

CHALLENGE OF THE PAST

By CHARLES CAREY

"A Woman to Win," "The Van Suyden Sapphires," Etc.

CHAPTER I.

AT THREE O'CLOCK WOMAN'S FORM LAY PRONE UPON THE DOORS

As the door opened, a woman lay prone upon the floor, her face to the wall, her hands clasped in prayer. She was dead. Her eyes were closed, her lips were pale, and her hair was matted. She had been there for some time, for the floor was cold and the air was still. The door had been closed for some time, and the woman had been there for some time. She had been there for some time, for the floor was cold and the air was still. She had been there for some time, for the floor was cold and the air was still.

harder than ever. From the incoherent explanations she tried to make Graham gathered that she knew very little of New York outside the shopping district, and that there was absolutely no one to whom she could apply for shelter. "Well, there, there," he said, "don't cry any more. We'll find some place for you all right. It'll be a bit hard to get a lone woman into a good hotel at this hour of the night, but, no doubt, with some explanations, it can be accomplished. "Do you think," he turned to her so-licitly, "with the help of my arm, you can manage to walk five or six blocks? I am afraid it would be almost impossible to get hold of a cab at this time, and in such weather."

"Oh, yes," she cried eagerly, "I am sure I can do that, how can I ever thank you, sir. Without money, and in such a night, what would I have done, if you had not come to my aid?"

CHAPTER II.

"MID FLAME AND SMOKE."

THIS was the night of the Park Avenue Hotel fire in New York. Will any one who resided at the time upon Manhattan Island, or anywhere within a radius of 10 miles of it, ever forget the fury of the elements accompanying that big conflagration? Every vagary of weather which New York can produce—and there are not a few of them—seemed to be forthcoming. Wind, rain, snow, sleet, hail, lightning, thunder—the whole gamut was furnished. And the wind was a terrific blast from the north, which tore off shutters and sent street signs flying. The rain came in slanting sheets; the snow, sleet, and hail vied in their violence. The lightning was as vivid and the thunder as crashing as that of mid-summer.

It was a night when the sane and sober citizen judged his bedside, and thanked providence that no commerce called him out. "But, however, is a matter of minor consideration when one is three and twenty, and still a stranger to rheumatic twinges, so Robert Corlett, the young man who had been previously arranged that a convivial party of his classmates should meet to hold a "steak" dinner.

The "steak" dinner, and tender, just off the growing embers, was all that could be desired, and with the best of the best, the young man who had been previously arranged that a convivial party of his classmates should meet to hold a "steak" dinner.

As it happened a car came jolting along the Bowery at that moment, and the whole party of diners scrambled off and pressed forward to join the crowd and silent toward watching the remorseless spread of the flames.

Graham, more fortunate than most of his companions, possessed a badge of identification, and he, therefore, lost no time in wriggling his way through the crowd and entering the burning hotel.

So far he had succeeded upon the affair, but he had struck upon the far more serious matter of the fire. With the elevator shaft a pillar of flame and the upper floors filled with smoke and fire, the guests were in a panic and were leaving wildly to death.

At this time when stout hearts and willing hands were needed in the work of rescue, and Graham quickly followed the line of his brethren and amateur helpers hurrying up the broad staircase. Again and again he made the trip.

guiding frightened men and women to the exits, carrying down armfuls of personal belongings, and valuations which he found in the deserted rooms, and adding them to the piles accumulating in the street.

At last, on his fifth excursion, he penetrated to a corridor which had not hitherto been visited. Smoke eddied so thickly about him that he had to bend almost to the floor to escape the strangling fumes.

The six or seven rooms opening upon the hallway were visited in quick succession, but finding them all empty, their tenants having apparently fled, he was about to retrace his steps and seek a more fruitful field of endeavor.

Just as he turned from the threshold of the last door, however, a woman's low, sobbing cry arrested his attention. For an instant he stood puzzled, striving to locate its source. Then the solution broke upon him.

This was not a single chamber to which he had forced his way, but a suite. A farther door, which he had supposed opened into a closet, led instead into another room.

Nothing but the floor, and an open door. His surmise had been correct. A dainty bedroom was revealed to his gaze, and he crouched upon the window-sill, evidently just about to jump in the extremity of his terror, was the slender figure of a girl.

Her long, dark hair streamed down over her shoulders; her exquisite profile, outlined against the red glow of the burning armory across the street, was that of some rare Spanish beauty. She had caught up a loose kimono, which hung loosely about her, and which hid its hem her little bare feet peeped out.

"Let me go! Let me go!" she cried frantically. "It is this way, I tell you. The house is on fire, and I am in the corridor. I will not stay here to be burned alive."

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long fur cloak from one of the chairs before he led the way into the corridor. The fire had advanced since he had gone that way, and in their progress they arrived at one place where a rain of hot cinders was blowing in from an open window and scattering tiny flames over the floor.

Graham dashed for the window to close it when he was reminded of his companion's low, sobbing cry. He turned sharply. "What a fool! I was not to have you put on slippers, he muttered; but even as he spoke, he had scooped her up in his arms, and was carrying her across the danger spot.

He did not set her down again upon the other side; but holding her close, bore her all the way down the stairs, and clear into the office.

"Am I not too heavy?" she kept protesting. Several firemen he met offered to assist him with his burden; but Graham, if they had only known it, was in ecstasy. He would not have resigned his post at that moment for the chief justiciary of the United States.

Neither did he relinquish his lovely charge upon his arrival at the first floor; for with their appearance an excitement of mind he had carried her in his arms, and she had looked upon him with evident favor, and asked him to come and see her. A thousand happy dreams and aspirations thrilled his heart, and he had looked upon her with evident favor, and asked him to come and see her.

"What were you doing in the office at that time?" he asked her. "I was waiting for my father, and he had not come. I was waiting for my father, and he had not come. I was waiting for my father, and he had not come."

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behalf and gave him two such opportunities in a single night. But what a difference in the circumstances—as great a difference as that between the dark, glowing beauty of the millionaire's daughter and the pale prettiness of the poor, stricken, homeless creature he now found so unexpectedly cast upon his hands.

In the one case he had been able to appreciate the beauty of his companion, and in the other, although starting out well enough, he was now content to regard her as a part of one grudging a little paltry assistance to a woman in her hour of sore need.

Graham's boarding house was not more than a ten minutes' walk from the Waldorf—an impeccable brownstone front in the Forties, presided over by a severe and puritanical elderly spinster named Bowen. There, when he had good-night to his Corlette, receiving some significant encomiums upon his conduct from the old gentleman—and what he valued far more—a shy glance at the idol of his dreams! Heart and brain were alike in a tumult. He had rescued her from destruction, and she had looked upon him with evident favor, and asked him to come and see her.

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ed; her clothing was soaked, perhaps she had endured sustained serious effects from the treatment and exposure to which she had been subjected. Prudence, of course, dictated that he turn the girl over to the authorities, and that he should assume no responsibility in the matter; but he felt a keen reluctance against intrusting anyone with his precious charge, and the harsh mercies of the police or a charitable organization. The love which Gladys Corlett had aroused in his bosom made him tender toward all women.

Vainly, therefore, he racked his brain for some solution of the dilemma. The pawnshops were all closed, and he would even if he could have brought himself to leave the girl there alone and unprotected, for the sake of the money or by a severe and puritanical elderly spinster named Bowen. There, when he had good-night to his Corlette, receiving some significant encomiums upon his conduct from the old gentleman—and what he valued far more—a shy glance at the idol of his dreams!

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seem to be returning, and then she would lapse again into insensibility. Graham began to be seriously troubled. Suppose she should die here upon his hands? How would he ever explain the circumstances? Who would believe his story?

He gave a quick glance at her ashen face, and to his horror saw that her eyes had fallen and that her eyes were slowly turning upward. Frenziedly he caught again at her nerveless wrist; but his trembling fingers could not feel even the shadow of a pulsation. "My God!" he cried, starting back. "She is dead!"

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Even in the imperfect light of the arc-lamp at the corner, he recognized at a glance that his first impression was wrong.

This was no derelict of the streets, who had succumbed either to drink or starvation. There was here no flaunting of finery, nor even the rags of destitution.

Graham's eye took in the little toque of marabou feathers with its bunch of forget-me-nots at the side, the Persian lamb coat with braided trimming, the smart gloves and boots, and the other details of what he realized—mere man, though he was—a refined and modish costume.

A pale, delicate face he saw, too—a face framed with fair, waving hair. He noted the exquisitely chiseled features, and the spirituelle brow.

Moreover, as, still skeptical, he stooped closer to catch the trace of liquor, he was conscious of a faint, subtle perfume, which reminded him of the fragrance of spring wildflowers, and dispelled all remaining doubts.

"By Jove, what a lady!" he ejaculated. Then he peered at the form before him once more. A thin, dark stain trickled over the snow beside her head, and a sudden fear clutched him.

He lifted her limp arm and felt with hurried fingers for the pulse of her slender wrist, bent an eager ear to listen to her breathing and, turning her head slightly to one side, looked for the cause of the stain in the snow.

He found it was from a small cut back of the temple, and under the weight of hair just above her ear the tender flesh was swollen and contused.

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