

Saved From the Sea

"You saw me there?" she said, looking at her hands pressed against her bosom; "then this is no chance meeting?"

"Chance!—not! How could I rest one hour without finding out where you were, and who and what the man was you were with? Then I learned you were all coming here, and I followed. I have watched the farm now for days; I saw you to-day when you rode off; I heard the farmer direct you here, and I have tracked you, to plead against hope for pardon for that miserable disloyalty—the first and last, in faith, I swear!—to hold you once more in my arms, as in years gone by, and—Christine, have mercy!" he broke out. "Come back to me! Come back to me, as of old, my darling!"

She was quivering from head to foot; the passionate impulse of the woman's heart swept her on to yield to the temptation, as in her ignorance the girl of sixteen had done, but the woman's trust and pride—oh, the woman's strength of her deathless love for him—swept back the tide of a mistaken impulse.

"Forgiven?—yes," she said, low and tremulously. "You are the love of my youth, my husband, and I cannot forget; but when you plead 'Come back to me, as of old,' you say too little or too much. I was scarcely more than a child, undeveloped, ignorant of the world and myself, when you, handsome and golden-tongued, met me, and in that awful hour caught by the fatal beauty which your lips and eyes first told me was mine. You quickly, easily won my girl's heart, and won its blind, worshipping love for your own, and only to let me then, when you knew your master's power over me was resisted, that I was the one being in the world banned and barred to you for life by your uncle, simply because my mother had refused his hand; that he was inexorable, and it would be your utter ruin for him to know that you loved Leonora Berengere's child; that for us, you said, it was paradise together and death to part—"

"It was—it has been—it shall never be again!" St. Maur said, between his teeth.

Christine's very lips were bloodless, but she went on almost as if there had been no break—the accuser still:

"Then came the supreme moment for the temptations by which you had meant from the first to hold both fortune and bride, by giving, indeed, the actual jewel of honor, but bereft of everything, you, as you well know, by which the world could judge and accept it for real—the moment to use your strength against my weakness, your maturer years against my youth. You held me to your heart while you whispered the insidious persuasions that easily mastered resistance in an impassioned, inexperienced girl of sixteen who loved you. 'Consent, you said, to a secret marriage, pledge me your solemn oath never to reveal it to living soul without my leave, and we need not part; refuse, and we must, forever.' I clung to you in agony at the mere thought; I yielded, I gave every pledge you demanded, and in a week was your wedded wife. You took me abroad; there were few months of such happiness as, looking back to, seem like a dream, then darkness, it crept up, first slowly, dimly, till it gathered into one black mass of doom. I learned the worst. I was a gambler's wife, and I was held as less than wife by the world—the somewhat Bohemian world in which we lived abroad—or, at best, equivocally held. Oh, the miserable shame of it all! yet still I strove to bear up against it, to win you from the demon passion of play, that outwitted all my power; or else, in my youth and inexperience, I made mistakes—ay, I know I did—errors that I will never commit again. For I have learned the lessons of life in the world's bitterest school, and the outward change in me is but the index of the inward change. I am no longer the light-hearted, trusting girl you deceived, but a woman who has suffered bitterly, whose very heart has been seared as by a red-hot iron, and who, in keeping still the vow of secrecy once given, know yet how to be strong for your sake as for her own. If you can tell me what I dare not hope, that you have flung aside forever the wretched vice of gambling, that, come what may, you will own our marriage before all the world, then take your wife for wealth or for woe, for richer, for poorer! But if your words literally, 'come back to you, as of old,' then, husband, I answer, no, never! For your own honor's sake, as for mine, I will not live with you again on your terms. As your acknowledged wife, were it in a hotel, yes; as under your protection, were it in a palace, no!"

She was magnificent in the pride and dignity of her womanhood, so wronged, so outraged, so forgiving where there was penitence and restitution; so unflinchingly arraigning the man she loved at the bar of justice where there was remorse and wild warfare of conflicting passions truly, but not penitence that could offer restitution, the only rest of sins repented of.

Falconer took three steps forward, and put his two hands on her shoulders, his dark eyes looking down into hers with an almost bold and passionate gaze, that for a moment bore down hers.

"Heavens!" he said, under his breath, "do you know how gloriously beautiful you are? If I had never seen you till now I must have surrendered at once, and loved you as I do now, a hundred times more, if that is possible, than ever before. Do you think I will accept your refusal, and see you, know you, who are mine, to be living in another man's house under another man's charge, the light of his home, perhaps, while mine is still dark, and I hunger and thirst for you in vain? Never! The very thought maddens me! Reverse the sentence, and with you at my side I will strive to be all you wish."

"You promised that before and utterly failed," Christine said, firmly, though her whole form trembled under his hands and gaze. "I can not, will not change my decision, or hear you more."

Now, indeed, this man's passions and ruthlessness were roused with almost uncontrolled force.

"Then, by heaven! you shall change it, and listen to me; here on my heart, as surely as you must yield to my strength, so, my darling—"

He suddenly dropped his hands to take her in his arms once more and wrap her to his breast so closely, so forcibly that she lay helpless, breathless, powerless to offer the slightest resistance to that clasp or the passionate kisses he pressed again and again on brow, and cheek, and lips.

"So—so—why force me to be cruel! You are mine by all laws of heaven and man. Sweetheart, wife, you can not—can not say me no like this, with my lips to yours to plead! With a sudden clasp, you are clinging, tender, as the rich mellow tones sunk to the very softest music of intense supplication. 'It will not be for long. No cloud of shame shall overshadow the quiet home where my darling shall reign. I have found you after six long years, and now how can we part? It is too much to live under. Tell me you love me still, Christine—tell me you still love only me!'"

"Husband, you know it," she sobbed, burying her face in his bosom. "I loved you once and for ever better than life, and you are wringing my very heart now! Do you think it is nothing to me to refuse your prayer where there is no happiness for me save at your side? But I—I must be strong for your sake. Don't make it harder—loose your clasp; don't kiss me and tempt me with the persuasive music of your loved voice. In pity, spare me! It is so bitterly hard to resist my own heart and—"

"Then why resist?" came the tempter's softest whisper in her ear; and as she clasped that had loosened a little drew close again. "My beautiful one, my heart's dearest, yield, then!—he freed one hand to raise her face, gazing down into her eyes with the look that any the woman loved ever sees in a man's eyes—'yield, then, to me, wife!'"

Had his power triumphed, that she held her very breath? In that moment of fierce temptation and agonized strife, the woman's heart failed herself, her very love was at once her weakness and her strength. For one second the wife had almost yielded the battle, in the next she had flung her arms closely about her husband's neck.

"Heaven help me! I dare not—for your dear sake!"

She was suddenly shaken from head to foot with a tempest of convulsive sobs, and clung to him as if in wild terror he would cast her from him in an outburst of pitiless anger, such as possibly she had once or twice experienced of old; but, if ever she had, it came not now.

All that was best in St. Maur's strong, impressionable nature was roused, and for the time—though only for the time—he gave back from this point—vanquished!

His deepest love was stirred to the core, and he folded the slender, quivering form yet closer to his breast, and strove, with tenderest caresses and endearing words, to soothe and calm the tempest which had indeed almost startled him.

"Let the question rest at present, my own darling!" he whispered, at last, as quite still and exhausted, she lay in his place her on the fallen bough beside him, still and exhausted, she let him place her on the fallen bough beside him, still within his sheltering arm. "Only one thing I will ask now—one promise which you will surely not refuse your husband."

"I will refuse nothing I can possibly grant, dear Falconer!" The low, sweet voice was unsteady yet. "What is the promise?"

"That you will sometimes meet me in secret," he said, earnestly, stroking the soft, curling locks. "You start, but we must—oh, Christine, we must! There is so much yet to say, to learn; meeting in society is but the stone for bread. Your own heart must plead for mine in this dear one promise."

"I promise, Falconer!"

There was a flash of triumph as well as joy in St. Maur's handsome eyes as he stooped and kissed the lips that had so pledged him.

"Dearest—thanks! When do you go back to town, then?"

"I think on Saturday. We can not meet again down here, Falconer, I could not escape—today was a mere chance; and now I must be returning."

St. Maur's brow darkened as he rose; but it cleared again as Christine laid her hand on his lips, half smiling.

"No, no, husband—no word or frown of jealousy! Tell me your address, for we can write; only you must write in a disguised hand if you are likely to be read the Cliffords."

"I shall, I mean to do so through the Addison's," was the answer. "I shall leave here to-morrow, then, since I may not see you again. I can take you part of the way back now, but we must say our farewell here, so, my darling—my recovered treasure!"

Once more a close embrace, a long, lingering kiss, and they turned together from the wood wherein, after long years, they had been so strangely reunited—yet parted still!

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