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CHAPTER X
A MALTESE CROSS.



HERE IS OUR Knight!

"This portrait! What a gloomy-looking villain! Surely he needed a priest to shrive his soul!"

Dolores laughed, while the features of the cavalier in the portrait had never appeared so somber.

The hall was lighted by the feeble ray of a small lamp placed in a lantern of open ironwork, and possibly the picture gathered additional heavy shadows from the insufficient illumination. Certainly the knight now wore a most lowering and threatening mien.

Dolores stood before Lieutenant Curzon in her rose-colored frock, with her mother's black lace mantilla thrown over her head. Her dark eyes sparkled like stars in anticipation of the pleasure in store. The source of so much happiness, the handsome officer, could not be expected to appreciate, with his more obtuse, masculine faculties, the exquisite satisfaction with which she extended to him, in greeting, a little hand encased in a pink glove of extraordinary delicacy and fineness of texture. What better use could be made of the new gloves of the Signorina Melita than to applaud her with fingers clothed in them on the occasion of her debut?

"How lovely you are to-night!" whispered the young man, gazing at her, and holding fast her two hands in his own.

Dolores made a little movement of withdrawal, which resembled the curling aside of the neck of the pigeons, and softly released the precious gloves from too close a pressure.

"Dolores, will you wear this for my sake?" He drew a small, gold cross of the Maltese form from a box, with a slender cord attached. She bent toward him to inspect the contents of the box with eager curiosity.

"Oh, yes!"
"Yes! How beautiful it is!" with delight.
"Let me fasten the cord around your throat then."

She put aside the folds of the lace mantilla wondering, even a trifle awestruck at so much good fortune. He dabbled with the task, thrilled by contact with silky tendrils of curling hair and softly rounded neck. Suddenly he stooped and brushed her cheek with his lips. Dolores trembled and was silent. The voice of Jacob Dealtry became audible behind them, dry grating, and unsympathetic, like the note of certain insects.

"You can see the inscribed tablet on the day after to-morrow."
"Ah? You must decipher it for me, Mr. Dealtry." Lieutenant Curzon answered lightly, but he was destined not to study the Phœnician characters for many a day later.

Jacob Dealtry extinguished the lamp, leaving the knight of the portrait gazing down, blankly, on a deserted interior, and the whimpering, disconsolate Florio as guardian of the premises, and locked the door of the Watch Tower.

"I hope you may not find your opera a fool's errand," he remarked, testily, as the trio traversed the shadowy gardens and emerged on the highway.

You are very good to go, Mr. Dealtry," said the officer, gallily. "Your granddaughter is very fond of music."
"Dolores? Tut, tut! She is too young to know what she is fond of," said Jacob Dealtry. "Why should we go to a debut at the opera? What is it to us?"

"I am eighteen years old, grandpapa," protested Dolores, in a tone of injured dignity. He laughed contemptuously, and made some half-articulate response.

Arthur Curzon took the hand of Dolores in the darkness. He found it very sweet to guide her light footsteps on the rough path, and still more so to give her pleasure. What a soft young creature she was to be left in the guardianship of this selfish old man! His heart was moved for her isolation.

A cab, engaged by the lieutenant, waited at a certain distance. They entered the vehicle, and the youth who served as coachman, urged his rough pony to a rattling pace.



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They were a silent party, save for an occasional, cheerful remark on the part of the young man. Was not the stillness of Dolores eloquent of a mute ecstasy of anticipated pleasure? His hand once more sought and clasped that of the girl, concealed by the folds of her dress. The meditations of Jacob Dealtry remained unfathomed. He sat erect, and the shafts of light in the casements of houses passed by the vehicle fell on a gray and rigid visage. What motive had induced him to consent to emerging into the world of his fellow-creatures, like an owl or a night-moth? Arthur Curzon asked himself the question with secret amusement and contempt. The hope of getting gain was obvious.

They reached their destination. Dolores uttered a sigh of bewilderment and satisfaction as she sprang out of the carriage and entered the theater. Possibly she remembered, at the moment, the invitation of the singer to seek the stage door on this suspicious occasion.

Captain Fillingham was wandering about the corridor, helplessly, followed by his energetic wife.

"If there has been a mistake about our seats, John, dear, we must take the best we can find," remarked the good lady, philosophically. "Of course, it is an abominable shame."
"I can neither hear nor see in that corner," fumed the Ancient Mariner. "I will go home."

At this juncture Arthur Curzon met and paused to greet the couple.

"They have sold our seats twice over," said Mrs. Fillingham. The lieutenant urged their acceptance of a place in his box.

They willingly consented to the opportune proposition, and were installed in a good loge of the first tier, already tenanted by Jacob Dealtry and his grandchild.

A trifle disconcerted by this unforeseen denouement, Mrs. Fillingham soon resigned herself to the fate of being provided with the best chair, while fully giving the appearance of acting as a chaperone to Dolores.

Lieut. Curzon established himself near Dolores. His face wore a resolute expression, as of a man who has taken a decision and intends to hold his ground.

Capt. Fillingham and Jacob Dealtry occupied the rear of the box. Mrs. Griffith and Miss Symthe took their places on the other side of the house. Arthur Curzon did not quit his post. The two ladies responded rather coolly to the greeting of Mr. Fillingham, who grew red, and looked uncomfortable. The matron's responses to the talk of Dolores was dry and dubious.

"What an extraordinary infatuation!" said Mrs. Griffith, with an inflection of scorn in her mellow voice. Miss Symthe adjusted the bracelet on her wrist. The trinket was made with cruel, little spiked ornaments. She laughed a trifle bitterly.

"I fancy your cousin will get over it," she replied, coldly. "Such passions are apt to be transient."
"Let us hope so," sighed Mrs. Griffith, who found all her matrimonial schemes frustrated unexpectedly by the headstrong perversity of her young kinsman.

"He will scarcely marry the Maltese," hazarded Miss Symthe, with an oblique glance at Dolores.
"Scarcely," echoed Mrs. Griffith, meditatively. "The girl may be very artful, of course, and lead him on."
"Those creatures are usually artful," assented Miss Symthe, with an irrepressible tremor of emotion

"How lovely you are to-night," in her calm tones. "Whatever is Mrs. Fillingham about to put herself in such a position?"

"She may be able to explain later, dear. It does seem rather odd, certainly," said Mrs. Griffith, stiffly. "The Fillinghams leave for Naples in two days, you know," added Miss Symthe, with a slightly acid smile.

The grand duke and his suite occupied the place of honor. The young prince languidly inspecting the house through his glass, recognized Dolores in her pink robe.

"Ah! I thought we should find the beautiful Phœnician again at the opera. Now I can pay my debt before departure," he said, carelessly.

Behind the scenes the prima donnas of the evening was guilty of the escapade of tripping on to the stage and peeping through an aperture of the curtain; thus evincing, to the secret satisfaction of Mrs. Brown, that she was to the manner born an actress.

"There is my little Maltese, in her rose-colored gown!" exclaimed Melita, gleefully. "I will play for her, Mr. Brown, and she must bring me good luck."

"An excellent plan," assented the manager, smoothly. "A debutante could do no better, my dear. Fix your attention on that pretty girl, and see nobody else. Not that I have the slightest apprehension about your success, Melita. You are in splendid voice, and the debut down here is simply practice."

The pupil made a little, mocking salutation to the audience beyond the curtain, and retired to her dressing-room to prepare for the ordeal in store for her.

Dolores, the innocent Psyche, object of these diverse reflections, sat in her box, admiring the novel scene about her.

In place of the solitary oil lamp burning in the hall of the Watch Tower before the portrait of the Knight of Malta, a chandelier which seemed to be a cone of jeweled light, sparkled and flashed with a wide-spreading effulgence that filled the house. Dolores revelled in a lavish profusion of light. The curtain, behind which the singer was, at the moment, surveying her judges, was an enchanting picture to be studied, terraces, blue lake, villa, and mountain background, with a volcanic sky. Then there were the ladies of the ball, Mrs. Griffith and Miss Symthe, who studiously avoided meeting her frank glance of recognition. Such coldness failed to wound her sensibilities. No doubt they had forgotten her by this time.

She stole a look at the grand duke, surrounded by the group of officers in rich uniform, and it seemed to her that he returned the gaze with kindness. Perhaps men were more kind than women, Dolores reasoned, for even Mrs. Fillingham made snubbing rejoinder if she addressed to the chaperone a timid question.

She recognized the Busatti family in the space below with sudden malice and amusement. Doctor Busatti was talking with a young woman, while his parents regarded him with complacency. Evidently they were an engaged couple. The absence of the physician from the Watch Tower was thus explained. Did Dolores care? She had not thought of Giovanni Battista of late, and now his value may have increased with his evident loss. She felt like the cat suddenly deprived of the plump mouse that runs away.

Ah, how ugly and yellow was the affianced bride! If the doctor would only turn his head, she would bestow upon him a sweet salutation. But Giovanni Battista, the prudent man, kept his attention fixed on the swathy damsel by his side. The short upper lip of Dolores curled scornfully, and her eyes flashed with a vengeful gleam.

The next moment she turned to Arthur Curzon with softest humility of gratitude beaming beneath her silky eyelashes, and touched, without apparent intention, the Maltese cross on her breast.

"You will always wear it, Dolores?" he whispered in her ear.

"Always," was the no less fervent response. "I will use it at prayers instead of the crucifix."
The orchestra was somewhat shaky, the curtain rose, and the opera commenced.

The piece was, on the whole, well mounted, and Il Barbiere a jelly personage in good condition. The prima donna was politely welcomed by a large and sympathetic audience. She was manifestly nervous, and self-conscious to an embarrassing degree, yet possessed a cultivated voice of unusual compass and flexibility.

Mr. Brown, who had quite exhausted a large vocabulary of injurious epithets under his breath, at a critical moment, when to his practised eye she seemed about to break down altogether, received his charge at the wings with an expression of beaming affability. She looked at him anxiously, and leaned against the scene.

"It was abominable, was it not?" she whispered, hoarsely, and a light of helpless rage burned in her eyes.

"Very good, indeed, my dear," he replied, and patted her shoulder reassuringly. "You will warm to the work with the next act."

She moved away with a petulant gesture. "I hate to be pitied!" she said, haughtily. "The audience was like a sea of faces, heaving up and down, ready to drown me. Then the horrible spasm of fear began to contract my throat. I felt myself nearly lost!"

"Why did you not look at your pretty Maltese maiden, and no other?" demanded Mr. Brown, in a tone of authority.

"I could not find her in the crowd," confessed Melita, hanging her head. "I sought her, and was wild with fright."

Mr. Brown controlled a choleric temper with some difficulty. The crisis of occasion demanded it. He rejoined smoothly, "When you go on again, Melita, look straight before you, and a little to the right, and you will find her. Keep your head, my girl. These are not critics to fear much."

Did the advice of the master act like wine on the flagging spirits of the singer? Did her own natural energy assert away over timidity before the unknown? Melita reappeared in the opera as a true, dramatic butterfly escaped from the cold and neutral chrysalis of the shy debutante. Vivacious, coquettish, and winning, by turns she kept her gaze steadfastly fixed on Dolores, until the girl's face became detached from the rest of the theater, a magnetic point, and all else sank into a cloud of vague obscurity. The naive of interest, the unfeigned admiration, blended with anxiety, to be read in this human mirror, the warm and thrilling sympathy of bearing, furnished the requisite chord of intelligence and sensibility. The girl on the stage made the girl in the gallery laugh at pleasure;

she could have as readily made her weep. The singer touched the fibre of emotion in a solitary spectator, in the experience of her talent, but with a new-born sense of power to sway and mould a larger public later. Nay, were there not moments when, borne up by the strains of melody gathering in chorus and instruments about her on the stage, Melita sang for her art alone, seeing beyond the dilating eyes of Dolores that long vista of renown and triumph on the difficult path she had chosen? A fresh Kosina had appeared.

Possibly the most impassive spectator of the entire audience was Jacob Dealtry. His coat was shabby and old-fashioned, and he shrank into the shadow of the rear of the box as much as possible, although his demeanor was more abstracted than diffident. His pale, gray eye dwelt with an expression of dry disapproval on his granddaughter and Lieut. Curzon.

Capt. Fillingham turned to him after a time.

"The chorus is out of tune," confidentially.

"Ah!" ironically.

"I believe your name is Dealtry."
"Yes," with uneasiness.

"I have heard that name before somewhere," continued the Ancient Mariner, taking a glass from his wife, wharewith to decide on the personal charms of the debutante, as a connoisseur of female beauty.

"The name is not an uncommon one," said Jacob Dealtry, with a certain stolidity of aspect, and yet a close observer might have detected that he was put on his guard by the casual remark of his companion.

"Dealtry is strangely familiar to my ear," pursued the captain, in a ruminating tone.

"Eh!" with a slight cough.

The grandparent of Dolores stiffened to an upright posture in his corner, his features twitched nervously, and he folded his arms, as if to control a sudden trembling of all his members.

"Were you ever at Jamaica?" questioned Capt. Fillingham, still striving to collect his souvenirs.

"I have traveled much," was the evasive response, given after a pause.

"Yes, she is very pretty," the Ancient Mariner decided, scanning the singer through the glass. "Bless me! how many heads she will turn in her day with those neat ankles!"

"No doubt she would easily turn your head," said Mrs. Fillingham, tartly, whose manly ankles were of a serviceable solidity.

The captain chuckled silently, then claimed her attention for a newcomer on the other side of the house. He proffered the glass to Jacob Dealtry, in turn.

"All painted actresses look alike," said the old man, returning the glass with sullen indifference.

When the third act was terminated Melita was called before the curtain amid a shower of flowers and an ovation of applause. Huge bouquets were presented to her by gallant officers of the garrison, and one of unusual size and richness, supposed to have emanated from the grand ducal box. Gracious in acknowledgment of these marks of approbation, she sang, with a sweetness, pathos and finish, for which she was destined to become famous, the "Last Rose of Summer."

"I like that!" exclaimed the Ancient Mariner, clapping his hands with enthusiasm.

He turned to his unsympathetic companion. Jacob Dealtry had disappeared.

"Most extraordinary!" mused Capt. Fillingham.

Capt. Blake had taken a seat with Mrs. Griffith and Miss Symthe.

"The Diva of to-night aspires to speedily becoming a Patti or a Nellson," he said, briskly.

"She will never soar as a nightingale," replied Miss Symthe, languidly. "Her voice lacks timbre, and her head notes quite set one's teeth on edge."

"If not a nightingale, then a lark," suggested the gentleman with unimpaired cheerfulness, and glancing about him. "She is awfully pretty,

she laughed wildly, and threw herself on a couch, suffering the bouquet to drop from her fingers.

"I found my little Maltese in the audience, and she brought me good luck," she murmured, passing her hand across her brow.

"The role might have been better sustained, even a great deal better, mind you," said Mr. Brown, sententiously. "We must return to Paris for six months more of conscientious study, my dear. It would never do to face the critics of the most provincial Italian town now."

Melita lay in a little heap on the sofa; she had fainted.

The opera terminated, Jacob Dealtry waited at the door of the theater. The heat made his head ache, he briefly explained.

A tall man approached Dolores, bowed, and ceremoniously begged her acceptance of a package from the grand duke.

Arthur Curzon compressed his lips in silence. Dolores laughed.

(To be Continued.)

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