

A Moorland Princess

By MRS. C. N. WILLIAMSON,

Author of "The Barn Stormers," "Fortune's Sport," "A Woman in Gray," "Queen Sweetheart," "Her Royal Highness," "The House by the Loch," Etc.

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CHAPTER VII.—Continued.

On St. Mark's Eve. "I am free!" she echoed. "What do you mean? How do you know that you can save me? You speak as if it had happened, and were all over, as if you already knew—the end." "The man she called Michael was silent, standing before her abashed, his face white as death."

"What do you mean?" she repeated. "You must answer. You look—oh, Michael, your eyes frighten me."

"They need not," he answered, moistening dry lips. "I spoke impulsively. I would have broken it to you. You ought to have waited, trusting me, and let me come to you later. Then I should have told you quietly that the man was here before his time. He—no doubt intended to spy about the neighborhood, and know for certain where you were living, so that he could use his knowledge for evil if he chose. I thought of that, and I, too, came early in the case."

"He has been, then? You have seen him?"

"Yes, he has been. We—we talked together for some time. No, he has gone, and I swear to you he will never trouble you again. Maya, my own, my beautiful one—you'll keep your promise as I have kept mine?"

He took a step towards her, holding out his hands, his young face pale with passion. But the girl shrank away with a cry. "Michael, there is blood on your sleeve!"

He drew back his hands, and his eyes followed the direction of hers, as they fell on the heather. Then, marching for an instant, then found the red stain that held her gaze.

"That's nothing," he said, faltering. "I fell and hurt myself this morning, stumbled in the heather. I am not used to your moor."

"What is that over there on the ground where the heather has been cut close?" She pointed to some small white object, and then running towards it, stopped. "It is my letter, the letter I gave to you—for him! There's blood on it, too—Oh, heaven! fresh blood, scarcely dry. And the ground is stamped as if with feet of men struggling. No tracks go on and on; Michael, they go as far as this place, this hole in the earth you have been filling up, there they stop. What horrible thing has happened that you would not leave it to me. You are free. You can live a new life—a life in the world. For your own sake, for my sake, ask no more questions."

The girl sank down upon the ground on her knees, her hands covering her face. "Questions!" she repeated, in an ungodly voice. "There is no more for questions. You have murdered him—you have buried him—there!" And she pointed, still covering her face with one little white hand.

"It was a fair fight between us," Michael answered. "I won. Yet I would have murdered him, if you had not saved you from the torture that is killing you. Your life or his. Was it hard to choose?"

"You meant this from the first," she whispered. "You knew the truth too late yesterday to come here. You had to wait till the heather. Then you stole out and dug a grave. Oh, heaven! it is who am a murderer! You did this for me."

"I tell you we fought," persisted Michael, doggedly. "And if we had not, it would not have been murder, to put a fend like that out of the world."

"You shot him," the girl went on, still whispering. "I thought—now I know that I heard the shot."

"Well, if I did? I have no remorse—never shall have. There is nothing on earth I would not do for you, Maya. You promised that, if I succeeded in saving you, you would be my wife. Now that I have kept my word, do you mean to break yours, simply because, thru my great, my mad love for you, I've risked losing my soul?"

"You said that you would not harm the man, I believed you."

"When I said I would not harm him, I made a mental reservation. It was for your sake, too. Is it harming a creature like that to put him beyond doing harm to others? Maya, do you hate me because that viper's blood on my hands stained for you? Are you going to throw me over, after all—after all?"

"Heaven help me!" sobbed the girl. "I know I must do to. If I could only die! Yet I want to die. My life is dedicated. It is not my own."

"It is mine. It is a debt, Maya. I love you so."

"And I—O, Michael, it is as if you had killed me! But I am guilty too. I should have remembered that you were young and your blood hot. I should have kept the secret. I should not have let you meet him."

"It was Kismet," said the man. "Henceforth, Maya, you and I belong to each other. I have robbed a man of his life that he should not rob you of yours. I dug a grave for his body, where I mean that he should lie when I had killed him (as I knew I should)—because of Kismet. If all had gone well, no one would ever have guessed—you best of all. Now we must keep the secret together, as we shall well know how."

"What a fate!" murmured the girl. "I dare not think!"

"A worse fate than that which has been

yours for the past five years and more—according to your own admission?"

"Worse ten thousandfold. As much worse as crime is worse than innocence."

"Do you hate me so then, Maya?"

"No—no, I don't hate you. It was for me, I know. Your guilt is mine. You are right in that I must help you to bear it. But we shall be, thru this life and the life to come, two lost spirits bound together by a dreadful bond."

"But the bond of love, for I will make you love me. Such love as mine must beget love."

"I shall never love you," said the girl, hopelessly. "I have told you that before, and now I must tell it you again; for if things could be made worse than they are, it would be by deceit. Michael, if—what you have done should be found out? What if he left some papers which tell of the journey he meant to make? He has warned me that a record was kept. You see, he always knew a little more than a year beforehand where the next meeting was to be. Others may have known something of it, too, and when he is missed—"

"Have no fear, my darling. I think he had no suspicion, until his moment came, what the end would be."

"Yet you said that there was a fight!"

"So there was, but—not till after I had shot him. Maya, don't look at me like that. You will kill your eyes. All is fair in love and such warfare. I did not delight in the deed, or what came after. It was for you, and I had to say that to myself a hundred times as I covered up his body with earth, while a horrible sickness overcame me. It was for you."

"Ah, I can bear no more!" cried the girl, her voice breaking into a wail. "Let us go—let us go, if I am not to be driven to madness. She rose to her feet, shaking all over, yet putting away, with a shudder, the hands held eagerly out to help her. "You can't touch me!" she implored. "Not you! I will try to overcome this horrible feeling, remembering only that—it was for me. But, for heaven's sake, let us leave this awful place, never, never to come near it again."

She staggered away a few steps, but the man did not follow her. He stood by the side of the grave, his face drawn and ghastly. "I cannot go yet," he said, in a low, strained voice. "You see, my task is not finished."

With a gesture which sent a shiver thru the girl's racked nerves, he indicated the grave only half filled in. No words were needed to make her understand.

"You are to go," he went on. "I wish it. Would that you had never come here at all!"

"Still, I should have known," she answered. "You could not have kept it from me. Hark! What was that sound?"

"I heard nothing," said Michael.

"Listen! There it is again! It was like a stifled groan. Are you to be haunted from this moment forever by his wicked spirit that tortured me in life?"

Michael had grown even paler than before. "Come away," he cried. "I'll risk all, and take you home. Afterwards I will return."

"Hush!" breathed the girl. "That is no spirit voice. It is a living man groaning, choking. And—the sound comes from there." She threw out her hand towards the grave. "Thank heaven, he is not dead! Even yet it may not be too late. He has not been there long, the earth is loose. Only part has been replaced. O, Michael, Michael, down on your knees with me to save him, and, by saving him, save ourselves!"

As she spoke she knelt, and began tearing away the earth with her pretty, childish hands. But the man caught her by the waist and lifted her to her feet.

"Are you mad, Maya?" he demanded.

"You heard nothing, I tell you nothing. Your fancy plays you false, and even if it did not, do you think I would let you undo all I have done, for a womanish scruple? The man is dead."

"The man is not dead!" she gasped, struggling in his hold.

"If he is not, he will be in a few moments. Don't pity him. He is past suffering. I have saved you. For you I have committed a great crime. Do not demean me by making it of no avail."

The girl tore herself free from him with a cry, and then faced him with such a look in her splendid eyes that he shrank under it into powerlessness. "Do you want me to loathe you with horror unspokeable—to flee from you as from a leper?" she flung at him. "Do you wish that the very sight of you should be death to me?"

"No—no!" he pleaded.

"Then help me to undo your dreadful work."

This time he obeyed her, taking up the spade and shovelling out the earth not yet packed tightly into place. Suddenly Maya stopped him with an exclamation. "See—the earth moves! He is struggling to free himself. Not the spade any more. Your hands—your hands and mine."

They worked together in silence, the girl's face gloried in his passionate eagerness. She had hope, the man's sickly white face had ceased now. Fear clutched coldly again at Maya's heart, while the blood ran more warmly thru the veins of the man.

"Reconsider—reconsider!" he implored. "All's over; he is dead."

"The god did not hear. Her fingers had touched something warm. Pushing away the earth, a face was revealed, mould clinging to it, weighing down the eyelids, clotting the long black lashes and sealing the mouth. For an instant, faintness overwhelmed her, and the feverish strength which had been hers faltered.

"It is not he, Michael," she faltered. "This is another face, different from his as a man's can be from a bird of prey. Ah, dear Heaven, help us to save him!"

Strength came again, as the blood rushed back upon her heart. Desperately she worked, flinging the earth away from the laboring breast, Michael helping now with all his soul.

The earth was red and wet over the place where the buried man had received his wound, but Maya, who had always hated the sight of blood, and been sickened by it, was no longer faint. She had thought only of doing her work quickly—of saving the life of an innocent man who had been so near to a death most horrible.

It was Michael who lifted the inert body out of the grave made ready for another man, but it was Maya who took the unconscious head on her lap, and with a delicate cobweb of a handkerchief tenderly wiped the brown earth stains from the man's cut features.

"See how young he is, and how handsome!" she cried, tears of pity falling from her eyes upon the pale face. Her little fingers touched so gently, "Michael, how could you dream that such a man as this could have been the villain I told you of yesterday?"

"You said that he was tall and dark," answered Michael. "How was I to know? And this fellow must have been sent by the other. He knew about the Maltese crosses."

"I don't believe it. There was some strange misunderstanding," she insisted. "This is the face of a hero, not a coward. And you—oh! you shot him treacherously, and flung him into a grave while he still

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lived. You were the coward and traitor—wound, Michael, and then go and fetch the cart."

"You ask too much of me," said the young man. "I am not made of stone."

"No, you are human and you have a heart. Therefore I ask so much. And if you care for my regard you will do all for me, if not for your own honor."

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(To be continued to-morrow.)

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Defective Page