

# Bound by a Spell

## CHAPTER XXIV.—(Continued.)

He turned aside, and remained silent for some seconds. Then next he spoke in a low, altered tone. "Tell me what you want? Is it money?"

"Money!" she cried. "Money from you! Look here, and she tore open a lady's reticule that lay upon the table; there are the two hundred dollars you sent me enclosed in your farewell letter; look what I do with them!" And she tore them into shreds. "Here are the presents you gave me; see what I do with them!" And she took out some trinkets, and crushed them beneath her feet. "Now will you ask me if it is money I want of you?"

Her face was something awful to look upon in its deadly pallor and convulsive quivering, and those glaring eyes. That man, with all his iron will, quailed before her.

"What do you want, then?"

"Respect, and I will have it. Let me refresh your memory. You found me in a traveling show. I was a mere child then, possessed of a strange power over certain minds—a power that to an ambitious, unscrupulous schemer like yourself, might one day prove invaluable. You saw no way to use me at the time, but you were loth to lose sight of so admirable an instrument. You wormed yourself into my confidence, and got from me that I was discontented with a mode of life which gave me but a bare living, and filled the pockets of my employer. I was vain of the attention of a fine gentleman—I who had been brought up in a back alley. You told my father that if he liked to go to Bury St. Edmund's you would help to set him up in business—that you would recommend him custom, as you possessed some influence in the neighborhood."

"Have you ever had reason to repent taking my counsel?"

"My father hit upon a more easy and profitable trade than shoemaking," she went on, not heeding the interruption. "I had depended upon your promises, we might have started. You thought no more of them, and years elapsed after our parting at Spalding before I ever heard anything of you again. One day we met in the streets of Bury. Although years had elapsed, we recognized each other instantly. You expressed great delight at the meeting, which certainly was not feigned, as it gave into your hands the exact tool you required, to fashion one of the most diabolical schemes that was ever hatched in human brains. But before you dared to propose it to me it was necessary to make me your slave. When you last saw me I was an ungainly looking, ugly girl; now I was a well-grown woman, with good looks enough to have secured several offers of advantageous marriage. But I was proud, ambitious; the life I led, and all its associations, were hateful to me—I longed to be free of them all, and I waited and waited. You, with your fiendish cunning, divined my secret; professed love for me. Blinded by ambition and vanity, I believed you—believed that you, the fine gentleman, would marry me. But at that time you simply lied, to serve your own purpose. You were very cautious, too—you bound me down to breathe no word of your secrets to my father. You said, once in his power, you would never be free from his extortions."

"Silence!" thundered Rodwell, springing to his feet.

"Well, enough of that for the present. After the girl's flight, you left Bury, and I did not see you again for a long, long time. At last, you returned. So you have got her into your clutch again. What is it to be this time—murder or marriage?"

How my heart leaped! Could it be Clara of whom she was speaking? The portrait I had seen in his namesake's cottage—the likeness to her, forgotten until that moment flashed upon me with the force of conviction. Oh, how eagerly, how breathlessly, I listened now!

"How dare you speak such words to me in the presence of a stranger?" he cried. "You are venomous enough to endeavor to establish such a charge against me!"

"I believe you to be capable of any crime, John Rodwell," she answered, disdainfully; "although you would give the preference to that which compromised you least."

"Suppose I admit that I intend to marry her, what then?" he demanded, boldly. "You will seek to thwart me?"

"I keep my intentions to myself. But I had forgotten; perhaps you are not aware you have a rival?" she said, mockingly. "You would not imagine Mr. Carston in the character of a gay deceiver; yet I can assure you that, during a short absence from his loving wife, he was making violent love to Miss Clara as a single gentleman, and not unsuccessfully, I believe."

"This is no subject to jest upon," he said, haughtily. "Do you mean to say that this fellow has dared—?"

He advanced menacingly towards me; but, weak as I was, I rose up, and confronted him. I felt no fear of him, although I was too agitated to speak—too overwhelmed by the thoughts of my worst than powerless position.

He paused; then, with a look of supreme scorn, he turned upon his heel and addressed Judith. "Such an object is too contemptible to excite anger. However, I presume that for the future you will restrain, in him such revolting propensities, more especially after the confidence you have chosen to repose in him this evening. Now let me understand. Do we part friends or foes?"

"I pledge myself to nothing either way. For years you used me as a tool. Now we have the reverse of the medal; you are utterly within my power, and I will use that power to minister solely to my own interest, or caprice, as the case may be, without one thought of you. You should have remembered that those who love intensely, hate intensely. He regarded her for a moment with a disconcerting look, which she met by one of determination. He tried to laugh off the effect of her words, but the laugh was a woful failure. "What a fool I must be to stand listening to the words of a mad woman!" he cried.

He was leaving the room when she called to him. "Where are you going? If you are going to her room, I have the key. I will accompany you."

He looked more agitated than ever; then he broke out into strong anathemas against Montgomery, against whom he vowed the most deadly vengeance.

"Montgomery has served me well, and I dare you to harm him in any way," she said, in the same tone of calm superiority. "Do so, John Rodwell, and before two hours your uncle shall know all that I can tell him. Do not fall into a passion. You have fallen into the trap, and you will never get out of it by beating yourself against the bars!"

He muttered and laughed scornfully, but he was conquered—conquered. Her triumph was complete. Presently they left the room together. Judith double locking the door behind her.

I saw no more of Judith or Mr. Rodwell. As soon as they were gone I crawled back to bed, utterly prostrated both mentally and bodily. Soon afterwards the nurse returned, and after giving me my medicine, and some beef tea, wrapped herself up in a blanket, and putting the key of the door under her head, as was her custom, lay down upon the sofa to take her night's repose.

Hour after hour I lay tossing about in a sleepless, mental agony. Clara was undoubtedly in the same house with me, exposed to heaven knows what sufferings and persecutions; and yet, for any hope of seeing or succoring her, I might as well have been hundreds of miles away.

At last, unable to lie there any longer, I rose and dressed myself. A fire was still smoldering in the huge grate, and a night light was burning upon the table. The nurse, by her hard, regular breathing, seemed to be in a deep sleep, and I moved about cautiously. Her face was turned to the open side of the sofa. I crept behind it and inserted my trembling hand beneath the pillow, feeling further and further until my fingers touched a hard substance—it was the ward key. Little by little I drew it away—she still sleeping profoundly—till it noiselessly in the lock, turned it, and the next moment found myself in a large, dark hall, at the foot of an immensely wide staircase.

I closed the door softly behind me. A long window, that stretched upwards from the first landing, admitted sufficient light to guide me, and, with a noiseless step, I crept up the stairs. At the top of the first flight was a long corridor, on each side of which, as far as I could see, for the further end was lost in obscurity, was a line of doors. Now came my difficulty; the slightest error would not only defeat my present object, but consign me to a stricter surveillance than ever, and perhaps bring about Clara's removal to some spot to which I could obtain no clue. Suppose, by chance, that I should go to Judith's chamber door? I shuddered at the thought.

I stood for some moments at the head of the corridor, irresolute what to do, listening eagerly for the slightest sound that might guide me. But the silence was deathlike. Down the corridor I moved noiselessly. Through the crevices of the third door came faint streaks of light and faint muffled sounds, either moans or a low, monotonous singing—the walls and doors were so thick, that it was difficult to distinguish which.

I listened more eagerly, until I fancied I could distinguish Clara's voice. I paused for a moment, and then, with my heart beating in my throat, tapped gently. Breathlessly I waited for several seconds. No answer. Then I tapped a second time a little louder. A sound of moving, and then a soft, tremulous voice, that thrilled my very soul, asked faintly, "Who is there?"

I could doubt no longer. The key was in the lock outside. I tried it—turned it—opened the door—met her whom I sought—heard a low cry, of astonishment, and my darling was in my arms.

At that moment I fancied that I heard a sound like the click of a lock in the corridor. I suddenly turned, disengaged myself from her arms, and looked out. All seemed precisely as I had left it—no light, no object, no sound; it must have been fancy. I gently drew the key from the outside, and, reversing it, locked the door from within. We were alone—no one could surprise us now.

To her eager questions, how had I discovered her, I scarcely knew what to answer; for, the first excitement of our meeting over, I reported that I had overheard her. "Could I have freed her from her enemies then, and then only, would it have been justifiable? As it was, I was feeding my own hopeless passion, and engaging more and more closely the affections of a simple-hearted girl, beneath the very roof that sheltered the implacable woman who claimed as her husband. Oh, all this was weak, criminal, and I felt it so, and yet I had not the courage to end it honestly."

After a while I asked her what happened upon the fatal night that we lost her—how she came to be separated from us.

She told me that a rush of people had suddenly impelled her forward, and that by the time she could turn her head to look round, she found that she had been carried out of sight of Mrs. Wilson.

At that moment a young man, evidently the same who had delivered Montgomery's message to me, touched her upon the shoulder, and said that I was waiting for her in a cab a little way down the street.

"He was hurrying me along all the time he was speaking," she went on; "and I was too bewildered by my situation to offer the slightest resistance. There was a long line of cabs and carriages; the one he pointed out as ours was the last of all, and stood up an unfrequented side street. He opened the door, and pushed me in; at the same moment a strange man jumped in past me, the door was slammed, the windows raised, and the horses were off at full speed, before I could recover my breath."

From her description, I discovered that this man who accompanied her was Montgomery.

"I am such a poor, nerveless creature—so utterly destitute of all presence of mind—that I could only crouch in a corner and sob with terror."

After a drive, which seemed to her excited fancy to endure for hours, they stopped before a tall iron gate, which, after a time, was opened from within. They drove over a long, winding walk, at the end of which was a large, gloomy looking house, before which the wheels stopped. Then, assisted by Montgomery, she was suffered to alight. A female servant conducted her to the apartment in which I found her.

"She was very kind to me," Clara went on, "and assured me over and over again that no harm would be done to me—that I was among friends, and whatever I liked to ask for I should have, but that she could not permit me to leave that room. But no entreaty could wring from her who her employer was. I have been here now nearly a fortnight—everything I have expressed a wish for has been given me, and I was growing quite reconciled to my position, for I can be content in any place where I am treated kindly; but this evening, just as I was watching the great red sun sink behind the trees, I heard my door open, and upon looking round I saw—"

She buried her face in her hands, seemingly unable to proceed. I knew perfectly well whom she had seen, although I asked the question.

"Those terrible eyes!" she answered, sinking her voice to a whisper.

By the aid of words I had heard spoken a few hours before, I began to understand it all now, but only dimly. I asked her what she meant, and she, forced all his affection to me, for he literally doted upon me—I had a cousin who was much—much older than myself, but, like myself, an orphan. I never liked him—or, I should rather say, I was always frightened of him; yet everybody called him handsome, especially all the women. Until my mother brought me home, a little girl, from India, he was the favorite nephew, and was supposed to be the heir to all his grandfather's wealth. John Rodwell hated me, and showed it, too, and that turned the old gentleman against him. When I was about thirteen, grandfather made a fresh will, and as he was never content to have me a moment from his side, it was dictated to the lawyer in my presence. In it I was named heiress to all he possessed, with the exception of an annuity to John, and the former will, by which John would have inherited all his wealth, was destroyed. I was very much troubled when I heard this; and I told grandfather how much happier I should be if he would let things remain as they were, as I was certain Cousin John would know better what to do with the money than I should.

"Well, in some way or other Cousin John found out that a new will had been made, and that I was present at the time. Once or twice he put some questions to me in an off-hand kind of manner as to its contents; but mindful of the strict injunctions I had received, I was very cautious, and finding that he could elicit nothing from me, he gave up the attempt. But he became a more frequent visitor to us. He also took great pains to ingratiate himself into grandfather's good graces, and not unsuccessfully."

(To be continued.)

CHAPTER XXV.

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I closed the door softly behind me. A long window, that stretched upwards from the first landing, admitted sufficient light to guide me, and, with a noiseless step, I crept up the stairs. At the top of the first flight was a long corridor, on each side of which, as far as I could see, for the further end was lost in obscurity, was a line of doors. Now came my difficulty; the slightest error would not only defeat my present object, but consign me to a stricter surveillance than ever, and perhaps bring about Clara's removal to some spot to which I could obtain no clue. Suppose, by chance, that I should go to Judith's chamber door? I shuddered at the thought.

I stood for some moments at the head of the corridor, irresolute what to do, listening eagerly for the slightest sound that might guide me. But the silence was deathlike. Down the corridor I moved noiselessly. Through the crevices of the third door came faint streaks of light and faint muffled sounds, either moans or a low, monotonous singing—the walls and doors were so thick, that it was difficult to distinguish which.

I listened more eagerly, until I fancied I could distinguish Clara's voice. I paused for a moment, and then, with my heart beating in my throat, tapped gently. Breathlessly I waited for several seconds. No answer. Then I tapped a second time a little louder. A sound of moving, and then a soft, tremulous voice, that thrilled my very soul, asked faintly, "Who is there?"

I could doubt no longer. The key was in the lock outside. I tried it—turned it—opened the door—met her whom I sought—heard a low cry, of astonishment, and my darling was in my arms.

At that moment I fancied that I heard a sound like the click of a lock in the corridor. I suddenly turned, disengaged myself from her arms, and looked out. All seemed precisely as I had left it—no light, no object, no sound; it must have been fancy. I gently drew the key from the outside, and, reversing it, locked the door from within. We were alone—no one could surprise us now.

To her eager questions, how had I discovered her, I scarcely knew what to answer; for, the first excitement of our meeting over, I reported that I had overheard her. "Could I have freed her from her enemies then, and then only, would it have been justifiable? As it was, I was feeding my own hopeless passion, and engaging more and more closely the affections of a simple-hearted girl, beneath the very roof that sheltered the implacable woman who claimed as her husband. Oh, all this was weak, criminal, and I felt it so, and yet I had not the courage to end it honestly."

After a while I asked her what happened upon the fatal night that we lost her—how she came to be separated from us.

She told me that a rush of people had suddenly impelled her forward, and that by the time she could turn her head to look round, she found that she had been carried out of sight of Mrs. Wilson.

At that moment a young man, evidently the same who had delivered Montgomery's message to me, touched her upon the shoulder, and said that I was waiting for her in a cab a little way down the street.

"He was hurrying me along all the time he was speaking," she went on; "and I was too bewildered by my situation to offer the slightest resistance. There was a long line of cabs and carriages; the one he pointed out as ours was the last of all, and stood up an unfrequented side street. He opened the door, and pushed me in; at the same moment a strange man jumped in past me, the door was slammed, the windows raised, and the horses were off at full speed, before I could recover my breath."

From her description, I discovered that this man who accompanied her was Montgomery.

CHAPTER XXV.

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