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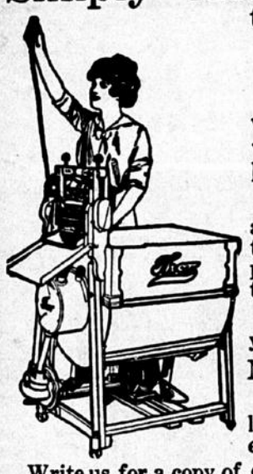

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"I love you so much I am ready to sacrifice everything for you—life, liberty, honor—"

"Hush, dearest, hush!" he begged, half distracted between joy and pain.

"I mean it; if honor could hold me back, do you think I would have broken in here tonight to rob for Bannon?"

"He sent you, eh?" Lanyard commented in a dangerous voice.

"He was too cunning for me. I was afraid to tell you. I meant to tell—to warn you this evening in the cab. And then I thought perhaps if I were cold and distant and let you go on believing me the worst of women—perhaps you would go away, save yourself, forget me."

"Never!"

"I tried to carry out my program of lying to him, but he wouldn't have it. They forced the truth from me by threats."

"They wouldn't dare—"

"They dare anything, I tell you. But it wasn't threats of personal injury to me, but to you, if I refused to tell them the truth, the whole truth. They knew enough of what had happened, through their spies, to go on, and they tormented and bullied me until I broke down and told them everything. And when they learned you had replaced the jewels here, Bannon told me I must return and bring them to him. He said if I refused he'd have you killed before morning. I held out until tonight; then, just as I was going to bed, he received a telephone message, and told me you were driving a taxi and were being followed by Apaches and wouldn't live till daylight if I refused."

"You came alone?"

"No. Three men brought me to the gate. They're waiting outside in the park."

"Apaches?"

"Two of them—I presume they're Apaches, at least. The third is Captain Ekstrom."

"Ekstrom!" Lanyard cried in despair. "Is he—"

The dull but heavy slam of the great front doors silenced him.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A Strange Interview.

Releasing the girl instantly, before the crash had ceased to reverberate within those walls, Lanyard slipped to one side of the doorway, whence he could command the perspective of salons together with a partial view of the front doors.

He was no more than established there, in the shadow and shelter of the portieres, when light from an electrolier flooded the reception hall.

It showed him first a single figure, that of a handsome woman well beyond middle age, but still well poised and vigorous of mien, a lady of commanding presence. She was in full evening dress of such magnificence as to suggest attendance at some function of state. Even had he not known well the features of Mme. Omber, he would have guessed her to be the mistress of the establishment.

Standing beneath the chandelier, she was restoring a key to a brocaded handbag. This done, she turned her head and spoke over her shoulder. Promptly there came into view a second woman of much the same age, but even more strong and able of appearance—a woman in plain, dark garments, undoubtedly madame's maid.

Handing over her handbag, Mme. Omber unlatched the throat of her ermine cloak and surrendered it to the servant's hands.

Her next words were audible to the eavesdropper, and reassuring in so far as they indicated ignorance of anything amiss:

"Thank you, Sidonie. You may go to bed now."

"Madame will not require me to undress her?"

"I'm not ready yet. When I am, I can take care of myself. It's late—much later than I usually keep you up, Sidonie, and I prefer you to go to bed. It doesn't improve your temper to lose your beauty sleep."

"Many thanks, madame. Good-night, madame."

"Good-night."

The maid moved off toward the main staircase, while the mistress of the house turned deliberately through the salon toward the library.

At this, swinging back to the girl in a stride, and impulsively grasping her wrist to compel attention, Lanyard spoke in a rapid whisper, mouth close beside her cheek.

"This way," he said, imperatively drawing her toward the window by which he had entered. "There's a balcony outside—a short drop to the ground." And unlatching the window, he urged her through it. "Try to leave by the back gateway—the one I showed you—avoiding Ekstrom—"

"But you are coming!" she insisted, hanging back.

"Impossible. There isn't time for us both to escape undetected. I shall keep her interested only long enough to give you plenty of time to get away. But take this"—and he pressed his automatic into her hand. "No—take it. I've another," he lied, "and you may need it. Don't fear for me, but go—oh, my heart—go!"

The footfalls of Mme. Omber were sounding ominously near by this time; and without giving the girl more time to protest, Lanyard thrust her forcibly through the windows, closed them, shot the latch and stole like a ghost round the farther side of the desk, pausing within a few feet of the screen and safe.

The footsteps were muffled by a rug in the drawing room—the woman was walking slowly, heavily, like one weary and thoughtful.

Where the girl had placed it, behind the cinnabar screen, the desk-lamp was still alight, and Lanyard knew that the diffusion of its reflected rays was enough to project his figure in silhouette against the glow distinctly visible to one on the threshold.

Now everything hung upon the temperament of the householder, how she would take that apparition—whether quietly, deceived by Lanyard's mumming into believing she had only a poor thievish fool to deal with, or with bourgeoise hysteria.

In the latter event, Lanyard's hand was ready planted, palm down, on the top of the desk; should the other attempt to raise an alarm, a single bound would carry the adventurer across it in full flight for the front doors.

In the doorway the mistress of the house appeared and halted, quick, glinting eyes shifting from the glow on the floor to the dark figure of the thief. Then, with a quick gesture, putting forth a hand, she found the chandelier switch and turned on a blaze of light.

As this happened Lanyard cowered, lifting an elbow as if to guard his face—as if expecting to find himself under the muzzle of a revolver.

The gesture had the calculated effect of focusing the attention of the woman directly to him, after one swift glance round had taken in the curtains that were still swaying at the window, and shown her a room tenanted only by herself and a cringing thief. And immediately it was made manifest that, whether or not deceived, she meant to take the situation quietly, if with a strong hand.

Her eyes narrowed and the muscles of her square and almost masculine jaw stood out ominously as she looked the intruder up and down in silence. Eventually a flicker of contempt moderated the grimness of her dark countenance. She took three steps forward, stopping on the other side of the desk, her back to the doorway.

Lanyard trembled visibly.

"Well!"—the word boomed like the opening gun of an engagement. "Well, my man!"—the shrewd eyes swerved to the closed door of the safe and quickly back—again—"you don't seem to have accomplished a great deal!"

Lanyard gripped the edge of the desk, quivering.

"For God's sake, madame," he blurted in a husky, shaken voice, nothing like his own—"don't have me arrested! Give me a chance! I haven't taken anything. Don't call the flics!"

He paused, lifting an uncertain hand toward his throat, as if his tongue had gone dry.

"Come, come!" the woman answered, with a look almost of pity. "I haven't called anyone—as yet."

The fingers of one strong white hand were drumming gently on the top of the desk; then, with a movement so quick and sure that Lanyard himself could hardly have bettered it, they slipped to a handle of a drawer, jerked it open, closed round the butt of a revolver and presented it at Lanyard's head.

Automatically he lifted his hands.

"Don't shoot!" he cried. "I'm not armed—"

"Is that the truth?"

"You've only to search me, madame!"

"Thanks!" Madame's accents now discovered a trace of somewhat dry humor. "I'll leave that to you. Turn out your pockets on the desk there—and remember, I'll stand no nonsense!"

The weapon covered Lanyard steadily, leaving him no alternative but to obey. As for that, he was glad of the excuse to listen for any sound to indicate how the girl was faring in her flight. And he made a pretense of trembling fingers to cover the slowness with which he complied.

But he heard nothing.

When at length he had visibly turned every pocket inside out, and their contents lay upon the desk, the woman looked them over incuriously.

"Put them back," she said curtly. "And then fetch that chair over there—the one in the corner. I've a notion I'd like to talk to you. That's the usual thing, isn't it?"

"How?" Lanyard demanded with a vacant stare.

"In all the criminal novels I've ever read, the law-abiding householder always sits down and has a sociable chat with the housebreaker—before calling in the police. I'm afraid that's part of the price you've to pay for my hospitality."

She paused, eyeing Lanyard inquisitively while he replaced his belongings in his pockets. "Now get that chair," she ordered, and waited, standing until she had been obeyed. "That's it—there! Sit down."

Resting herself against the side of the desk, the revolver held negligently, the speaker favored Lanyard with a second inspection, at her leisure, the hardness of her eyes modified, and that anger which primarily had marked her countenance gone by the time she chose to pursue her catechism.

"What's your name? No—don't answer! I saw your eyes waver, and I'm not interested in a makeshift alias. But it's a stock question, you know. Do you care for a cigar?"

"Don't Shoot!" He Cried. "I'm Not Armed—"

She opened a mahogany humidor on the desk and extracted a box.

"No, thanks."

"Right—according to Hoyle—the criminal always refuses to smoke in these scenes. But let's forget the book and write our own lines. I'll ask you an original question: Why were you acting just now?"

"Acting?" Lanyard repeated, intrigued by the acuteness of this masterful woman's mentality.

"Precisely—pretending you're an ordinary criminal. For a moment I actually believed you afraid of me. But you're neither that nor a common crook. How do I know? Because you're unarmed; your voice has changed in the last two minutes to that of a cultivated man; you've stopped cringing and started thinking; and the way you walked across the floor just now and handled that chair showed me how powerfully you're made. If I hadn't found this revolver you could overpower me in an instant—and I'm no weakling, as women go. Then why the acting?"

Studying his captor with narrow interest, Lanyard smiled faintly and shrugged, but made no response. He could do no more than this—no more than spar for time. The longer he indulged this woman in her whim for the bizarre, the more assured were Lucy's chances of escape. By this time, he reckoned, she must have found her way through the service gate to the street. But he was on edge with apprehension of mischance.

"Come, come!" Mme. Omber insisted. "You're hardly civil, my good man. Answer my question."

"You don't expect me to—do you?"

"Why not? You owe me at least satisfaction of my curiosity in return for breaking into my house."

"But if, as you suggest, I am—or was—acting with a purpose, why do you expect me to give the show away?"

"That's logic. I knew you could think. More's the pity!"

"Pity I can think?"

"Pity you can get your own consent to waste yourself like this. I'm an old woman, and I know men better than most; I can see ability in you; so I say it's a pity you won't employ it to better advantage. Don't misunderstand me; this isn't the conventional act. I don't hold with encouraging a fool in his folly. You're a fool, for all your intelligence, and the only cure I can see for you is drastic punishment."

"Meaning the Sante, madame?"

"Quite so. I tell you frankly, when I'm finished lecturing you, off you go to prison."

"If that's the case, I don't see I stand to gain much by retailing the history of my life. This seems to be your cue to ring for servants to call the police."

A glint of anger shone in the woman's eyes.

"You're right," she said shortly; "I dare say Sidonie isn't asleep yet. I'll get her to telephone while I stand guard over you."

Bending over the desk, without removing her gaze from the adventurer, his captor groped for, found and pressed a call-button.

From some remote quarter of the house sounded the grumble of an electric bell.

"Pity you're so brazen," she commented. "Just a little less side, and you'd be a rather engaging person!"

Lanyard made no reply. In fact, he wasn't attending.

In this suspense the iron control which had always heretofore been his was breaking down—since now it was for another that he was concerned. And he wasted no strength trying to enforce it. The stress of his anxiety was both undisguised and indisguisable. Nor did Mme. Omber overlook it.

"What's the trouble, eh? Is it that already the cell door clangs loudly in your ears?"

As the woman spoke Lanyard left his chair with a spring as lithe and sure and swift as an animal's, that carried him like a shot across the two yards or so that separated them.

A hair's breath of error in his reckoning would have finished him, for the other had been alert for just such a move, and the revolver was nearly level with Lanyard's head when he seized it by the barrel, imprisoned the woman's wrist with his other hand, and in two movements had possessed himself of the pistol without hurting its owner.

"Don't be alarmed," he said quietly. "I'm not going to do anything more violent than to put this out of commission."

Breaking it smartly, he shot a shower of cartridges to the floor. The empty weapon itself he tossed into a wastebasket beneath the desk.

"Hope I didn't hurt you," he added abstractedly—"but your pistol was in my way!"

(To Be Continued)

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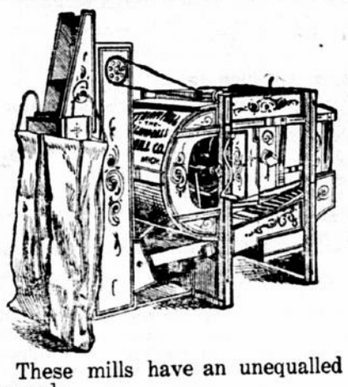

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