

ever you decide to do, remember that, and spare her as much as you—"

"Hugh, stop!"

The cry came from the door. Both men wheeled.

"Don't humble yourself or me to him!"

"Marie!" Hugh crossed to her. "Where have you been?"

"I'll tell you when he is gone," she answered, putting away the hand that Hugh held out to her. "It doesn't concern him where I have been. Nothing I have ever done concerns him." She took a step nearer Amaranth. "I've heard all that you've said about me, and I'm glad I heard it. Perhaps I am what you believe—I don't know. But whatever I am now or have ever been in the past, however notorious or vile, one thing at least I have to thank God for—I am not your wife!"

Guy's head shot out with a startled stare.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that our marriage last night was not legal."

"Not legal?"

"I was already married. My husband has just died—in my arms!"

CHAPTER XIX

AS Marie spoke the final words she swayed forward and would have fallen if Hugh had not caught her. At his touch she roused herself and clung to his arm with both her hands like a frightened child.

"Ask him to go. Please ask him to go!" she begged.

Guy did not move. "I don't understand," he said. "What does she mean? Is that true?"

"Yes, yes, it's true. Please go!"

"Won't you explain?"

"What does it matter to you as long as you're free? Please, please go away!" She was trembling violently, her breath came in gasps.

Hugh waved Amaranth to the door. "You'd better go, I think," he said.

For a moment longer Guy stood irresolute, then he started for the door.

"Wait! I have something of yours!" she cried suddenly.

He stopped and turned back to her. She drew away from Hugh's supporting arms, and pulling her gloves off unbuttoned her coat and let it slip into his hands. Then she felt within her dress and brought out a ribbon on which were strung the rings Amaranth had given her the night before.

With trembling fingers she untied the loops that held it secure about her neck and drew off the rings and laid them on the table that stood between them. Leaning forward she shoved them across to him.

"Take them, please."

She did not look at him, nor he at her. The eyes of both were on the rings that lay there between them, the symbols of their faith and love, mocking them.

Amaranth did not move to pick them up. He looked at Hugh. "I want to speak to her alone," he said.

"No, no! I've nothing to say to you!"

"You owe me some sort of explanation!"

"There's nothing to explain. There are your rings. Please go!"

"Very well then, I will," Guy said shortly. He snatched the rings up, and without another word turned and left the house.

THE outer door slammed loudly behind him, and the girl's form shook as though she had been struck. Hugh took her hands in his and drew her toward a chair near the fire.

"You are cold, your hands are like ice," he said.

"I'm so tired!" she whimpered. "I walked and walked. I thought I should never get here. You see—"

"Wait—don't talk. Just sit here until you feel better."

He hurried from the room, and returned at once with some brandy in a glass. She coughed as she drank it; but presently the effect of the stimulant became apparent

in slower, quieter breathing. Suddenly she sat up with a start.

"How is Aunt Alicia?"

"All right. She's asleep. She doesn't know you've been out."

"I was so afraid she would worry about me. I wanted to telephone; but I had no money." She shivered and held her hands to the warmth of the fire.

Hugh dropped to his knees beside her, and taking one hand in his began chafing it vigorously. She leaned back with a tremulous sigh, as though his warm, strong touch soothed her.

"When I left the house this afternoon I meant to be gone only five or ten minutes. I felt that I must get out where I could breathe. I felt as if I were choking. It was as you guessed, as you told him just now. It was his coming here and not speaking to me, hardly looking at me—I didn't know what that could mean. All day I had waited for some word from him. Of course I knew that you didn't know how serious it was, that we were married. That troubled me too. I wanted to tell you; but I had promised him—"

"Yes, he told me. I understand. Don't worry about that any more."

"It was so ungrateful to you and Aunt Alicia. I shall never forgive myself. But I must tell you about what happened. You see the suspense all day had been terrible. Then your coming here—and with that other man—I couldn't understand. And when you went into the study and I went upstairs again I felt that I couldn't sit still doing nothing. I thought if I could get out into the cold air and walk a little I'd feel better. I didn't tell any one I was going, I thought I might be right back, you see. But at the corner I met Miss Niklova."

"Niklova?"

"She's a Russian girl who plays the violin for our dancing class. She stopped me; she was on her way here for me, she said. Some one was dying and wanted to see me, some one who had known me in Paris and thought I was dead. I tried to tell her that she must be mistaken; but she wouldn't listen. She was terribly excited. There was no time to waste, she said. I wanted to come back and leave some word; then I wanted to telephone. But she wouldn't let me. He was dying, she said. I didn't know what to do. I knew that what she said might be true. There must be people in the world who once knew me and now think that I am dead. She almost dragged me along the street while I was wondering what to do. 'He's dying, he's dying!' she kept saying over and over."

"Didn't she tell you his name?"

"Not then. 'Wait—you'll see him,' she said when I asked her. We took the elevated. She had tickets. I didn't have any money. I had no purse with me. Well, we rode and rode, and when at last we got off we walked east. It was getting dark, and I could see the lights of the boats on the river. We went into a house and upstairs—up and up and up. Then we went into a room." She broke off shuddering and covered her face with her hands.

"OH, that room, Hugh! It was so bare and cold and desolate! And he was lying there on a bed—the man I had come to see. Another man, a doctor, was sitting by the bed, and when we came in he and Miss Niklova walked to a corner of the room and left me standing there by the bed. I looked down. He was lying on his side, and I couldn't see his face well, and I thought he was asleep. Then he moved and spoke. 'Alix—Alix,' he said in a kind of moan, and then louder, as if he were calling some one, 'Alix! Alix!'"

"I stood waiting, not knowing what to do. Then Miss Niklova said to me sharply, 'Answer him!' But I couldn't—I couldn't speak. She came over to the bed and touched him. 'Alix is here,' she said. 'Look, she's come.' He raised his head and stared at her as if he had not understood; then she pointed at me, and he turned and saw me."

She shivered and drawing her hands from Hugh's she buried her face in them.

He stood up and waited, watching her anxiously.

"Did you know him?" he asked in a strained voice.

She shook her head. "He was like a stranger to me—a man I had never seen before. But—he knew me."

"What did he say?"

"He didn't speak; just looked at me a long time. I didn't move. There was such a queer look in his eyes that I couldn't stir. It was as if every moment he would speak. Suddenly he raised up in the bed and stretched out his arm toward me—his right arm—and I saw that he had no hand—"

Hugh gave a sharp exclamation.

"What is it?" she asked, surprised.

"I'll tell you afterward. Go on. He stretched his arm out toward you, you said."

"Yes. I saw that he was reaching for me, and I stepped a little nearer, near enough for him to touch me. But he pulled back his arm and lay down again. 'I'm dreaming,' he said, 'I'm dreaming!' but he didn't take his eyes from my face. Then suddenly he sat up again and put out the other arm, and when his hand touched my hand he gave a sort of gasping scream and fell back unconscious. The doctor hurried to him, and Miss Niklova cried out to me, 'He's dead, he's dead—you've killed him!' But the doctor said he was not dead, but had only fainted from the shock of finding that I was real and not a dream. 'Who is he?' I asked, and then—Miss Niklova told me."

"Told you he was your husband?"

Marie inclined her head and sat silently gazing down at her hands tightly clasped in her lap.

"What else did she tell you?"

"Oh, I hardly know—she was so excited, so miserable. What a cruel thing life is, Hugh! She loved him."

"What was his name? Tell me what she said to you," Hugh urged.

BRIEFLY she pieced together the facts she had learned from Irma Niklova, — of Andrus' life there in the tenement; of his struggle to replace the right hand, lost in an accident, with the left, and of his failure; of the portrait which the Russian girl had recognized as hers; of the gown so like the one she had danced in; of what Andrus had said of her, that she had been a dancer and his wife, and that she was dead. He had taken the picture away that afternoon and sold it to get money because he was ill and was going to the hospital; but when he came back to leave the money for her to take care of he had fallen unconscious and she had put him to bed. Then the doctor had come and told her that it was a question of hours. And the sick man had called for Alix, always for Alix, and in his delirium he had talked of the portrait, Alix's portrait. It was that which had given the Russian girl her clue, and she had determined to bring to him the woman he loved.

"She said 'Of course things to me,' Marie went on. "Of course she couldn't understand. She thought I had deserted him in his misfortune, that I was deceiving every one now, pretending to be somebody I was not. I couldn't explain: there was no time, and she would not have believed me. Besides, what did it matter what she thought of me? All I could think of was that here at last was some one out of the life I had forgotten, some one who loved me, who had grieved for me all these years. Whatever I could do to make amends must be done. If I was a wife, I must act as a wife would act. At last he regained consciousness. But he was very weak and lay quite still, noticing nothing. The doctor watched him, feeling his pulse. Miss Niklova was kneeling in a corner praying. Not seeing what else I could do, I knelt by the bed and waited."

"Poor child!"

"At last he opened his eyes and saw me. He was much whiter now and weaker, and I don't believe he realized where he was; for he accepted my presence as natural, and, believing that I was dead, he wouldn't have done that if he had been quite conscious, would he?"

"Did he say anything?"

"Very little—just the name Alix, over and over. He smiled at me, and kept putting out his right arm to touch me as though he had forgotten that the hand was gone. Suddenly his expression changed, his eyes lost focus. It frightened me and I turned to call to the doctor. Then he spoke. 'It's getting dark, Alix,' he said. 'I must go. Kiss me, sweetheart!' He lifted his head a little, and I—I—" She caught her breath sharply and stopped.

"Well?" Hugh questioned gently, after a while.

"I put my arm about his neck and—kissed him. I felt his lips meet mine, then his head fell back—he was dead!" A sob broke from her as she finished speaking, and bowing her head on the arm of her chair she wept uncontrollably.

"Poor child, poor child!" Hugh repeated pityingly.

SHE looked up, her face streaming with tears. "When I saw that he was dead I cried out and jumped up. The doctor looked at him and said, 'It's all over,' and Miss Niklova screamed and ordered me to go. 'He's mine now, he's mine!' she said. 'Go back to your fine home and your fine friends! You're a cruel, wicked woman!' I tried to speak, to reason with her, to explain. She wouldn't listen, she pushed me from the room. 'Go to your friends and explain to them,' she said. She was crazed with grief, it was so terrible, so pitiful. In the hall outside the doctor asked for my address. He said he would let me know about the funeral. I gave him the address, and he went back into the room. He believed what she had told him about me, and he looked at me as if I were some loathsome creature. But it didn't seem to matter what he thought—nothing seemed to matter."

"The hall was very dimly lighted, and I had to grope my way down the steps, then through other halls and down more stairs until I was again in the street. It was night. To the east I saw the lights along the river, to the west the tracks of the elevated. That was the way home, I thought; then I remembered that I had no money, that I should have to walk. So I walked along the street where the elevated ran—"

"You walked home! Why didn't you take a cab?"

"There were none, for one thing, and if there had been I shouldn't have taken one. What right have I to comfort and luxury? Everywhere about me as I walked I saw poverty and wretchedness; back in that room I had left poverty and sorrow. What had I left behind me that morning seven years ago? That was what I kept asking myself. Perhaps I had parents, sisters and brothers, perhaps—a child."

"Marie!"

"How can I know, Hugh—how can I know?"

"You were nothing but a child yourself."

"I had a husband. How can I tell that somewhere in the world there isn't a little child, poor and unfortunate; or perhaps—its grave. That is the thought that won't leave me. My husband was a stranger to me; my child would be a stranger too. I feel as if I were a monster, a thing without human sympathy. Think of it! All these years I've lived without a thought of those who might be grieving for me!"

"That was not your fault, dear child; you had lost all memory of them. You were questioned again and again about home and family; you could tell nothing. Inquiries were made, and as far as we could learn no one was trying to find you, you had not even been reported as missing."

"Perhaps they were too poor. The poor are so helpless! Perhaps they thought I had meant to leave them. Perhaps they thought I was dead."

"Yes. We know now that they thought you were dead. They thought you were murdered!"

"Murdered!"

"Listen, my dear."

To be continued next week