a sweet potato and a piece of hoe-cake. At its side was a cup of fragrant coffee, and the tin pail contained water.

The latter was, perhaps, as important a find as any. Dipping her handkerchief in the pail, she made a wet bandage and applied it to her throbbing head.

After a little the headache wore gradually away, and appetite came in its place.

She managed to make a hearty meal with the material at her disposal, and then felt wonderfully better.

When noon came she noticed that the sun's rays were pouring through the little skylight, and she pulled her mattress to a spot underneath where she could lie and bask in the mellow glow.

It seemed to do her a wonderful amount of good, for, in her dreary loneliness, the sun was a friendly companion indeed.

At last she felt a dim perception that there was human companionship near at hand.

Instinctively she raised her eyes to the skylight, and saw a little black face regarding her intently through the dirty panes of glass.

Was help at hand?

Her heart throbbed and beat wildly.

She made a sign that she wished to speak with him, and the little colored boy on the roof seemed to understand her.

By dint of much and long exertion the little fellow managed to get the skylight up.

Then he poked his head through the aperture and looked wonderingly at Dianne and about the room.

“W’at yo’ doin’ dar, missy?” he demanded, at last.

“I have been locked in here,” cried Dianne, eagerly, “and I want you to help me to get out.”

“Doan’ kno’ ’bout dat, missy. I reck’n if I git cotched I’se a skinned niggah, I is.”

“But you won’t get caught,” urged Dianne, eagerly. “You have only to help me to the roof, then show me a way to gain the street, and follow me to a place where I will give you a handsome reward.”

But the little fellow shook his head dubiously.

“Reck’n, missy, yo’ doan’ kno’ how cheap niggahs is ’roun’ heah. If mass’r cotch me doin’ it I ain’t got no longer to lib. He shoot me drefful quick, mass’r would. He doan’ fool wid no one.”

“Does your master own this house?” Dianne inquired, quickly.

“Nope,” was the positive response.

“Does he live here, then?”

“Nope.”

“Then how came you here?”

“Mass’r libs nex’ door, and de two houses join one an-oder.”

“How did you know I was here?”

“Didn’ kno’ for shuah; jest crawlin’ ober de ruff, an’ seen yo’ down dar, missy, an’ wondered how yo’ kem dar.”

“I’m locked in here by wicked people, who want to keep me here, and I’m very unhappy!” declared Dianne,

trying to use language which the little fellow could understand.

“What for is dey locked yo’ in dar?” demanded the little fellow, who did not seem overquick of perception.

“Because they want to get my money,” answered Dianne. “But if you will help me to get out of here, little one, I’ll have you bought of your master, and then you shall be free.”

“Reck’n I doan’ kno’ w’at ‘free’ done mean, missy,” rejoined the youth, looking more puzzled than ever.

“Don’t you know what it means to be free?” Dianne asked, incredulously.

“Reck’n I doan’, missy.”

“Why, to be free, little one, means to be able to do just as you please, to have no master, to be just like white people.”

The boy’s perplexity was evidently increasing.

“W’en I’s free I doan’ hab no mass’r?” he repeated, looking at her more wonderingly than ever.

“No, no master,” assured Dianne, who saw it would not do to hurry the youth faster than he could comprehend.

“Shucks!” rejoined the youngster, with something like contempt in his tone. “W’at’s a niggah gwine do widout a mass’r, anyway?”

“Why, do just as he pleases, of course.”

“An’ whar’ll he git enurff to eat?”

“Who, the master?”

“No, de niggah, ob course. See heah, missy, who yo’ s’pose done gwine ter git a niggah somefin ter eat or er

place ter sleep if he jest a pore, no 'count niggah, w'at doan' wuk for' no mass'r?"

"You will work for yourself, and get paid for all you do," returned Dianne, slowly.

She was just beginning to find herself at a loss how to answer the youngster's strange questions.

"Wuk fo' myself, an' git paid?" was the incredulous response. "See heah, I'se jess a niggah, an' no 'count, sartin, but I done want yo' quit foolin' wid me."

"I'm not fooling with you, little one; I'm very much in earnest," said Dianne, appealingly, tears coming to her eyes in spite of herself, when she began to fear that her only hope of escape was slipping away.

"I'se kno' yo' ain't foolin' wid me, missy," he said, contritely: "So doan' cry, please, missy, but tell me 'bout w'en I'se free."

"You can go North," answered Dianne, drying her eyes, "and when you get there you can get work to do, and pay for it, just like white people."

"Whar's de No'th, missy?"

"Ever so far away from here."

"Furder away frum heah dan ole Kaintuck?"

"Just the other side of Kentucky."

"Shucks! is dat so? I done heah tell ob 'free' niggahs, w'en I'se in ole Kaintuck, but I didn' nebber see none wid my own eyes, an' I nebber kno' w'at dey was."

"Will you help me to get out?" queried Dianne, with feverish impatience.

"Doan' kno' as I kin, missy," rejoined the boy, with a puzzled shake of his woolly head.

“ But I’ll get you your freedom, and send you North,” urged Dianne.

“ I’ll do w’at I kin, missy.”

“ Then get a rope, and help me out of here.”

The boy scratched his head, and seemed about to consent, when he suddenly straightened himself up and listened intently.

“ What is it you hear?” queried Dianne, with a presentiment of evil.

“ Ole’r mass’r done call me down in de street. I reck’n I hab ter cut, or I’se ’ll git my black skin peeled off.”

“ Come back as soon as you can—please do,” implored Dianne.

“ I’ll do dat, missy, for suah.”

“ How soon will that be?”

“ I kain’t tell, missy, but I’se kim back jess as soon as I kin. But I reck’n I’se better cut now, for dar’s ole mass’r down in the street a-shoutin’, ‘ Pompey, Pompey, yo’ black rascal! Whar is yo’?’ So I’se gwine now, missy, but I’se ’ll kim back some time.”

Cautiously the boy withdrew from the aperture, and then closed the skylight as he had found it.

One last, reassuring glance he gave Dianne, and then disappeared from sight.

When Pompey was gone she was in a feverish state of hope and expectation, and could hardly keep herself from shouting and weeping with sheer joy.

“ I shall soon be free,” she whispered to herself, with

radiant face. "Oh, how glad I shall be to get back to dear Madame Delaporte, and dear, dear Elsie!"

Her face was flushed and feverish, and she used up the last of the water in the tin pail in bathing it.

Then she waited and listened for the return of Pompey, but an hour passed by, and still there were no signs of that youngster.

"He's probably been sent somewhere on an errand," she thought, "or perhaps he's gone to find a rope. But he'll come back, I know he will. Something seems to tell me so."

But at that moment something occurred which attracted her attention elsewhere.

She heard the noise of a key turning in the door and realized that she was about to receive a visitor.

CHAPTER XVI.

POMPEY RETURNS.

DIANNE'S first thought was to pull the mattress away from under the skylight, in order that her plan of escape might not even be remotely suspected.

Hardly had she done so, and taken a seat upon the mattress herself, when the door opened a few inches.

Then a turbaned head asserted itself through the aperture, and Dianne saw that her caller, or jailer, was a colored woman.

"Is yo' all right, missy?" queried the woman.

"That depends," returned Dianne.

"'Pends 'pon w'at, missy?"

"On whether you call it right to keep a free white woman boxed up in this shameful manner."

"Now, see heah, missy," exclaimed the woman, raising her voice not a little, "doan' you tak' on dat way, 'cause I reck'n it won't do no good, nohow."

"Wouldn't you let me out if you were paid for it?" queried Dianne. "I mean, if you were paid very well?"

"Now, see heah, mah young lady. Doan' talk dat way to me, 'cause dere ain' money enuff in New Orleans to mak me let yo' go, unless mass'r say de word. 'Cause if yo' get away he done kill me for shuah, and den w'at good am de money gwine ter do me? Tell me dat, mah young lady."

“Is he so bad as that?” questioned Dianne.

“Reck’n he am dat, for suah, an’ er heap sight wuss.”

“And he would kill you for letting me get away?”

“Reck’n he’d kill me, missy, so quick I wouldn’t know w’at it was dat hurt me.”

“When do you think he intends to let me go?” asked Dianne.

The woman was pretending to busy herself with picking up the breakfast dishes, and Dianne was obliged to repeat her question twice.

“Was yo’ talking to me?” demanded the woman at last.

“I asked you,” reiterated Dianne, “when you thought your master intended to let me go out of this wretched place?”

“Ain’t so suah yo’s goin’,” replied the woman, stoically.

“You don’t mean to say he will keep me here the rest of my life?” demanded Dianne, incredulously.

“Dat ’pends, missy, on how long yo’s goin’ to lib.”

There was something so significant in the way this was said that Dianne now began to be thoroughly alarmed.

Did the ruffian who had abducted her, mean to kill her in cold blood?

The old maxim that “Dead men tell no tales,” recurred to her with ghastly significance.

She shuddered as she thought of the doom that was seemingly in store for her, and wondered how soon it would come.

Inexperienced as she was in the wicked ways of the world, she nevertheless could see clearly that the ruffian who had brought her to this miserable place would feel

secure from discovery and punishment if her tongue was silenced forever.

She was silent now, and had no more questions to ask.

The colored woman seeing this, smiled grimly and piled up the dishes preparatory to departing.

Dianne noticed the partly opened door, and a desperate idea came into her mind.

The idea rapidly developed into a resolve.

Beyond that door lay—what?

The outside world, and freedom, she hoped.

The jailer's back was turned, and the moment was propitious.

Dianne rose cautiously to her feet.

Evidently the colored woman did not hear her for her back was still turned.

“God help me and sustain me!” murmured the poor girl.

Then with a bound she reached the door.

Another bound and she had pushed it open.

The next room was very much like the one which she had just left, and at the other end she perceived a stairway.

She sped across the room.

The colored woman discovered the escape as soon as it was made.

“Come back heah, chile,” she shouted, rushing after the girl.

But Dianne, unheeding, ran towards the stairs. She gained them and started to descend.

But her jailer had caught up with her.

“Yo’, doan’ fool dis niggah dat way,” shouted her pursuer.

Dianne made a frantic effort to get down stairs, but the other caught her by the hair.

The poor girl fought desperately, but gradually, step by step, she was forced back to the attic floor.

Here the desperate conflict was renewed.

The woman was strong, and fought with the temper and strength of a virago.

Dianne, well built and wiry for a girl, seemed suddenly possessed of the strength of an Amazon.

“Let me go!” she hissed.

“Dat I won’t, mah lady.”

“Let me go, or I’ll tear you to pieces!”

“I kin play dat game as well as yo’, missy.”

“You fiend!” panted Dianne, still struggling with all the strength and fury she could summon; “let go of me this minute, or I’ll kill you!”

“Dat’s a game we knows pretty well heah, too,” chuckled the virago, striking her captive unmercifully.

Clinched tightly, they struggled and struggled, and Dianne’s great fury and wild longing for escape seemed to make her the equal of her antagonist.

At last, with a sudden wrench, Dianne freed herself.

This time she knew better than to turn and run.

The virago must be first silenced.

During the struggle Dianne had all the time had her eye on a stick of wood which lay upon the floor.

Both now saw it.

Dianne rushed toward it.

So did the virago.

But the girl was the first to reach it.

Snatching it in her hand, she now stood erect, her head thrown back and a savage light gleaming in her eyes.

“Now, you hag, I’ll kill you if you resist or make any noise!” she hissed.

“Drop that stick!” vociferated the other, seemingly not in the least intimidated.

“Go back into that room!” commanded Dianne, brandishing her club in the direction of her recent prison.

“Git dar, yo’self!” returned the woman, scornfully.

“Get in there, I tell you!” shouted Dianne, beside herself with excitement and natural ferocity.

“Drop dat stick, I tell you!” returned the woman.

Dianne seeing that she was not being obeyed, advanced upon her foe with the stick uplifted.

Then began some artful dodging.

The virago seeing the fire in the girl’s eye and realizing her danger, retreated.

Dianne took pains to keep between the woman and the stairs, while the other exercised equal ingenuity in keeping away from the door of the girl’s former prison.

“Are you ready to go into that room now?” demanded Dianne, after several ineffectual attempts to strike the nigger.

“Is yo’ ready to drop dat stick an’ go dar yo’s’e’f?” was the retort.

Dianne made no answer, but seeing her opportunity, sprang forward with the club uplifted.

Down it came with a sickening thud upon the negress' head.

A blow that would have killed, or at least stunned anybody else, was apparently thrown away in this case.

The woman reeled, but recovered herself before Dianne could follow up her advantage.

"What's all that noise up thar, Lize?" shouted a voice from below.

"Come heah, quick, mass'r!" shouted the virago, and Dianne heard heavy footsteps coming.

She turned and faced the new-comer, stick in hand.

"So she's got out, the hussy!" growled the man, whom the girl recognized as her abductor.

He sprang upon her, and Dianne would have struck him down, but she felt a pair of sinewy black arms encircling her own.

"Give me this splinter!" commanded the man, and wrenching the stick from Dianne's grasp.

Then without a word, he seized her and bore her back to her old dungeon.

With no little violence the man threw her down upon the mattress.

"Now, I reck'n yo'll stay thar!" he muttered, standing over her and glaring at her malevolently.

Then, turning on his heel, he strode out of the room, and locked the door behind him.

All of her strength was gone now, and the poor girl lay panting and exhausted on the mattress where she had been so forcibly thrown.

No one came near her, as the hours sped by, and she

gradually recovered sufficiently to discover that she had a very healthy appetite.

Did they intend to starve her into submission?

It was not a pleasant prospect.

She might lay there for days without food, she reflected, and then Pompey's promise of future aid came back to her.

Hours had passed since the little slave boy had left her.

Why did he not come back?

Could he be relied upon to come at all?

In her heart she felt that he could, so she must wait and hope and pray.

The daylight gradually gave place to the darkness of an early winter evening.

Pulling her mattress to the spot under the skylight she glanced up.

The stars were twinkling brightly, and it looked like a clear crisp night without.

The evening had not far advanced when she heard a faint scratching sound overhead.

Looking up quickly, with a feeling of hope surging through her bosom, she saw a diminutive hand and wrist upon the glass.

The noise was repeated, and then she discovered a curly head peering down into her place of captivity.

Springing to her feet she stood erect and extended her arms toward her visitor that he might see she was on the alert.

He evidently saw her, for she could hear him tugging at the skylight.

After what seemed like hours to the hopeful but impatient captive he succeeded in raising the frame, and she felt a sweep of cool air.

“Is that you, Pompey?” she whispered, eagerly.

“Yes, dat’s me, missy.

“Thank God!” Dianne exclaimed, fervently. “Can you help me out now?”

“Yes, missy; I t’ink so.”

“Then be quick about it, please, Pompey.”

“Is yo’ got on all yo’ street close?” queried the urchin.

“No, but I will have right away. Don’t lose a moment, Pompey.”

Dianne hurried on her wrap, and fastened it about her, after which she fastened her hat securely on her head.

She heard the noise of cautious pounding on the roof, and realized that the boy was driving a nail or a spike. Then a knotted rope was lowered into the room.

“Quick, missy!” whispered the boy.

Dianne stole on tiptoe to the door of her prison, and listened intently.

Not a sound was to be heard on the other side of the door, and she believed she could make her escape unobserved and uninterrupted.

“Quick, missy; quicker’n dat!” Pompey whispered again.

Seizing the knotted rope with both hands, Dianne raised herself a few inches at a time.

When she had nearly reached the roof, she felt her strength failing her. Pompey, too, perceived this, and stretched out his hand to her.

Between the boy and the rope she was enabled to reach the roof in safety, where she sat down panting and exhausted.

Pompey quickly recovered his rope, and replaced the skylight.

Then he turned to Dianne and said:

“Come, missy; no time to lose!”

She followed him across the roof to the adjoining house, where they came to an open skylight.

“Yo’ go down first, missy,” advised the boy; and she did so.

Then she followed him noiselessly down what appeared to be three flights of back stairs.

The boy held a door open, and she passed out into a back yard.

“This way, missy,” whispered Pompey; and before she realized it he had pushed her through another gate-way, and she found herself upon the street.

She was free at last!

CHAPTER XVII.

A RECOGNITION AND A PURSUIT.

FREE, but for how long?

Dianne breathed in the air of freedom, and felt exhilarated, only to become a prey to terror of the wildest kind.

Not knowing which way to turn, she had paused, as soon as the gate closed behind her, irresolute and uncertain.

After the first rapture of sudden liberty had passed away, she shudderingly realized that she was standing next door to the abode of the scoundrel who had entrapped her.

She cast a hurried, frightened glance about her, but the result of her searching look was on the whole reassuring, and she breathed more easily.

Yet she must not pause a moment longer.

She had become convinced of the idea that her ruffianly captor had made up his mind to murder her, and oh, if he should find her again now that she had once escaped his clutches!

Bending her head as low as possible, and looking neither to the right nor the left, she hurried down the narrow, dimly lighted street.

Where?

She knew not, only realizing that all her hopes of safety were now centered in putting the house of her late detention as far behind her as possible.

Several times Dianne fancied she heard stealthy footsteps in pursuit, and as often turned to look behind her, only to discover that her fears had deceived her.

The first corner she came to she turned down, not that she knew whither it led, but possessed of the idea that she must continue her flight until she reached a place of comparative safety.

Taking time to look about her, now that she realized she was not being closely pursued, Dianne was surprised and dismayed to find that her surroundings were not improving with regard to respectability.

The slouched, shuffling figure of a young man ambled by her, and Dianne, with a sudden chill creeping into her heart, saw that he was watching her.

Was he one of the ruffians who had brought about her captivity?

If so, did he intend to pounce upon her, and carry her back, that his confederates might wreak their vengeance upon her?

Trembling in every limb, Dianne managed to accelerate her speed, and a feeling of great relief came to her when she realized that the young man had passed on with no display of hostile intentions.

But almost immediately her fright was renewed.

Two other men had passed her, and she felt, rather than saw, that they had paused, and were regarding her.

One of them started after her.

Dianne quickened her speed as much as her skirts would allow.

But her pursuer quickly covered the distance between them, and laid a detaining hand on her shoulder.

The poor frightened girl felt that, in such a neighborhood, her appeals for aid would be utterly ignored, yet she could not repress the scream of terror which arose to her lips.

“ I beg your pardon, miss—”

The voice was not unkindly, and Dianne turned to recognize in her captor—Reginald Prentiss.

From abject terror to the heights of joy and confidence was such an abrupt transition that Dianne could not speak.

She only clung frantically to the young man, as if she were drowning, and he, comprehending something of her emotions, did not press her with the questions that sprung to his lips.

“ Frank!” he shouted, all unmindful of his surroundings, and Streater came back at a pace which threatened the utter demolition of his dignity.

“ By Jove, Miss Lorraine!” the youth began volubly, when Reginald checked him, and he retreated a few paces.

The shuffling young man who had been leading them down the street, came back, too, and he guessed the turn of affairs in an instant.

“ I reck’n ye’ve found her, boss, an’ ye won’t need me no more,” he said.

“ Yes, thank you, I have,” replied Reginald.

“ Then if ye’ll hand me the five we’ve ’greed upon, I’ll be off, an’ sorry ’taint the twenty-five.”

“ Here you are, and be off as soon as you like,” replied

Reginald, thrusting a bill into the dirty, outstretched paw.

The volunteer guide snatched the bill, and scanned it.

“Reck’n ye may have made a mistake, boss. This here is a fifty-plunker.”

“Never mind; take it with my compliments and be off,” responded the young planter, impatiently.

The young man needed no further instructions. Inside of a minute he was lost to sight.

“Oh, Mr. Prentiss, how you frightened me at first!” began Dianne, who had now recovered her power of speech.

“I shall be glad of opportunities to make amends in the future,” responded Reginald, gravely, yet with a trace of eagerness in his tone.

“I am safe again,” she murmured; “thank Heaven—and you”—shyly.

“Rest assured of your safety,” Reginald answered, with such overwhelming positiveness that, despite their late differences, Dianne would gladly have nestled her head against his breast.

But the young planter would have defeated that intention, even had she formed it, for he felt that the present was a time for speedy action.

“We must get a cab at once,” he said, “for you are not fit to walk, and the distance is too long. Frank, have the goodness to get the nearest carriage. We will wait here until you return.”

“But supposing you are attacked here,” suggested Frank, solicitously.

“I have Major Delaporte’s pistol, and am confident I can protect both myself and Miss Lorraine.”

“I reckon you can, old fellow; after all, but I won’t waste a moment.”

Streator was as good as his word.

In a few minutes a carriage rolled up to the edge of the sidewalk and Frank jumped out.

“I had to get an open carriage,” he explained, “but the night isn’t very cool, and I thought it best to take the first I came across.”

“This one will do,” Reginald answered, shortly.

He helped his fair companion in and took a seat beside her.

Streator considerably lighted a cigar and jumped up beside the driver.

“Tell him where to take us, Frank,” Reginald shouted, as they rattled away over the pavements.

“Where are we going?” questioned Dianne, breaking her long silence.

“Back to Major Delaporte’s. Is that not where you wish to go?”

“Yes; have they been anxious on my account?”

“Could they have been otherwise, Miss Lorraine? They have had two detectives on your track ever since yesterday morning.”

“Was he one of them whom you were following down the street?”

“No; a fellow Frank and I ran across a little while ago, who thought he could take us to you.”

“And how came you to be looking for me, Mr. Prentiss?”

“Elsie sent me word you were in danger, and to come at once. Streator and I both answered the summons. I can not tell you how glad we are to have found you.”

“And why did you search for me at all?” asked the girl, looking up at him.

“Don't you know?” was the counter-query trembling on Reginald's lips; but he did not speak, and Dianne realized that they stood on embarrassing ground.

There was another fact which embarrassed Prentiss, although Dianne appeared utterly unaware of it.

When they had first entered the carriage he had placed his arm around her to steady her, and she did not appear to notice it.

Reginald's sense of honor told him that he was taking an unfair advantage of the woman who had rejected his love so short a while ago, and yet he did not see how to remove his arm without making the removal palpable to her.

Meanwhile, Streator was playing the part of the devoted and disinterested friend, sitting there on the box with the driver.

He smoked and chatted with the Jehu, but never once turned to observe the pair on the rear seat of the barouche.

“I wouldn't want any one looking at me,” thought Frank, “if I were sitting so cozily with—”

The reflection ended in a puff of smoke of unusual volume.

The driver kept his horses going at a lively gait, and,

ere long, his passengers found themselves riding through one of the handsome thoroughfares of the city.

Coming down the street slowly, arm in arm, were two men, in whom the occupants of the carriage would have felt a lively interest had they observed them.

They were Gasparde Lorraine, the gambler, and his no more reputable friend, Captain Linscomb.

Evidently they were conversing earnestly, this precious pair of rascals, for, though they spoke in low tones, they were gesticulating a good deal, and their cigars had gone out unconsumed.

“I’m sorry for the girl,” Linscomb was saying. “It strikes me she is having a rough time of it for a lady born, but of course you know your own affairs best.”

“Truly spoken, Linscomb,” responded Lorraine. “I admit to you that the girl is suffering martyrdom, locked up in that vile hole; but it’s the only way to break her of so much spirit, and Carlin is my tool, and won’t dare to injure a hair of her head, even though I should decide to have her kept there a month.”

“See here,” rejoined Linscomb, excitedly, “you don’t mean to tell me that you may keep the girl there a month?”

“And why not?” queried the other, coolly.

“See here, Gasparde, I am a friend of yours—”

“Admitted without argument,” responded Lorraine, imperturbably.

“But I’ll be hanged if you shall keep your sister in that dirty den for four weeks.”

“Why not?”

“ Because I have some rights in this matter.”

“ What rights, please?”

“ I’m going to marry the girl, and—”

“ That depends altogether upon how well you fall in with my plans,” was the gambler’s prompt but calm response.

“ See here, Lorraine, if I thought you meant to make a fool of me in this manner I’d—”

“ Well, what?” asked Gasparde, with a coolness that aroused the ire of his companion.

“ I’d let daylight through you,” replied the captain, touching his pistol-pocket significantly.

“ Little fear of that,” laughed Lorraine. “ I might as well tell you,” he added, “ that certain papers are still in existence which would send you to the gallows if produced.”

The captain started.

“ But you know I am innocent of that affair,” he expostulated.

“ Very true,” returned his companion, amiably, “ but the papers are so damaging that it would be next to impossible for you to establish your innocence in the face of them.”

“ Where are they now?” demanded Linscomb.

“ Oh! safe enough; in the possession of the lawyer who has my will. When I die the papers will all be produced together, that is unless, by that time you have followed my wishes in every respect, and have also married my sister.”

Linscomb gnashed his teeth in silent rage. He could

cheerfully have killed the man at his side, but, under the circumstances, it was certainly best to be politic.

So the captain took another tack.

“My dear fellow,” he said, persuasively, “my impatience to get on with the wooing had been the cause of this slight disagreement. Don’t you think it best, now, to call at Major Delaporte’s without delay? There, of course, you will learn that she has disappeared, and, equally of course, you will be terribly solicitous about her. Before daylight I can perform the heroic rescue of the distressed maiden, and then—”

“In here, quick,” whispered Lorraine, interrupting his friend, and pulling him into a door-way.

“What’s come over you?” questioned Linscomb, looking very much surprised, as, indeed, he was.

“Look there?” gasped Lorraine, hoarsely.

The captain followed the direction of his companion’s eye.

There was a jam of carriages in the street, and all were compelled to move along slowly for the time being.

In an open barouche was, of all women, Dianne Lorraine, and unmistakably supported on a man’s arm!

“Fiends of Hades!” whispered the captain in his companion’s ear. “Some other fellow has made the rescue. Who is he?”

“That Prentiss fellow I fought the duel with,” muttered Gasparde, savagely.

“We mustn’t lose sight of them for a moment,” declared Linscomb. “Come, they have got by now.”

The captain seized his companion's arm and rushed him out into the street.

The second carriage behind Dianne was empty, and evidently a public vehicle.

The driver hauled up when he saw a possible "fare" of two gentlemen, and leaned over to receive his instructions.

"Do you see that barouche—second carriage ahead?" asked the captain.

The driver nodded.

"Very well, don't lose sight of it. Ten dollars if you keep it well in sight until that other driver puts down his passengers."

And the pair of conspirators jumped into the vehicle.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE PURSUERS FOILED.—MORE PLOTTING.

THE carriage containing Dianne and her friends, having now got out of the press of vehicles, was bowling along at a lively rate.

Gasparde and Captain Linscomb were following closely, and had the advantage of being in a covered carriage, which insured them freedom from recognition.

“Are we going straight to Major Delaporte’s?” asked Dianne.

“As straight as we can go,” answered Reginald, “but, since we are in an open carriage and liable to recognition, the driver has the admirable good sense to drive us there through side streets.”

The driver’s “good sense” was wholly attributable to Frank Streator’s shrewdness, for that young gentleman, serenely smoking on his high perch beside the driver, was very much awake.

He believed thoroughly that Dianne’s brother was responsible for her abduction, and he now hoped to escape the gambler’s vigilant eye by making a *détour* of more unfrequented streets.

But, as we have seen, this idea did not occur to Frank until it was too late.

However, the young man did notice that a solitary cab kept at a regular distance behind them, on streets where

no other carriages were in sight, and his suspicions became quickly aroused.

Long and earnestly did Frank gaze at the pursuing cab, and then determined to communicate his suspicions to his friend.

“Reggy,” he whispered, leaning back from the box, “I am very sure that the cab behind us is following us, and has been for some time.”

Prentiss turned in his seat and looked back.

There could be no doubt that Streator’s conjecture was correct.

“It is true,” he said to Dianne.

“What is true?” she asked.

“That we are being followed.”

“By whom?”—rather incredulously.

Reginald was about to answer when it occurred to him that the time was not favorable for explanations, so he changed his tack and said:

“I can better explain that to you later, Miss Lorraine. For the present will you trust me fully if I think best to alter the programme?”

“I will trust you fully,” answered Dianne, so unhesitatingly that her confidence in him went straight to his heart.

Reginald crossed to the other seat and stood up so that he could reach Streator’s ear.

“Frank,” he said, “you are right about our being followed. I must leave it in your hands to outwit our followers. It seems to me that we had better first go to the Delaporte’s house on Ruggles Street. When the fellows be-

hind see us drawing up there they will naturally halt at a distance. Then have our driver whip up instantly, dash around the corner, and go through a perfect maze of side streets so rapidly as to throw the fellows behind us altogether off the scent."

"Admirable," commented Streater, "and then—"

"And then drive straight to the house of our friend Douglass on Eustis Street."

"An excellent idea," assented Streater. "Trust me to carry it out successfully."

"What are you going to do?" questioned Dianne, when Reginald had resumed his seat at her side.

"I am taking you to the home of friends of our family—that is, after we have outwitted our pursuers."

"And who are they—our pursuers, I mean?"

Reginald bit his lip.

"Wait until I have taken you to a place of safety, Miss Lorraine, and then I will send at once for Elsie. She will explain everything to you."

Dianne wondered, but saw that her companion had no desire to explain, and so she remained silent.

Her eyes began to open in astonishment, however, when she noticed that they were getting near the Delaporte mansion.

"I thought you intended to take me elsewhere?" she interrogated.

"So I do," was the reply, "but we must first throw those fellows off the scent."

Dianne felt that the whole affair was shrouded in some

deep mystery. She was silent, but she watched the proceedings with a deep interest.

The carriage now rolled slowly up to the door of the Delaporte's house, and Streator, watching the pursuing cab, saw it haul up abruptly at a considerable distance.

Then began an exciting game of hide-and-seek.

"Quick! Whip your horses up and go around that corner for all you are worth," whispered Frank to the Jehu.

The latter comprehended, and the whip shrieked through the air and stung the horses into a mad gallop.

Around the corner whirled the carriage, with a lurch that nearly threw its occupants out.

Streator, looking behind just as they turned, saw the other vehicle getting slowly under way.

"Turn down the next corner there," Streator ordered the driver.

No vehicle came into sight, nor could they hear the rumble of wheels.

"I think we have thrown them," whispered Frank to his friend. "Shall we proceed now?"

"By all means, and do it quickly," was the reply.

In a few minutes more the carriage had drawn up before the Douglass house, on Eustis Street.

To Mrs. Douglass Reginald gave a hasty account of Dianne's adventures, and she received the girl with the utmost friendliness.

"Go and get Elsie to come here," Reginnald desired of Frank. "At the same time present our apologies to Major and Mrs. Delaporte, and explain why we have taken the course that we have."

Streator jumped into the barouche, rode to one of the main thoroughfares, and then dismissed the driver.

Walking a little distance down the street, he engaged a covered carriage, and was driven to the Delaporte mansion.

The major and his amiable wife were in the library, and so was Elsie. All were waiting anxiously for news of the lost girl, and Frank's story was eagerly listened to.

"I am sorry," said the major, when Frank had finished, "that you could not bring Miss Dianne back here, but I think you and Mr. Prentiss decided wisely after all. However, remember that as soon as this episode has blown over Miss Lorraine positively must return here and finish her visit."

Frank replied that he had no doubt she would be most glad to do so, and then inquired of Elsie how soon she could be ready to accompany him to the house where Dianne had found temporary shelter.

"In a few minutes," Elsie replied, rising at once.

"I think it wise that your trunk and one of Mr. Lorraine's go with us," he observed.

"They shall be ready, too," Elsie answered, and hurried from the room.

Frank had not long to wait before the trunks were strapped on behind the cab, and Elsie was ready to go to her friend.

Streator noticed that no other vehicles were in sight, and ordered the jehu to drive as rapidly as possible, to preclude the possibility of any one following them on foot.

That night Dianne and her bosom friend were reunited, and all in the house of Douglass were happy.

The Douglasses, by the way, were old friends of the Prentiss family, and Dianne Lorraine, under the protection of Reginald and Elsie Prentiss, was made to feel herself a welcome guest indeed.

Gasparde and Captain Linscomb, when they saw the carriage draw up before the Delaporte mansion, were in an exultant frame of mind.

“We have had our chase for nothing,” observed Gasparde, dryly. “We might have known that she would go there as a matter of course, for I doubt if she is acquainted anywhere else in New Orleans.”

“And this pleasant little undertaking of ours having failed,” commented Linscomb, “we must immediately put our heads together to devise something more cleverly original.”

“Fiends take them!” growled Lorraine, who had kept his head out of the window all the while, “they have fooled us. No one has alighted, and yet they are driving on again.”

Linscomb leaned hurriedly out of the window and saw that his friend’s statement was correct.

“Driver,” he shouted, “follow that carriage, quick, and don’t let them give you the slip or you lose your reward.”

This potent appeal sent the horses attached to the cab flying along.

But it was soon apparent that there was something wrong, for the speed of the cab was abated, and then it came to a standstill.

“What’s the matter, driver?” demanded Linscomb, protruding his head from the window.

“They have given us the slip for sure, sir—can’t even hear their wheels!”

“Maledictions!” groaned the captain.

“Then I suppose there is nothing for us to do but give up the chase for to-night,” suggested Gasparde.

This certainly was the only feasible course, and so it was adopted.

The baffled and discomfited rascals were driven back to the Pelican Club, cursing their luck, or the absence of it, all the way.

They found a table in as secluded a spot as they could, and sat down to consider the matter in hand.

“Here, Adolphus,” called the captain to one of the slaves in attendance, “go to the steward and get a bottle of Bourbon as quick as you can.”

“Drink a few glasses of this stuff,” advised Linscomb, when the liquor was brought.

“Better far to leave the stuff alone,” returned Gasparde, pushing the proffered glass away from him. “If you used less of it, Harvey, you would be in better shape to grapple with the mighty problem that confronts us.”

The captain drained his glass, and then glared at his companion.

“I would, eh? Please tell me, my dear Gasparde, how you have distinguished yourself over me in this matter?”

“I didn’t say that I had,” returned the gambler, testily, “but it is well for you to understand that we need clear heads, for prompt, decisive action is necessary now.”

“How so?”

“Prentiss will be your successful rival, if we don't make all speed.”

“I don't understand you,” granted the captain, gulping down his third glass of whisky.

“Drink a little more of that beastly stuff and you won't be able to understand anything or do anything,” retorted Gasparde, angrily.

“Best thing in the world to brace me up!” declared Linscomb, suiting the action to the word by draining a fourth glass.

“Nonsense,” roared Gasparde, angrily, and without another word he seized the bottle and emptied its contents into a cuspidore.

“What did you mean by that?” demanded the captain, rising to his feet.

“My meaning ought to be perfectly clear,” rejoined Lorraine, coolly.

“That's my whisky.”

“It was.”

“And I paid for it with my own money.”

“I will pay you the price of it.”

“That doesn't square it at all.”

“Sit down, Linscomb.”

“Confound you,” growled the captain, “I'll call you out!”

“Nonsense; sit down.”

“I'll call you out, I tell you!”

“Go and call out Peyton,” retorted Gasparde, con-

temptuously; "the poor boy lives in terror of being forced to meet you on the field some day."

"I'll call you out; by George I will!" persisted the captain.

"You'll do nothing of the sort, and if you don't subside at once I'll wash you off my hands altogether. Sit down."

The captain glared at his friend and then obeyed.

"Adolphus," called Gasparde, "bring a glass of plain soda."

The captain looked unutterable things, but the soda was brought, and, after unavailing protests, he was induced to drink it.

"Now," resumed Gasparde, "we will talk of the matter in hand."

"What do you propose to do?" questioned Linscombe, now thoroughly vanquished and subservient to his friend's will.

"Just this," replied Lorraine: "Dianne has no friends in New Orleans except the Delaportes. Therefore, it follows that Prentiss has taken her to some of his friends. When she once learns of our share in the mishap, as I fear she will, then she will marry that Prentiss fellow at once. She is eighteen, and therefore old enough to marry without my consent as her guardian. Then I shall have to turn over her fortune, and our little plans are dished."

Captain Harvey Linscomb listened while his companion proceeded to unfold the details of a most audacious plot.

CHAPTER XIX.

AGAIN IN THE TOILS.

ON the morning of the day after Dianne's escape from durance she received a call, at the Douglass house, from Messrs. Johnson and Farrar.

The detectives seemed in nowise disconcerted over the fact that the young lady whom they had been employed to liberate had accomplished the liberation herself, and without their aid.

"We learned of Major Delaporte that you had 'turned up' all right, and that you were stopping here," began Johnson, who, as usual, acted as spokesman.

"Oh," responded Dianne, "you are the detectives who were engaged to learn my whereabouts and set me free!"

There was a tinge of sarcasm in her tone which Detective Johnson did not by any means ignore, when he replied:

"New Orleans is a city of considerable size, Miss Lorraine. To search it from one end to another is not an easy task. However, if you had not been so impatient to get free, we should have had the pleasure of rescuing you in due form. It was early in the evening when you made your escape; it was midnight when we reached the same place. You had flown, they told us, but we induced those very worthy people to make a restitution which may please you."

As the detective spoke he drew from his breast-pocket a watch, several pieces of jewelry, and a purse.

“They are mine,” cried Dianne, picking them up and scrutinizing them delightedly.

“We should have taken you out of the house with those trinkets, had you not been so impatient,” responded Detective Johnson, with a good-humored twinkle of the eye.

“Why did those people abduct me and threaten to murder me?” asked Dianne, suddenly, hoping to penetrate the mystery which enveloped the whole affair.

The reply which came was indeed a startling one to her.

“Your brother caused it all,” said Johnson, very calmly, and regarding the girl intently.

“My brother?”

“And a blackleg who calls himself Captain Harvey Linscomb.”

“Oh, I see it all,” exclaimed Dianne; but, nevertheless, she did not understand it as well as she wished.

“You call Captain Linscomb a ‘blackleg,’” she said, “and I have been told that he comes of one of the best New Orleans families.”

“You doubtless got your information from your brother,” replied Johnson, eying her very closely but somewhat covertly.

“It is true,” he went on, “that Linscomb’s family was all that could be desired. When his father and mother were alive, twenty-five years ago, there were no more respected people in the entire city, but their heir, the captain, has squandered both their fortune and their good name. Only Harvey Linscomb’s intimates have the au-

dacity to mention him and his family in the same breath."

"And yet Gasparde would have me marry this wretch," said Dianne aloud, though addressing herself.

"Undoubtedly he would," replied Johnson, who heard her remark; "and this leads me to say to you, Miss Lorraine, that I have a most unpleasant duty to perform."

Dianne looked at him wonderingly, while the detective went on to say:

"My colleague and myself have satisfied ourselves thoroughly that you have a great deal to fear, both from your brother and this friend of his. I will say that they both *appear* to be thoroughly unscrupulous in their determination to make you Mrs. Linscomb. Permit me to inquire if you have any property in your own right?"

Dianne pondered a little over the advisability of answering this question, but finally decided to do so.

"My brother is my guardian," she replied, "and I believe he holds something more than a quarter of a million in trust for me."

"That is the key to the whole affair, then," responded Johnson, thoughtfully. "Your brother is, I suspect, low in funds, and Linscomb has now only what he secures in nefarious ways. Pardon me for telling you, Miss Lorraine, but I am convinced that they are scheming to get possession of your fortune to divide it between them."

Dianne did not look so astounded or stupefied at this information as the detective had expected she would.

She had been forced to believe that Gasparde was at the bottom of her abduction and imprisonment, and if a

brother could stoop so low was there any limit to what he might do?

Neither could she be angry at the free manner in which the detective had discussed the case with her, for she could not doubt the correctness of his discoveries. There was, too, a fatherly air about Detective Johnson. To her, at this moment, he seemed more like a valuable counselor than a paid spy.

Dianne was wretchedly unhappy, and, as there seemed nothing more to be said, she sought to terminate the interview.

“If you will kindly state the amount of your bill for services,” she said, “I will gladly pay it.”

“Our bill, Miss Lorraine, is already paid.”

“By whom?”

“Major Delaporte.”

“I do not understand you.”

“It is quite easy of comprehension, Miss Lorraine,” said Johnson, rising as if to depart, in which movement he was imitated by his colleague. “Major Delaporte, with a chivalry which does him credit, declares that his guests are at all times under his protection. It was as his guest that you disappeared so suddenly, and Major Delaporte felt that upon him, as your host, depended the task and expense of finding you. He begged me to explain this to you, and to set you entirely at ease in case you broached the matter.”

The detectives then took their leave, and Dianne, seizing her recovered possessions, hurried off upstairs to Elsie.

It was a wretched, unhappy day for Dianne Lorraine.

Her nature was loyal and truthful to the core, yet she could not bring herself to doubt her brother's perfidy, and she feared the course he might adopt in the future.

To Elsie she went for comfort, and in Elsie she found it.

"Never mind, darling," said that little woman. "If Gasparde has really turned out in a disappointing light, you have still plenty of friends. You know how much you can count upon me, dear; and Major and Madame Delaporte, I really believe, love you as much as they could their own daughter. Then there is Reggy—but perhaps you would rather I would not speak of him."

"He has been very kind to me," murmured Dianne, sadly. "At the very time when my brother had turned against me your cousin came to New Orleans and scoured the city to bring me back to freedom. Has he not been infinitely more kind and considerate to me than my own brother?"

"I hope you will continue to think so, dear; for Reggy loves you better than his own life, and there isn't a truer man in all Louisiana than Reginald Prentiss."

"I have already told him I can not be his wife," replied Dianne, earnestly, "but, believe me, Elsie dear, I will strive to be his friend as he has been mine."

"The saddest and cruelest words a man can hear from the woman he adores," said Elsie, sadly.

"Do you really think so?" asked Dianne, looking quickly at her friend.

"I do indeed, dear."

"Then I will really try to be as kind to him as I can,

Elsie, and I will endeavor to be most considerate with him, for so good a man should not be wounded by any woman.”

Elsie would fain have urged her cousin's cause upon her friend, but upon sober second thought she felt that time was needed more than argument.

Later in the day Dianne had an opportunity to keep her promise.

She and Elsie had been chatting in the reception-room, when the latter left her for a few moments.

Hardly had Elsie quitted the room when Reginald entered.

He looked surprised to see her, she thought, and not wholly overjoyed.

But in this she was mistaken. Though he feared that he had lost her, the pain of the reflection was always overwhelmed by the joy of even looking upon that face so dear to him.

It was the first time they had met during the day, and commonplaces were therefore in order.

“ Good-morning, Miss Lorraine. You are, I hope, fully recovered from the fright I innocently and unintentionally caused you last night, when we met so strangely.”

His tone was courteous and grave, his words formal rather than familiar.

Dianne did not appear to notice this, for she responded cordially:

“ The fright was only momentary, Mr. Prentiss, and was entirely overshadowed by the happy discovery that I was in the hands of friends whom I could fully trust. Had I not met you I fear I should have fallen again into

the hands of enemies, or, worse still, I might have died of fright."

"Are you not still afraid—"

Reginald paused. He was treading on dangerous ground. He had experienced unpleasantly Dianne's loyalty to her brother on a previous occasion, and he had stopped himself upon the verge of another mistake.

"He was about to refer to my brother," thought Dianne, "but he is too noble and too thorough a gentleman to do that." And then aloud:

"Afraid of what, Mr. Prentiss?"

"Of the same scoundrel who spirited you away before. He has a double interest in it now, for he must use every possible effort to get you into his power again before you can furnish information to the police."

Reginald breathed easier when he had got safely over this dangerous spot. He felt that he had thrown her off the scent of his meaning, but in this he deceived himself.

Dianne was convinced that Prentiss must be fully aware of her brother's perfidy toward her, and she admired his gallantry.

"No, I am not afraid for the future, for I shall take good care of myself," she replied. "But let us talk of something else, please. My recent adventure seems like a horrible nightmare, one that I shall be glad to forget."

So they changed the subject and conversed freely for half an hour.

Dianne was kind. She was more; she was cordial and gay, and did all she could to set him completely at ease.

Reginald was puzzled. He believed the girl to be the

embodiment of purity and frankness, and could not bring himself to believe that she was dissembling—a course utterly foreign to her nature.

Did she know her brother's villainy? Yes, she surely did. Did she, then, repent her former answer to him, her lover?

If Dianne could have known how she sent the blood coursing through his veins, if she could have realized the eager, feverish hopes that arose within him she might have been frightened.

Several times Reginald was on the point of again declaring his love for her—of pleading for a reconsideration and risking a more favorable verdict.

But he was a gentleman at all times, and feelings of honor had pre-eminent consideration in his nature.

Did she love him? Would she accept his love?

These were questions which excited him to a fever height of hope and anxiety, yet he felt the time had not come when he could honorably declare his longings again.

At last, when he could bear to be in her presence no longer, with these terrible questions surging through his brain, he arose, excused himself, and left the room.

Dianne looked out of the window and saw that the day was nearly gone. It was time, then, to dress for dinner.

She arose, and had nearly reached the door leading into the hall-way when two muffled figures stole in through the street door.

With a horribly sickening feeling at heart she recognized the intruders.

They were her brother and Captain Harvey Linscomb.

“ Now, dear sister mine, make no trouble and you will be much better off,” Gasparde whispered in her ear, as he roughly seized the frightened, shrieking girl.

One terrified, unearthly scream left her lips, and then she was seized and carried bodily down into the street. A cab dashed up, she was forced in, and the other two entered.

She saw Reginald Prentiss rushing through the open door-way, closely followed by Frank Streator and Mr. Douglass.

The cab whirled rapidly away, and Dianne fell back in a dead faint in the arms of Captain Linscomb.

CHAPTER XX.

ON BOARD THE "GIRARD."

It was a blank-looking trio that halted on the sidewalk before the Douglass mansion and gazed at the flying cab until it turned sharply around a corner near by.

They did not stand there long, however. It was a time for action, and not a moment was to be lost.

"That rascally brother of hers again," muttered Frank Streator, but not loud enough for their host to overhear.

Reginald stood still for a few moments, and was evidently lost in thought.

At last he seized his friend's arm and declared, triumphantly:

"I have it!"

"What do you mean?" questioned Frank.

"Come in, quick, Frank, and get your hat and coat. Mr. Douglass, will you call a cab?"

"With pleasure," responded their host, promptly; "but if you can wait I will have my own carriage in readiness."

"No, a cab will answer our purpose."

"Very well; it shall be ready."

Prentiss and his friend hurried into the house, only to come out again almost immediately with their hats and coats on.

Reginald led his host aside and whispered to him:

“Douglass, my dear fellow, do me the favor not to let a word of this episode get outside of your house. It might cause a scandal about a young lady whose name I am most anxious to protect.”

“Have no fear for us,” replied Douglass, warmly shaking hands with both young men.

“Excuse us both to Mrs. Douglass,” requested Reginald, and then, amid profuse good wishes from their host, the young men piled into the cab.

“Treble fare to get us to the —— pier ten minutes before the ‘Girard’ leaves,” were magic words from Reginald, which sent the dilapidated conveyance rattling and bumping over the roads at a rate which threatened demolition both to cab and occupants.

“Now what is your plan?” questioned Streator, as soon as he could make himself heard above the noise of the wheels.

“I am going to the steamer ‘Girard.’”

“I heard you direct the driver to that effect. What next?”

“Here is the plan in a nutshell,” Reginald went on: “The ‘Girard’ and the ‘Royal Abercrombie’ are the fastest steamers sailing up the river this winter. Both start for St. Paul to-night, at the same time. That means a race, and a desperately fast one. Now, it occurs to me that Lorraine, after his last experience, won’t care to take Dianne to any place in New Orleans, for fear we’ll find her. The only way to get her any distance out of New Orleans to-night will be by one of these two steamers. Now, Frank, the ‘Abercrombie’ sails from the next pier

to the 'Girard's.' When we get out of the cab I will watch the 'Girard,' you the 'Abercrombie.' Unless you are not positively satisfied that our party is not going on the 'Abercrombie,' you take passage on her, and I will go by the 'Girard.'

"In case we get separated, and you find out where they have taken Dianne, telegraph all particulars to Elsie. If I find nothing, I will wire her to send me the particulars of your dispatch. Do not lose sight of the place to which they take her, and as soon as I hear where you are I will join you. In case the poor girl is on the 'Girard,' and you can not find me, I will wire Elsie instead and reverse the programme. Is it all clear to you?"

"An excellent plan," assented Frank.

The cab rolled on to the —— pier, and the driver opened the door.

"We are here nearly twenty minutes ahead of time, sir."

"Very well; here's your pay."

The two friends alighted and were about to separate, according to their arrangement, when Reginald grasped his friend's arm.

Another cab had drawn up on the pier at a little distance from them, and a couple of men got out, carrying the inanimate form of a woman between them.

"Dianne, as I live!" muttered Reginald.

"They are going to take her aboard the 'Girard,'" observed Streater.

"Undoubtedly."

"Then we will not separate."

“No; we will go aboard the ‘Girard’ together.”

“Now?”

“No; wait until the last moment, so that that precious pair of scoundrels will not take alarm and change their plans.”

The two friends waited until the gang-plank was about to be drawn ashore, and then clambered aboard.

“Wait here, for the present,” directed Reginald.

They therefore remained in the gangway until the boat was well out in the stream.

At the same time they noticed that the steamer “Royal Abercrombie” had cast off, and was standing up the stream.

What promised to be a memorable race to St. Paul was now well under way.

The steamers, as soon as they were well out in the stream, forged ahead at unwonted speed.

Dense, black clouds of smoke poured from the smoke-stacks, bells were constantly clanging, whistles blowing; the officers of either boat, stationed at their posts, shouted orders in stentorian tones. The captain of each steamer occupied the place of chief command on the bridge, and it was evident to all that neither boat would be held back in the great race through negligent handling or overprudence.

The river in that locality was alive with small craft filled with people who had come to see the start.

It was already dark and a moonless night, but the stars twinkled everywhere, and the cool, crisp air made it glorious on deck.

“ I am beginning to share the excitement of this thing,” said Streator, enthusiastically. “ I believe the ‘ Girard ’ will win, old man, and to show you my confidence in her, I’d like to lay you a wager of two to one.”

“ We’ll discuss that later,” answered Reginald, somewhat impatiently. “ At present we have more important affairs on hand.”

“ So we have, old man, so we have,” returned Frank, contritely. “ I beg ten thousand pardons, Reggy, and, to show my penitence, I’ll do anything you desire.”

“ We must get a state-room now, if we intend to at all,” said Prentiss, but that was by no means the real purpose he had in hand.

The young men made their way to the clerk’s office, and Reginald inquired if any state-rooms remained.

“ A few, sah,” answered the clerk, glibly. “ Where will you have it, sah?”

“ Let me see the list,” replied Prentiss.

The clerk pushed it forward, and Reginald scanned it intently.

“ You have a young lady on board?” he questioned.

“ Several, sah,” replied the clerk, with a grin.

“ But this one is ill.”

“ Yes, sah; young gentleman takin’ his sick sister home. Carries a doctor along to look after her until they get home.”

“ I saw them on the pier,” Reginald went on, in a tone that was intended to be somewhat listless, “ and I had a little curiosity to know who they were. Thought I recognized them as old friends.”

“ There’s their names, sah.”

Reginald looked at the place indicated by the clerk’s pencil and read:

“ Mr. Paul Stowell and sister. Doctor Amos North.”

“ Ah, they are traveling under assumed names,” thought Reginald, as he mentally noted the number of the state-rooms of the party.

“ Has the young lady far to go?” he questioned, more listlessly than before.

“ All the way to St. Paul. Shall I send in your cards to either of the gentlemen, sah?”

“ No; I was mistaken. I am not acquainted with either of them.”

Reginald secured a state-room at a considerable distance from those occupied by the Lorraines and Captain Linscomb, and then turned to Frank.

“ They are on board, and I know where they are quartered,” he whispered, exultantly, to Streator, and then gave his friend the information he had gleaned from the clerk.

Dianne and her captors were, indeed, on board.

Soon after the hack had started away from the Douglass mansion she showed signs of returning consciousness. She struggled and murmured in a drowsy way.

“ Get your sponge ready, my dear Gasparde,” requested the captain.

Lorraine produced a sponge and vial of chloroform. Wetting one end of the sponge with the fluid, he pressed it to his sister’s nostrils.

The murmuring and struggling ceased, and the girl's face took on an ashen hue.

"She'll sleep all right now until we get her out on the river," commented the captain, jubilantly.

Dianne was insensible when she was carried aboard from the pier, and did not recover consciousness for some time after the boat had started.

When she at last opened her eyes she found herself in a strange place and could not immediately account for it.

The room was in darkness, but a little light shone feebly through the ground-glass pane of the door.

Struggling to recollect what had happened, she arose to a sitting posture in the berth.

"Ah, my dear sister, you have recovered, eh?"

She could not see the speaker, whose face was obscured in a dark corner of the state-room, but she recognized the voice as belonging to her brother.

Then all the events of her abduction came back to her, and she sprung to the floor, confronting him with blazing eyes.

"Gasparde, what does this strange outrage mean?" she cried, and her tones were so hoarse and frenzied that even she was startled by the change.

"It means," replied the young man, imperturbably, "that a young lady's best friend is her brother and guardian, whom she should respect and obey in all things. When she doesn't"—meaningly—"then she should be prepared to pay the penalty of her misconduct."

"Let me free at once, that I may return to New Or-

leans from the first stopping-place," she demanded, imperiously.

She realized by this time that she was on a steamboat, and correctly conjectured that it was bound up the river.

Gasparde laughed sardonically.

"My dear sister," he replied, "you do not appear to realize how impossible that would be. Your immediate future is too fully mapped out to admit of the least alteration of my plans."

"Where are you taking me—where are you going to take me?" she demanded, defiantly.

Gasparde's only reply was to light a cigar and puff it indolently.

"Let me out at once!" she cried. "Let me out of this room and cease to molest me, or I shall scream out and appeal to the chivalry of the gentlemen on board!"

Gasparde laughed brutally.

"How many do you imagine you would find to take your part?" he inquired, sneeringly.

"Any and every one to whom I appeal," she replied, hotly.

"Bah! No one thinks of taking the part of a maniac against her lawful keepers, even though she be beautiful."

Maniac! That one word revealed to Dianne a world of terrible fiendish meaning. Did Gasparde, then, mean to shut her up in a madhouse? She reeled, and clutched at the berth to steady herself.

Gasparde's keen, penetrating eye saw the effect of his words, and he was not slow to follow up the advantage he had gained.

“ Yes, my dear sister,” he resumed, calmly, “ a young lady refuses so excellent and desirable a husband I have picked out for you, no reasonable person could have a doubt of her insanity. All the details are arranged. A place in the North, a small private asylum, is in readiness for you, and there you will remain in seclusion until you are ready to fall in with my matrimonial views for you. The officers of this boat believe you to be a maniac, and, though I turned you loose to run over the boat, you will find yourself hopelessly in my power. I have a physician with us. I will summon him now.”

Gasparde rapped on the partition, and soon there came an answering rap at the door.

The gambler inserted a key in the lock, turned it, and admitted Captain Harvey Linscomb.

“ Has our patient changed her mind?” inquired the captain, with mock geniality.

“ Ask her directly,” was Gasparde’s response.

“ May I hope to address you in the future as Mrs. Linscomb?” questioned the captain, insinuatingly.

Dianne looked at him so steadily that the rascal quailed under her scornful gaze.

“ Never, though I suffer all the tortures of an earthly hell first!” she replied, in a clear, unwavering tone.

Gasparde looked knowingly at the captain.

“ Is there any hope for the patient?” he asked, meaningly.

“ None,” was the emphatic response. “ She is hopelessly insane. My brother physician in Minnesota will re-

without question, and take the best of care of

Dianne looked searchingly from one scoundrel to the other.

In their faces she read only hard, unalterable purpose. There was no hope, except on one condition, and that condition she would much rather die than fulfill.

With a low, despairing cry, she fell back into the berth in a swoon resembling death itself.

CHAPTER XXI.

IN AWFUL PERIL.

“You have found her,” said Frank Streator, as he followed his friend away from the purser’s office; “now, what are you going to do about it?”

“Nothing, certainly, for the next half hour,” was the answer.

“Why any delay?”

“For the best of reasons, my boy. This is a matter in which we do not care to act hurriedly and rashly. It might prove disastrous to our plans.”

“What first, then?”

“Dinner.”

“Dinner!” ejaculated the young man in astonishment. “Well you are about the coolest fellow I ever knew, Reggy. Why, if the woman of my heart were in danger like Miss Lorraine’s I couldn’t eat, sleep, or even rest, until she was well out of it. Dinner! Why, even I have no appetite for that, while my friend’s beloved is in the clutches of two designing rascals.”

“That sentiment does more credit to your heart than to your head,” rejoined Prentiss, with a faint attempt at a smile. “But come and let us try to eat. I will explain everything afterward.”

“If you really intend to eat, you appear to have lost your wits,” replied Streator. “You are walking straight away from the dining-room.”

“For good reasons. Follow me and you will see.”

Reginald led the wondering boy straight to the state-room he had engaged.

Frank followed him into the apartment, and Prentiss closed the door.

Then he pulled off his coat in a leisurely fashion, a course in which Streator imitated him after awhile.

“There’s the basin and a pitcher of water; wash up while I ring for the waiter.”

Frank obeyed, the waiter came, and dinner was ordered to be served in the state-room.

Reginald washed his face and hands, combed his hair with much precision, and waited patiently for the return of the waiter with the dinner.

Both put in an appearance a little later.

After the edibles had been spread on a small table Prentiss informed the waiter that he might depart.

The two friends fell to and attacked the viands. Frank, despite the expression of laudable sentiments a quarter of an hour ago, proved himself possessed of a very good appetite which did great justice to the tempting dinner.

“Oh, I see what you mean by eating in here,” Streator at length broke in. “You didn’t care to go into the dining-saloon, for fear of recognition by the enemy.”

“Your penetration does you credit, Frank.”

“But am I not right?”

“Yes.”

“You hope by this course to keep out of sight of Lorraine and Linscomb.”

“That is my desire for the present.”

“Then I fear you are not altogether shrewd, Reggy.”

“Why not?”

“Because if either of those fellows suspects that he may have been followed he has only to go to the clerk’s office and find our names on the state-room list.”

Reginald’s brow clouded.

“Frank,” he returned, “I owe you a statement, an explanation, an apology, whichever you prefer. When I engaged our state-room I felt obliged, whether wisely or not, to adopt a course which is always repugnant to gentlemen.”

A light of intelligence dawned in Streator’s face.

“You mean you registered fictitious names?”

“I did. I felt it best, under the circumstances, to fight these rascals with their own weapons, for they are registered under names not their own.”

Frank seized his friend’s hand and pressed it warmly.

“Reggy,” he declared, “I would trust you with my life, my honor. Make no explanation or apology for a course so obviously wise as that.”

They finished, and Reginald announced:

“I will send the waiter for cigars.”

“No, don’t do that. I have plenty with me, and better than we can get from the steward.”

Reginald accepted one, lighted it, and then drew on his overcoat.

“Going outside?” asked Frank.

“Yes.”

“But we will find no privacy there. Half the passengers will be outside to see how the race goes along.”

“ I will take you to a place where we are not likely to find many people,” Prentiss answered.

He went directly aft, and up the after companion-way, to the hurricane-deck.

“ Whew!” muttered Frank with a shiver. “ It’s colder than Greenland up here.”

“ That’s just why I came here.”

Streator stared at his companion, while the latter explained:

“ As you said, half of the passengers are likely to be outside, to see how we are getting along with the ‘ Abercrombie.’ But there are few of us Southerners who could stand half an hour up here, where the breeze is so brisk.”

“ I should say not,” muttered Frank, who had already turned several shades of blue, and who was shivering as if with an acute attack of the ague.

The wind was, indeed, cold and penetrating, and the hurricane-deck of the “ Girard ” was a place where they were calculated to get the full force of it.

Reginald watched his shivering, shaking companion for a few moments, and felt tempted to laugh, but compassionately refrained.

“ Come, my boy,” he said, “ I will show you a warm place.”

“ For Heaven’s sake do,” entreated Streator, in as steady a tone as his chattering teeth would permit.

Reginald found a couple of stools, and, going forward, placed them close to the smoke-stacks.

“ Happy thought!” ejaculated Streator, taking his seat

with alacrity and spreading out his hands toward the nearest of the three smoke-stacks.

It was not long before both had warmed themselves in this way and Streator found voice to inquire:

“Now, Reggy, tell me what you propose to do in this matter which has brought us here.”

Prentiss looked around to make sure there was no one within hearing.

“There’s no one within hearing, Reggy. The only other living soul on this deck besides ourselves is that officer on the bridge. We won’t trouble him, and he won’t molest us.”

“Well, then, I don’t know what I am going to do,” replied Prentiss, dejectedly.

“That’s a brilliant plan,” commented Streator, sarcastically. “But can’t you devise a better one than that?”

“I’m afraid not, at present.”

“Well, then, I can, and I am ashamed of you, Reggy.”

“Let us have your plan,” replied Prentiss, hopefully.

“It is the one that would occur to any wide-awake man,” declared Frank, earnestly.

“Yes; but let us have it.”

“Well, just this: You know the number of the state-room in which Miss Lorraine is confined. All we have to do is to go down there and let her out. We have our revolvers and can make it interesting for any pair of blackguards who attempt to stand in our way.”

“Is that the only way you see out of it?” asked Prentiss, despondently.

“Doesn’t that answer the purpose well enough?” an-

swered Streator, warmly. "And if we find we have more on hand than we can accomplish together, there are plenty of gentlemen abroad who could be relied upon to assist in rescuing a lady from such a pair of scoundrels as Linscomb and Lorraine."

Reginald deliberated for awhile, but the cloud of despondency which had settled on his face did not scatter.

"Frank, your plan is too visionary," he said, finally.

Streator looked aghast at this charge, but his companion, unheeding him, went on:

"Gasparde Lorraine would ask for nothing better than to have us act up to the course you have suggested. He is Dianne's brother, and not only that, but her legally constituted guardian. Now, if I were to adopt the course of rescue which you suggest, it would place both you and me in the very awkward predicament of kidnappers. Dianne is in the custody of her legal guardian, and the courts would sustain him, to our cost."

"Reggy, I didn't know you could be so prudent, so—I don't know what to call it," Frank burst in vehemently.

"Is 'cowardly' the word you want?" queried Reginald, quietly.

"It is a word I should hate to apply to so brave and loyal a friend as you are," returned Frank, in a more subdued tone.

"You know me better than to suspect me of mere physical cowardice," Reginald made answer. "But if we were to follow your course, Frank, Gasparde Lorraine could have us both arrested and imprisoned for terms of a few years apiece. As I hinted before, he would like it only too

well, and I shall take pains that he does not gain that advantage."

"Then what do you propose to do?"

"We must watch the gangway at every landing-place. When we see him go ashore we will go too and find out where he takes Dianne. Then we must find some means of enabling her to get out of his power, without laying ourselves liable to punishment as kidnappers."

"Then you have no exact plans for the present?" asked Streator.

"No; we must plan as occasion arises."

The discussion being ended for the present, the two friends lighted fresh cigars and turned to watch the exciting race in which the two mighty steamers were engaged.

Up to this point the "Royal Abercrombie" and the "Mabel Girard" had kept well along together. They were about a sixteenth of a mile apart, and each was lighted up so well from stem to stern that everything passing on one boat was plainly discernible to the people on the other.

Both steamers were straining to get the lead, and now it was apparent that the "Abercrombie" was gradually gaining.

The officer on the bridge of the "Girard" was the first to notice this, and through the tube leading to the engine-room he roared:

"The other boat is leading us! Crowd on every pound of steam she'll bear!"

It was evident that the command had been obeyed, for the smoke-stacks shook and roared under the increasing

clouds of black smoke which poured skyward from the furnaces.

It grew so warm around the funnels, in fact, that Prentiss and Streator were compelled to move their stools a few feet away.

Still the "Abercrombie" gained more and more of a lead as the moments slipped by.

The officer on the bridge put his lips once to the tube and shouted:

"She's still gaining on us! *Crowd on more steam!*"

The order was obeyed. The deck shook as if there was a raging volcano beneath, instead of furnaces.

Again and again the two friends were compelled to move away from the smoke-stack, as its proximity grew hotter and hotter.

Loud cheers came from the decks of the "Abercrombie" as she forged nobly ahead, and these were answered with groans from the passengers huddled on the lower decks of the "Girard."

Then flash after flash could be seen from the decks of the "Abercrombie," followed by volley upon volley of reports.

"What's that for?" inquired Streator, who, thoroughly aroused to the excitement, was standing upright on his stool.

"Oh, some overenthusiastic fools are emptying their revolvers as a salute in honor of the faster boat," said Prentiss, contemptuously.

Orders for "more steam" were shouted down the tube until the officer seemed frenzied.

Reginald, turning suddenly, saw that the smoke-stacks had ignited to a red heat.

“This is getting desperate,” he said, calling his friend’s attention to the discovery. “At this rate the boilers can’t hold out much longer.

The officer on the bridge had apparently not noticed the condition of the smoke-stacks, so Reginald called out to him:

“Look at this red heat, sir. How much longer can the boilers stand such a pressure?”

“Reck’n the officers and engineers of this boat know how to run her,” was the cold response from the bridge.

Nevertheless the mate shouted through the tube:

“Pass the word for the captain to come on deck at once!”

The captain came. The two officers examined the red-hot smoke-stacks, and then consulted apart.

One look at the commander’s grave, almost terrified face confirmed Reginald’s worst fears.

He clutched Streator’s arm, and whispered hoarsely in his ear:

“My God! Even the officers do not believe that the boilers can hold out much longer. And my darling is aboard in all this awful peril!”

CHAPTER XXII.

THE FATE OF THE "GIRARD."

"Do you really think it is as bad as that?" inquired Streator, after a moment's mournful pause.

"There is no doubt about it," answered Reginald, despairingly. "For my own life I do not care, but it is horrible, terrible to think of the fate in store for poor Dianne."

At this moment the captain's voice was heard from the bridge.

He was issuing an order to the engineer through the tube.

"Slacken speed at once. The steamer is in danger from her boilers. The smoke-stacks up here are red hot."

"Do you hear that, Frank?" demanded Prentiss, hoarsely.

His face was blanched—not through fear for his own safety, but for that of the woman who was all dear to him, and who unwittingly shared his and the general peril.

Evidently the engineer below had answered the captain, for the latter shouted through the tube once more:

"You had no right to take orders from any one—not even me—to put on more pressure than the boilers could stand. If there is an explosion, then by the heavens above I will kill you if we both escape the wreck!"

Then the captain turned to the mate beside him on the bridge, and said sternly:

“You may be less guilty than the engineer, Mr. Culver, for you have not the same knowledge of the resisting powers of the boilers that he is supposed to have. Nevertheless, I doubt if a court of inquiry would hold you blameless in case of accident. Now, sir, go below, and I will take your place up here. In case of an accident, which I seriously fear, then you must do your best, as an officer of this boat to secure the safety of all the women and children who may be spared. See that they get ashore, even at the cost of your life and that of every man of the crew.”

“I may be a fool, Captain Plaistow, but I am no coward,” replied the mate between set teeth. “I’ll not leave the boat, sir, in case of accident, until you do.”

“What is the extent of the danger, sir?” questioned Prentiss, stepping forward out of the shadow of the pilot-house, where he and Streator had been screened from the eyes of the officers.

“What the d—l are you doing up here on the hurricane-deck?” demanded Captain Plaistow, savagely, taken back at the fear that a general alarm was likely to be raised throughout the boat.

Reginald perceived this, and answered diplomatically:

“I am not here for the purpose of making trouble, sir, and I am not likely to lose my head. I asked because there are those on board who are dear to me.”

The captain heard him patiently for a man who is in momentary expectation of seeing his boat blown sky-high in pieces.

“There is danger,” returned the captain briefly. “We may have an explosion at any moment, but I hope for the

best. Mr. Culver," to the mate, "hurry below and see that the different boat's crews are sent to their posts as quietly as possible. Avoid any movement or word that may be calculated to start a panic among the passengers. Gentlemen," to Prentiss and Streater, "I rely upon your discretion."

"You shall find your reliance well placed, sir," was Reginald's answer.

The mate had already gone below to carry out his instructions, and Reginald and his friend went down also, leaving the captain alone on the hurricane-deck.

Frank Streater, boy though he was, and an impulsive one at that, was no coward. He knew his own peril and that of every one on board, but in this crisis his only thought was how he could serve his friend.

When they reached the main-deck they heard one of the male passengers impatiently say:

"Confound this boat, any way! I took passage on her because I thought her the faster, but the "Abercombie" is long out of sight around a bend in the river, damme if she ain't!"

Reginald could not, for the life of him, refrain from pausing long enough to frown angrily at this fellow, and then he strode down the saloon.

Frank followed faithfully at his friend's heels.

"What are you going to do, Reggy?" he inquired.

"Find Dianne's state-room."

"Do you know where it is?"

"Yes, I know the number."

"And then what?"

“Get her out and take her to the very stern of the boat—the furthestmost point from the engines.”

“I have a better idea than that. Get life-preservers for all of us and drop overboard. Then if we have no explosion, we can at all events get her ashore, and outwit our enemies.”

“Good! Get the life-preservers,” was Reginald’s terse response.

He paused before a state-room door, and made sure that the number was right.

Knocking, he listened a few moments in silence.

There was no immediate response, and, without wasting valuable time for consideration, Reginald put his shoulder to the door and exerted all his strength to burst it open.

It yielded, and he found himself in the presence of Dianne Lorraine.

She regarded him with a frightened look until she recognized him, and then she flew to his arms with a wild cry of joy.

“Quick, dearest! There is danger,” he whispered to her. “Do as I ask you, and no questions until we are safe.”

She comprehended instantly that something was sadly amiss, and that in her lover lay her only hope of escape from the threatening danger.

Frank came up at that moment with three life-preservers. Reginald first adjusted one upon Dianne, then he and Streater attended to their own needs.

When all was completed he took her hand in his, and whispered:

“Follow me, dearest, and obey me implicitly. I can save you.”

She noddingly acquiesced with a trustful glance that thrilled the young man through and through.

Reginald led her through the saloon, down a flight of stairs, and out toward the stern of the boat.

Their fellow-passengers, who noticed the life-preservers in which they were incased, manifested lively amusement and curiosity, but seemed wholly unaware that there might be some real danger lurking near at hand.

With all the speed possible the trio rushed through the lower saloon, and out upon the deck near the very stern.

“Here, Frank, help me to lower Miss Lorraine into the water,” requested Prentiss; and this they accomplished, taking care to do it in such a way that their precious charge was in no danger of being drawn under the boat, or the equally great peril of being struck by the ponderous stern wheel.

Without a moment's hesitation the young men sprung into the water after Dianne. The poor girl had accepted all their treatment with unquestioningly passive compliance. She believed it to be a bold stroke to secure her freedom, and one that necessarily must be done quickly to avoid detection by her brother.

That their movements had not escaped this detection was soon apparent, for hardly had the trio found themselves safely clear of the swash of the boat than Gasparde Lorraine and Captain Linscomb appeared on almost the identical spot from which they had leaped.

Both held pistols in their hands, and all three could hear Gasparde shout to his confederate:

“ You shoot the boy, Linscomb, and I will attend to the other fellow.”

Prentiss and Streator, who were supporting Dianne on either side, knew full well that they were within range of the weapons. With a chivalry that did honor to their natures, they both struck out in opposite directions, making strong efforts to place themselves at such a distance from her that she would be in no danger of being hit by mistake.

But at this juncture the strong hand of Providence interposed in a terrible manner.

All that has been related occurred in an incredibly short space of time.

The engineer of the “ Mabel Girard ” had made frantic efforts to lower the pressure of his boilers, but all to no avail. The mischief had gone too far to be undone, and just at the moment when Lorraine and Linscomb were on the point of taking a cowardly advantage of their enemies in the water, the crisis came.

There was a terrific crashing sound in the engine-room, followed by an awful thunderous report. The steamer seemed rent asunder, and the groans of the wounded and dying mingled with the frightened shrieks of those of the passengers who had escaped uninjured.

It was so dark upon the river that the catastrophe was but dimly seen by the trio struggling in the water, but the flying *débris* fell about them in all directions. It was a wonder that none of the three were injured, but such was the case.

Whenever the shrieks on the "Girard" subsided momentarily, the loud, hoarse issuing of orders could be heard, which showed that the officers of the boat had their wits about them.

Boats were lowered, and the people jumped into them, sinking the gunwales almost to the level of the water, and scrambling about in such a way as to threaten immediate capsizing. The first two boats were actually overturned, but the inmates were rescued from a watery grave.

"Go to the rescue," pleaded Dianne. "I can not sink, and can easily propel myself to the land over there."

The land to which she pointed was a long, low, wooded island, toward which such of the boats as had got under way were now making.

"Are you perfectly sure you can get there unaided?" asked Reginald, solicitously.

"Positive. Please go. There must be some in the water who can be saved."

"You had better go, Reggy, if she insists upon it," whispered Streator, swimming close to his friend's side. "I will manage to keep close to Miss Lorraine, and render her assistance if she needs it."

Reginald struck out, and twenty strong strokes brought him to the side of a man struggling in the water which threatened to engulf him.

"Save me, sir, if you can," implored the other. "I fear my leg is broken, and I can not swim a stroke."

"Put your arm around my neck," answered Prentiss, "and I can keep you up until we reach land."

The young planter swam close to the injured man's side.

A glance of mutual recognition followed. The other man was Gasparde Lorraine!

The gambler recoiled and exclaimed:

“I would rather go down, sir, than be saved by you.”

“Nonsense,” muttered Prentiss, angrily.

He seized Lorraine by his coat collar, just as the latter seemed on the point of sinking, and commanded, sternly:

“Put your arm around my neck, Mr. Lorraine, and let me assist you to the shore.”

The gambler complied with sullen reluctance, and Reginald, with swift, strong strokes, carried him to land.

Streator and Dianne had already reached *terra firma* uninjured, and were not a little surprised at the sight of the new-comer whom Prentiss brought with him.

Reginald struggled ashore and carried his old-time enemy in his arms to a soft, grassy spot on the bank.

Dianne, as she beheld her brother's condition, was greatly alarmed.

“Oh, Gasparde, you are hurt!” she cried, running toward him. “Let me attend you!”

“Get out of my sight, you detestable thing!” roared Gasparde, in tones not to be mistaken.

Dianne recoiled from this harsh rebuff, and Prentiss, flushing with righteous indignation, led her several yards away.

Prentiss and Streator and their fair charge found a resting-place a few yards distant from the unnatural brother and peered through the darkness to see how fared their fellow-passengers of the ill-fated boat.

The cries for succor had died away, and it was evident

that all who had escaped with their lives were being quietly rescued. The splash of oars told them that the boat's crews were landing their human freight at a point considerably higher upon the island.

A solitary man swam ashore near them and clambered up the bank until he reached Gasparde Lorraine's side.

The trio had no difficulty in recognizing the last comer as Captain Harvey Linscomb.

The two scoundrels conferred in whispers for a few moments, and then both drew revolvers.

Prentiss and Streator realized their peril. They were unarmed, for the former had lost his weapon while struggling in the river, and the latter had left his in the state-room on the "Girard."

"At last we can settle some old scores!" shouted Linscomb, in a loud, menacing tone. "Gentlemen, we regret the necessity, but we must now put you out of our path for all time to come!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

AID FROM AN UNEXPECTED SOURCE.

“BAH!” responded Streator, contemptuously, “your pistols have been too thoroughly soaked in the water to be of any use to you now.”

“Don’t be too sure of that, my friend,” sneered Lorraine. “Did you ever hear of water-proof caps? Well, we use them.”

“Have the goodness, gentlemen, to stand up, that we may have a fairer mark,” commanded Linscomb.

“Go away from us, Dianne darling,” implored Prentiss, in a whisper. “Frank and I can not escape; they are too near to miss us; but I beseech you not to imperil your own life by remaining near us.”

“Come, why don’t you get up?” growled Linscomb. “If you remain seated, it may take two or three bullets apiece to settle you. Stand up, gentlemen, and we will take you sure on the first shot. Stand up, and give us a fair mark. It may save you both a good deal of pain.”

Dianne, with no intention of following her lover’s advice, sprung up and stood in such a way as to partly shield both of the imperiled men.

Linscomb, who had been on the point of firing, was visibly dismayed. He started back and lowered his weapon.

“Have no consideration for her if she consorts with such fellows,” Gasparde broke in, harshly. “Better that she should perish with her sneaking lover.”

Lorraine was unable to stand, but reclined on the grass and held his weapon out before him.

Captain Harvey Linscomb was plainly loath to shoot, and his companion, seeing this, cried out impatiently:

“If you are too much of a coward to shoot, let me take the first step.”

Gasparde coolly sighted the weapon leveled straight at his sister's breast.

Dianne, unmoved and unterrified, resolutely maintained her position. She faced her brother undaunted, and gazed at him in cold defiance.

But the two young men whom she so nobly defended had no intention of permitting such a sacrifice. They sprung from behind her on either side, and stood well exposed to the mark of their enemies.

Dianne glided resolutely to the side of her lover just as the scoundrels were on the point of firing.

At this juncture there was a most unlooked-for interruption.

“Permit me, Captain Linscomb, to exchange shots with you, if you please!” came in cool, clear tones from one of a party of three men who had just come up.

The latter, recognizing the state of affairs, had drawn their revolvers to protect the lady at all hazards.

Linscomb turned upon the man who had so suddenly upset his villainous plans, and he was so astounded that the weapon nearly fell from his hand.

“Peyton!” he gasped, as if unable to credit the evidence of his eyes.

“Yes, I am Peyton,” responded the youth who had first

spoken. "You have long tried to pick a quarrel with me, Linscomb, and now, when I find you engaged in the dastardly work of shooting down women, I am ready to accommodate you. Make ready, sir; it must be an impromptu affair."

But the astonished captain was unable to grasp the fact that, at last, Peyton held him in no fear, and seemed incapable of stirring.

"Very well," rejoined Peyton, after a pause, "since you are plainly too cowardly to accept the opportunity you have so long invoked, I command you not to raise your weapon, on pain of being instantly shot through."

Captain Harvey Linscomb, the gambler and duelist, with more than a dozen bloody encounters on his conscience, had met his match at last in a quarter where he had little expected defiance.

"Do not stir, sir," commanded Peyton, walking up to the overwhelmed captain; "and now"—pausing before him—"hand me your pistol, or I will shoot you like the contemptible cur that I have found you out to be."

The captain saw no alternative, and sullenly handed his weapon over to his boyish conqueror.

Gasparde Lorraine, finding himself covered by the two other new-comers, was vanquished as easily.

"Now, you sneak," cried Peyton to Linscomb, "turn your back upon us and travel lively!"

The captain started, but he did not go rapidly enough to suit Peyton, who accordingly accelerated his speed with a prodigious kick, which hit the captain so squarely and so

forcibly that he ran away at full speed, holding on to his injured anatomy as he went.

“Now you follo him,” continued Peyton, turning upon Lorraine.

“He can't; he's badly hurt,” spoke up one of Peyton's companions.

“Very well, then; I suppose he will have to stay here.”

Reginald came forward, holding out his hand to the principal of their deliverers.

“You will not doubt that, under the circumstances, I am glad to see you.”

“I am most happy to have been in time to be of service,” returned Peyton, absently.

He was still thinking of the exquisite kick with which he had repaid Linscomb's gratuitous insults of so many occasions before. “Peyton, I am delighted to meet you again; doubly so at this time.” This from Streater, who had just come forward and who recognized in Peyton an old school friend.

Then followed the introduction of the new-comers to Miss Lorraine.

“How did you happen to come here just at the right time?” Streater inquired.

“Well, we escaped from that accursed boat,” Peyton made answer, “and, having nothing else to do, concluded to keep warm by walking about.”

“Are there many others on the island with us?” asked Dianne.

“Yes, Miss Lorraine. Scattered about are supposed to

be all of the passengers and crew, with the exception of some twenty who are missing."

"Horrible, awful!" murmured the girl.

"But those who are missing may have got to the other side of the river, Miss Lorraine," Peyton answered, considerably.

But Dianne was not so easily deceived. She realized that such a catastrophe could not occur without a sickening loss of life. Had Peyton told all he knew of the disaster, he would have added that, besides the score or more supposed to have been killed, at least forty had been brought ashore who were more or less seriously injured, many fatally.

"My brother was hurt, you see; there must have been many others injured also."

As Dianne spoke she indicated Gasparde with a nod of her head.

Peyton understood, and was astonished at the relationship. With all his presence of mind and good breeding it was all he could do to repress an exclamation of incredulity and amazement.

"If he is your brother," he rejoined, hurriedly, "we must give him all the attention in our power."

"I fear he will not permit it," responded Dianne, her voice a little broken; for with all the injury she had suffered at his hands she now felt a great deal of sisterly compassion for the suffering wretch.

"Won't permit attendance, eh?" queried Peyton, who had suddenly developed into a very decisive young man. "Then he must be made to—that's all."

The young man walked deliberately over to Lorraine, and, despite the other's remonstrances, proceeded to examine the injured leg.

"A mere fracture, though a very painful one, I dare say," pronounced Peyton, who was, by the way, a medical student.

Finding that his remonstrance against company availed him nothing, Lorraine remained sullenly silent, while the others gathered around him.

Peyton borrowed enough handkerchiefs to make a very respectable bandage, and proceeded to attend to Lorraine in a way which he said would answer until other and better treatment could be procured.

Prentiss and Streator both divested themselves of their overcoats in which to wrap the injured man, and Dianne would have added her cloak had not Reginald interposed.

"Your brother will do well enough now, and you must not be permitted to sacrifice your own health," he said, with a gentle decision.

The gambler could not have been insensible to all the kindnesses showered upon him by the very people he had endeavored to kill. Perhaps the fact that he no longer growled and grumbled at them may be taken as evidence of this.

"If we could only have a fire," Peyton began.

"Happy thought!" exclaimed Streator.

"Well, what is it?"

"I have some matches in my pocket."

"But they are wet; they will be of no use," objected Peyton.

“Are you sure of that? Just gather a good big pile of wood, the rest of you, and I’ll show you that it is still possible to make use of these matches of mine.”

The fagots and sticks were soon gathered from the undergrowth of the forest, and Frank meanwhile rubbed the matches vigorously through his soft, silky hair.

By this simple process he managed to get the matches dry enough to ignite, and soon had a glorious fire blazing and crackling.

“That’s a great success, is it not?” Peyton declared. “I, too, have plenty of matches about me. We must be off to start other fires, for there must be many sick people on this island to-night who are suffering from the cold. But, first of all, please arm yourself with these pistols, of which I had the pleasure of relieving our friends a little while ago.”

With this Peyton and his friends were off on their merciful errand of supplying fires for the wounded of the terrible catastrophe.

It was evident to those who remained behind that Gasparde Lorraine’s condition was anything but improving. His face flushed feverishly, and his frequent groans betrayed the anguish that was racking his bones.

“Do you think he will die?” whispered Dianne, turning a white, compassionate face to Reginald.

“There is little danger of it, I think,” the young man returned. “He will naturally suffer, of course, but we can doubtless get him to the mainland in the morning, where he will receive the best of attention and rapidly recover.”

But Lorraine passed from bad to worse. Soon he became delirious, and in the ravings that followed he unconsciously told his startled hearers the story of his dastardly attempt on Dianne's happiness.

As for the girl, she sat beside her brother, and the tears which trickled down her cheeks showed how acute was her misery.

Reginald tried to induce her to leave the sick man's side for awhile. She gently but firmly resisted, and remained.

Slowly the night hours passed away. Like some two hundred on the same island that ill-fated night, the quartet waited in anxiety and suffering for daylight to appear.

It was during that hour before dawn, which is, of a verity, the darkest of the night, that Gasparde Lorraine had a lucid respite.

He turned his pale, wan features from one to the other as he studied their faces as best he could by the light of the fire.

"What is it, Gasparde dear?" questioned Dianne, bending over him.

This simple word of affection completed the undoing of the sick man.

"I think I am going to die," he whispered, as a furtive tear stole down his cheek.

Dianne's heart sunk within her, for her old love returned for Gasparde in his weakness and utter helplessness. She felt that his suspicion was correct, yet she answered:

"No, no, dear; you are only a trifle feverish. It will pass away when morning comes."

She tried to speak bravely, but her voice trembled in spite of herself.

“I wish to ask forgiveness of you, and of your friends, for I fear that I need forgiveness,” Gasparde continued, huskily.

“You have my full forgiveness, dear Gasparde, and I am sure I speak also for my friends.”

“We will speak for ourselves,” interjected Reginald, coming forward. “Gasparde Lorraine, there is nothing of enmity between us. Everything is forgiven and forgotten.”

Frank Streator echoed this sentiment, and Lorraine seemed vastly relieved.

“Well, Gasparde, I never believed you to be chicken-hearted. I am utterly disgusted with you.”

The watchers at the sick man's side turned and beheld Captain Harvey Linscomb.

CHAPTER XXIV.

REGINALD FINDS HAPPINESS.

GASPARDE turned suddenly and eyed his erstwhile confederate.

“I have no reproaches for you, Linscomb,” he said, feebly. “I was just as bad as you, and planned and schemed with you in everything, but all is known now, and I am not exposing your confidence in any way.”

The dawn was coming now, and in the gray light of the early morning Linscomb's usually passive face showed lines and movements that would have intensely interested a physiognomist.

Not one sign of weakening or relenting was there, however. It was evident that the captain was astounded, and, as he said, disgusted at the new determination of his old crony.

“I have not long to live,” Gasparde went on, in tones that steadily increased in strength, “and I would like to at least die an honest man. One whose life has been hard and self-indulgent to an extreme is not likely to appreciate the full force of my feelings until he finds himself at death's door.”

Gasparde paused. His utterance was becoming more thick and husky. His lips were so parched that Reginald, seeing what the trouble was, ran down to the bank and returned with his hat full of water.

He pressed it to Gasparde's lips, and the sufferer drank a long, full draught with evident relish. Then his hot, feverish hand sought Reginald's and gave it a pressure which was heartily returned.

"Do you feel any better?" Prentiss asked, anxiously.

"A little, but the relief is only momentary," was the reply. "I feel as if I were burning up inside."

"Getting ready for the tortures to come in the next world," sneered Linscomb, heartlessly.

Reginald and Streator both turned savagely upon the wretch.

The latter, impulsive boy that he was, drew his revolver and said, menacingly:

"Another word like that, Captain Linscomb, and you will be the first to investigate the mysteries of that unknown world."

There was such a depth of meaning and determination in the boy's tones that Linscomb recoiled suddenly and cowered.

"Come, Frank, put the pistol up," said Prentiss, authoritatively. "Don't you see how it excites our friend Gasparde?"

Frank readily complied, and Linscomb as rapidly regained something of his old self-possession.

"Harvey, can't you accept my advice and try to lead a better life?" pleaded Lorraine.

"Bah!" was the contemptuous response. "You are a good deal more of a coward than I believed you to be. You have lost all the nerve you were once noted for."

There was a grand touch of latent pride in Gasparde's voice as he replied:

"No, I have not lost my courage. I am ready to face the end as bravely as any one could do it, but I want to go in peace."

Linscomb's only response was a contemptuous snort.

"I think you had better leave us, sir," said Reginald, addressing himself decisively to the captain. "Your presence here is likely to work more harm than good."

"I can readily believe that my presence here is not welcome," answered Linscomb, jeeringly, "so with apologies to the lady, I will withdraw, and leave the rest of you alone to the pleasant contemplation of this—craven—who was once considered a man of courage and honor."

The sufferer made no protest, but it was plain that the ordeal was telling upon his strength.

The captain made a mockingly elaborate bow, and disappeared among the trees.

Dianne sat down by her brother, and pillowed his head in her lap.

"Courage, dear," she whispered. "It is morning now, and we shall soon be able to get you to a place where you will have both comfort and attendance. I don't believe you are really half as ill as you think. Do you feel much pain?"

"Only in my leg," answered Gasparde, resolutely suppressing a groan; "but I feel as if I were burning up with a fever."

"It will give way to skillful treatment when we once get you on shore," said Dianne, reassuringly.

Reginald here decided upon a course of action.

“I am going to the shore side of the island,” he said, “to see if I can find where the steamer’s boats are. Frank will remain here, Miss Lorraine, to see that you are not annoyed.”

“I can be relied upon to perform that duty to the best of my ability,” affirmed Streator.

Prentiss did as he proposed. He soon came across one of the “Girard’s” boats, but instantly perceived that there were a great many injured people who needed transportation.

While standing on the bank and gazing at the shore in a quandary he espied a flat-boat manned by negroes putting off.

Putting his hands to his mouth, and shouting with all the power of his lungs, he succeeded in attracting the attention of the occupants.

They headed for him and pulled lustily.

As the boat came nearer Reginald saw that a white man was steering the craft, and judged him to be the overseer of a plantation near by.

“Did yo’ want us?” called the steersman, as soon as the boat had got within hail.

“Yes; a friend of mine is very severely injured, and I must get him to the mainland at once, where he can have attention.”

“I reck’n we kin help yo’,” responded the overseer, steering for the bank.

The boat was made fast, and half a dozen slaves sprung ashore.

“ Let the boys carry yo’ friend to th’ bo’t,” advised the overseer.

Reginald led the way to the spot where Gasparde was lying.

“ Courage,” he whispered, bending over him; “ we are going to take you ashore now, where you will have all the comforts that can be procured.”

The slaves lifted the sufferer as tenderly as they could, and bore him with infinite pains to the boat.

It was a rough journey at best for a man in Gasparde’s condition, and there were several times when he could not suppress the groans which rose to his lips.

At last they got him into the boat and made him as comfortable as they could during the passage to the mainland.

When the shore was reached, the overseer dispatched two of his “ boys ” for a stretcher.

This they soon returned with, and Gasparde had a tolerably comfortable journey to the plantation mansion, which was less than a quarter of a mile distant from the shore.

The planter turned out to be an enterprising Yankee named Briggs, who had so far outgrown the abolitionist sentiment of his native place as to come South and run a sugar plantation in a most prosperous way.

“ I am right glad to see you,” Briggs declared, when the party reached the house. “ One of the boys came in with a yarn about the steamer ‘ Girard ’ bursting her b’ilers last night, and I sent Carlton and some of the boys

out to see if there was any truth in it. So the b'iler did bust after all?"

Their host was a most cordial one, and saw that the sick man was comfortably quartered.

An elderly colored woman came up soon after with a bowl of gruel, and announced:

"Dis is gru'l fo' de sick man, an' mass'r done tole me to say dat de rest ob ye was to come down to brekfus di-reckly."

"But who is to look after Mr. Lorraine?" queried Dianne, anxiously.

"I reck'n I is, missy; I'se been a nuss dese fo'ty yeahs, an' I reck'n I kin take good care ob de young mass'r. Dey's done sent fo' de doctor, an' I reck'n he'll be heah soon, too."

Prentiss and Streator and Miss Lorraine, seeing the sick man so well provided for, were nothing loath to descend to breakfast, where they found their host and hostess awaiting them.

"Much of an accident last night?" queried Briggs, after the meal was fairly under way.

"A terrible number of fatalities and casualties, I fear," answered Reginald; and then proceeded to give an account of how the catastrophe occurred.

"Mighty curious how your party, being all together, managed to escape, all but one," observed Briggs.

Reginald did not care to enlighten his host on this particular point, and so turned the conversation into other channels.

"I've sent Carlton and the 'boys' back," Briggs an-

nounced at last. "Told them to bring all the hurt people here they could, and I've sent for the nearest doctor, and expect him here every minute!"

The medical man soon came and was shown into Gasparde's room.

The trio of friends stood outside of the door and anxiously awaited the result of the examination.

When the doctor came out again, half an hour later, they looked anxiously at him.

The physician's face wore a smile, however, and he said, cheerily:

"It's nothing but a fracture of the right leg, and not a bad one at that. He will be able to be moved in a week, and in a month he'll be nearly as good a man as ever."

"But the fever?" interrupted Dianne, anxiously.

"Nothing at all, my dear young lady, nothing at all; simply incidental to the pain and exposure he has suffered. With the medicines I have given him he will be out of his fever in the morning."

"Then there isn't the least danger of his dying?" Dianne almost shouted this appealing query.

The doctor laughed.

"Dying? I should say not; that is, my dear young lady, not unless you insist on coddling him to death. You—"

But Dianne had waited to hear no more. She flew into the sick-room to share the good news with Gasparde.

"Who is he?—her lover?" asked the doctor, bluntly, for the door was closed between them.

“No; her brother,” Reginald replied, quietly; but his own face told the shrewd physician how the land lay.

It was decided, upon the urgent invitation of Planter Briggs, that the whole party should remain just where they were until Gasparde was in condition to be removed.

Their host assured them that the colored nurse was fully competent to perform her duties, and strongly recommended that his guests retire and get a few hours' rest.

At luncheon, which was served a little later than usual, the trio made their appearance much refreshed.

After this light meal was out of the way, Reginald and Frank sauntered forth from the house for a short stroll over their cigars.

It so happened that Streator discovered he had left his cigar-case in his room, and as Reginald had only one cigar Frank turned back, promising to join him in a few minutes.

Reginald strolled down a well-beaten path which led through a grove at the rear of the mansion, and in so doing encountered Dianne, who was evidently out for a walk herself.

“I trust our paths lie in the same direction.”

“We can easily make it so,” she responded, gayly. “I am out, like yourself, for the air, and the direction is a matter of trivial importance.”

They walked along, side by side, and both were ill at ease, for both were thinking very intently of the same thing, and neither dared speak.

* * * * *

How it came about neither exactly knew; but it seemed

eminently appropriate that Reginald should again declare the love that was consuming him—and Dianne, how could she resist?

They were walking back to the house, arm in arm, when he asked her, perhaps for the twentieth time, that stereotyped question on such occasions:

“Are you perfectly sure, darling, that you know your mind?”

“I believe you,” she replied, with tender seriousness; “why should you not believe me?”

“I will,” he answered, vehemently. “And shall I ask Gasparde’s consent at last?”

“When he is better, dear; and I am sure you need not fear his answer. I am going to send a telegram this afternoon, if I am not imposing too much upon our good host and hostess, for Elsie to join us here,” she added.

And Frank Streator, who came up just in time to hear this declaration, looked extremely contented.

CHAPTER XXV.

A PAIR OF MATRIMONIAL SURPRISES.

EVERYBODY felt happier after the doctor had made his visit and his report in the morning.

“The patient is in no danger,” he said, “so long as he is not moved at present, and kept as still and as cheerful as possible. The fever, as I predicted, has wholly disappeared, and will not return unless through some causes which can not be foreseen now.”

Gasparde seemed much improved in condition, and no longer felt that he was immediately to be one of death's shining marks. He did not regret the reconciliation, however, and seemed delighted to have Reginald sit by his bedside and read aloud or chat with him.

Dianne had carried out her intention of sending for Elsie, and had telegraphed on the afternoon before.

“Do you expect Miss Prentiss this afternoon?” Streator inquired of her the first time he met her alone.

“There is a boat which leaves New Orleans at eleven,” Dianne replied, “and if she takes that she will be here in the afternoon in good season for dinner.”

Frank said nothing, but it was noticeable that he was restless and uneasy through the remainder of the day. He eschewed the house as much as he could, and roamed a great deal through the groves that surrounded the house, smoking an incredible number of cigars, and chewing the

ends in a distracted way that did not speak well for his peace of mind.

He asked his host as frequently as he met him what time the boat got in, whether it was late or ahead of time, and, in short, caused Jonathan Briggs to "do a heap of thinking."

The boat was expected at four o'clock, or shortly after.

It was three when Frank had his latest interview with Mr. Briggs on the subject.

"I shall send the family carriage down to the landing, of course," announced that gentleman. "Do you wish to go in it, Mr. Streator?"

"I was going to ask you a favor, sir. I—I—er—er—"

Frank came to a full stop, and the tell-tale color mounted to his cheeks.

"Well, what is the favor you speak of?" queried his host, blandly, though there was a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

"It isn't a favor—that is, not exactly that," Frank went on, desperately.

"What do you want, then?"

"I—I—Miss Prentiss is very fond of walking, at least I think she is. I think she would much prefer to have you send a wagon for her luggage and let her walk here. I shall go down to the boat, of course, and escort her to the house."

"Miss Prentiss's desires shall be carried out to the very letter," responded Briggs, with a kindly irony that altogether escaped the young man's notice in his much perturbed condition.

Frank Streator was, in fact, impervious to everything except that he must meet Elsie at the boat—alone—and have a more or less prolonged conversation with her.

He reached the landing at 3:30. The boat did not get in until an hour later. Frank, meanwhile, had been consumed by the most lively anxiety and impatience.

At last the steamer came into sight around the bend of the river. Never in the course of his life had Streator known a steamer to travel so slowly as this craft did as she veered from her course and swept toward the landing.

At last the boat was alongside, the lines were made fast fore and aft, and the gang-plank was run ashore.

There was but one passenger for Briggs's Landing—Elsie Prentiss—and at sight of her Frank's fears were lulled, while his heart beat with trebled intensity.

Miss Prentiss came ashore and gave the young man her hand in a pretty, confiding way.

“I am glad you have come,” he said, with an earnestness that startled even himself.

Then he paused confusedly, for the bravest of men are the veriest cowards under some circumstances.

Elsie's womanly intuition must have given her warning of something unusual.

“Hadn't we better start at once for the house?” she asked hurriedly and a little nervously.

“Why—er—yes; how forgetful I am!” stammered the poor boy, realizing his surroundings for the first time, and noticing that the passengers on the steamer's deck were gazing at them curiously, if not amusedly.

“Tell me,” said Elsie, “all that has taken place. Dianne’s telegram explained so little.”

Frank went hurriedly over the details, naturally dwelling upon them as little as possible.

“Where is the carriage?” asked Elsie, when he had finished.

“There is a wagon coming for your baggage—there it is now; but I thought you would prefer to walk,” he stammered, blushing like a school-boy.

Elsie looked at him fixedly, and that glance revealed a deal to her. Her eyes sought the ground.

“Very well, then, let us walk,” she said, simply.

“Please take my arm,” Frank went on. “Please!”

“Is it so necessary to your happiness that I should take your arm?” she asked, with a faint smile and with a nervous assumption of gayety. Then her words repeated themselves in her mind, and she colored more furiously than ever.

Timid people, in sheer desperation, often make a bolder stroke than more courageous people would be capable of, and it was so with Frank Streater at this moment.

The blood surged into his face, and he flushed clear to his temples as he felt the touch of the girl’s hand upon his arm, and turned to gaze into her face.

“Elsie,” he whispered, passionately, “more than that is necessary—your hand and your heart.”

The girl drew back suddenly, and as Frank looked again, he saw that every vestige of color had left her face.

“I mean it,” he said, in low tones, as he clasped her

little hand firmly yet so gently in both his. "What is your answer, Elsie?"

Her eyes sought the ground, and her head was bent so low that he was obliged to stoop a little to catch her reply when it came.

Whatever it was, it seemed to transport him with delight.

He raised her unresisting hand and pressed his lips to it with infinite tenderness and fervor.

In the paroxysm of his new-born happiness he revered this beautiful girl so much that he did not dare aspire to her lips.

"Let us go on at once," she said, at length; "they will think it strange if we do not soon arrive."

With her hand resting confidingly within his arm they strolled on to the house.

* * * * *

Reginald had not by any means escaped the species of anxiety that had harassed his friend on that eventful day.

Dianne loved him—had she not told him so over and over again?—yet there was one drawback which, slight as it was, constantly recurred to him.

He had not yet asked Gasparde's consent to their marriage.

That this would be readily given Reginald had now no doubt, but it was the enforced waiting which troubled him.

Delay is the most subtle torture known to lovers, and suspense is their greatest enemy.

Just as the physician was leaving in the morning, Pren-

tiss had taken that gentleman one side and had briefly explained his position with regard to Dianne.

“Can I approach Mr. Lorraine to-day with a request for his consent?” he had asked.

“Our patient is in no danger; but I think you had better wait a day or two. Any excitement may retard his recovery,” had been the doctor’s reply.

And so Reginald must needs content himself as best he could. He spent all the time he could in Dianne’s company, but that was mainly in the sick-room, for Dianne felt that she owed more devotion, for the time being, to a sick brother than to a well lover.

On Gasparde’s face there was a puzzled, worried expression during the afternoon, as if he were thinking very intently upon some absorbing subject.

“Dianne, come here, please; I wish to speak with you,” he said, at last.

Dianne went quickly to the bedside, and Reginald turned as if to leave the room.

“Don’t go, Prentiss,” advised the sick man.

Reginald therefore walked to the most distant window in the room and tried to occupy his thoughts with the dreary landscape spread out before him.

It was while looking out in this manner that he espied Elsie and Frank Streater coming toward the house.

They were walking along very slowly and seemed very much absorbed in each other, so much so in fact that it did not escape the eye of Reginald.

“They are preparing to follow in our footsteps,” he thought, watching them with an amused smile.

Gasparde and Dianne had meanwhile been conversing in low tones, and Reginald now heard his name pronounced by the former.

“Did you call me?” he asked.

“Yes; come here, Prentiss. I have something important to say to you.”

Reginald went over to the bedside of his old-time enemy, with a very lively presentiment of what was coming.

“I have been thinking all through the day of the relations between yourself and my sister,” Gasparde said, cordially. “I have just asked Dianne about it, and she says you have done her the honor to ask for her hand.”

Reginald bowed affirmatively.

“She tells me that you intended to ask my consent as soon as I am more fully recovered,” Gasparde went on.

Again Reginald bowed.

“Then, my dear fellow, the quicker she is Mrs. Prentiss the happier I shall be. Here is my hand, Prentiss. You have been a noble foe. Henceforth I know that you will prove as noble a friend and brother, and I shall try to be worthy of it. I am glad Dianne loves you, for I know you will make her a happy wife.”

Gasparde extended his hand, and Reginald pressed it firmly and heartily within his own.

At this moment the sound of merry voices was heard in the corridor outside, and then came a tap at the door.

“Come in,” said Dianne.

The door was pushed open, and Frank Streater, flushed and triumphant, followed by Elsie, crimson and abashed, came in.

To Reginald there was no time like the present. He was happy, and his friends must know it.

“Congratulate me,” he said, tucking Dianne’s hand under his arm, and leading her up to the new-comers. “You behold before you the future Mr. and Mrs. Prentiss, and I am the happiest fellow alive!”

“Except one,” returned Frank Streater, so decisively that Elsie turned a deeper crimson than ever.

“What?” exclaimed Reginald, as if a little taken back by surprise.

“I mean just what I say,” Streater resumed. “Elsie and I have talked it all over during the last quarter of an hour. We want your consent, but I know I have that beforehand, and so it all is fixed.”

When the happy boy had finished this voluble account, he walked directly to the bed where Gasparde lay looking at the two happy couples, and held out his hand.

“Lorraine, this peculiar marriage combination makes us all related to one another. Are you not glad of the new relatives you are about to acquire? I am.”

Gasparde took the extended hand, and the pressure which he gave in return spoke more eloquently than words could have done.

Pompey, the colored boy, who had aided Dianne to escape from durance vile on an occasion well remembered, was not forgotten nor neglected.

Reginald himself successfully undertook the purchase of the little fellow from his much-feared master, and the boy eventually found himself in the regions of the North beyond “Ole Kaintuck.”

The money which Frank Streator had won from Lorraine and his companion—the last he ever won at a card-table—was drawn from the bank, and was the nucleus of the prosperity which Pompey afterward achieved.

In the spring there was a grand double wedding in the stately old Prentiss mansion, and the reader does not need to be told the names of the high contracting parties.

There are grandchildren now in the Prentiss and Streator families.

Gasparde Lorraine has never married. He declares that, with so many relatives as he now has, his marriage might only have embarrassed the two families, who, he thinks, are too numerous to admit of any more additions.

THE END.

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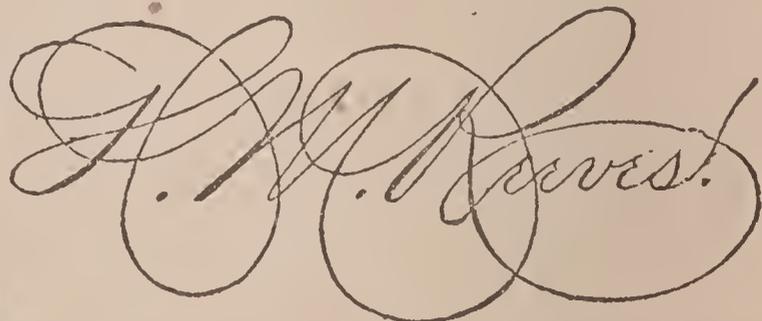
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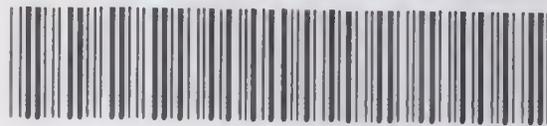
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