

A Terrible Temptation.

CHAPTER IV.—Continued. "You may have heard, or perhaps not, the service I did him once. Without doubt I saved his life that day. Now a deed of even more difficulty, more danger, lies before him. I tell you it is humanly impossible that he should cross that moor in safety unhelped. I am the only creature who can and will aid him—he depends on me. I have promised, but," she came still nearer until her glittering eyes seemed to burn Joan's face, and her utterance was but a whisper, "I bring it to-day for you to decide. His life or his death—his cold, cruel, shameful death, lie in your hands. I shall not save him for you. I shall not shield his beautiful life that you—you in your proud scorn may enjoy it, and I—I be forgotten despised, turned from. If I save his life you must give him up. Do you hear? Do you understand? I know you love him. Do you think I could not tell? You came to see him. You sought him out, trying to help him—you in your weak ignorance of his dangers. What can you do? I know all. I have guided, hidden, protected him once. I can do it again. I saw you look at him. I knew its meaning instantly. You love him; but his life is at stake, and you cannot save it. I love him, too. Ah, your love is as nought to mine. Your cold, pink, and white heart cannot burn as mine does. I will save him if it costs me every breath. What will you do for him? Will you give him up for his life's sake?"

ing. "I wish I had that brute within my grasp again; he should not escape as last time. Every moment is precious now, but after my task is done, I will ride round his way and just teach him the lesson of courtesy to women!" He set his teeth. "No, no," Stella cried; "they would murder you. Your life would not be worth an hour if you went within their sight. They would murder me now if they could find me, for"—her head drooped, her voice became almost inarticulate—"they know why I help you." "From sheer kindness of heart," Esmond said, somewhat uneasily. She flashed back a look at him at once shy, tender, defiant, imploring. Even through the gloom he could see the fire of her lustrous orbs. "It is the one crime the Romans never pardon," she said. "I love a Giorgio." "You love—?" "I love you!" No words could describe the passion, the intensity of the avowal. As she uttered it she flung her arm hitherto resting upon the horse's neck around Vesey, and buried her face upon his knee. "I love you—I love you? I cannot live without you! Take me!" she cried. "I will serve you night and day, obey you implicitly, learn anything, do anything, become anything you wish; only take me—take me; let me live with you always and love me a little!" Esmond Vesey was deeply touched, but was terribly troubled. Of all the complications and difficulties that had appeared to him, he had never surmised this. He was greatly indebted to this girl—in her power, temporarily, to a great extent—but he could not grant her prayer. A less scrupulous, less honorable man would have temporised, and thought no harm of it—made love to her now, and evaded her afterwards; but Esmond Vesey was too straightforward a gentleman—too loyal a lover—to descend to that. He answered her gravely, but without a moment's hesitation: "I am most deeply grateful to you, as you know, Stella. I shall always be your friend. I will do anything for you that a friend or a brother, at any time can do; but, my poor girl, it is out of my power to promise anything else, now or ever." "Why?" He could not see her face as she uttered the monosyllable. He hesitated, and she went on imploringly: "Is it because I am not of your class? You think I am unworthy? I tell you I can learn anything, do anything. Say but the word, and I will become a fine lady, as dainty, as proud as those you call your friends. I will love you, and serve you as no high-born lady could do. I will have but one wish, one aim in life—to please you. You shall be my master; I shall be your slave; only give me the thing I cannot live without—your love! Oh, give me your love!" "My dear girl, it is impossible; it is out of my power," he said in low-voiced trouble. But he spoke firmly withal; and suddenly her aspect altered—from a supplicant she became a fury. "You love another!" she hissed, with pallid face and blazing eyes—"that golden-haired Giorgio! Yes; I know it. But she shall never have you—never! I will kill you with my own hands first. I swear it!" "Hush, Stella! you are talking wildly—madly." "I am wild—mad. Look me in the face and own the truth. Do you love that other?" She stopped the horse, and by some means raised herself on a level with the rider's face; through the gloom her eyes burned into his. "Tell the truth. I shall know if you attempt to deceive. Do you love this woman with the pale eyes and white skin?" "I should never condescend to deceive you or anybody else," was the haughty reply. "I do love Joan Ambrose." "You are going to marry her?" in the calm before a storm. "If she will have me," was the response. "She will have you, no fear. She is in love with you to distraction; even a gipsy could see that. But she never shall—never, never, never! Do you hear me—do you understand? Unless you give her up now, to-night, you shall never return alive to her—I vow it!" His friend and ally had turned his enemy with a vengeance. Vesey thought he had scarcely needed this additional difficulty in his path. "My dear Stella, be reasonable," he said soothingly, and as she drooped half fainting, he lifted her upon his horse, and urged the animal to a quicker pace. "You will see someone else you will like much better in time. You are too good for your own race; you shall marry one of ours; with your glorious beauty you can pick and choose. I will always stand your friend and help you in every way that stands in my power. Be a good sensible girl as you are, and look at the thing reasonably. I knew Lady Joan and had learned to love her long before I ever saw your face." A convulsive shiver passing through her whole frame was his only answer. He was not cruel enough to put her down in her trouble and leave her as he might so easily have done, but this embarrassment and

delay in his progress was most annoying and difficult to him. "Stella, would you rather I went on alone?" he asked. Another shiver, nothing else. "Which is the most direct road from these four cross-ones?" he inquired hoping to distract her thoughts. Without speaking she raised her hand and pointed, and he guided his horse into the way indicated; then for some time only the regular monotonous sound of the horses gallop was heard; the sounds behind seemed to have ceased for a while. Vesey glanced down upon the slight drooping figure he held before him, and felt a great deep pity for her, but no thought of disloyalty to Lady Joan crossed his mind. "Stella," he said gently—"Stella, won't you consent to be my sister—my dear little loved sister." "Your sister, and she your wife? No, never!" cried the fierce untrammelled nature, as Stella flashed round upon him with face white as death and eyes like two things of fire. "Choose between her and me, and choose also between success and failure, life and death," she hissed through her set teeth. "For as surely as you choose her and scorn me, I will be revenged. Listen. If you choose me I will guide you, save you, bring you to your end successfully. I can do it and I will. If you scorn me, I will betray you to those who are watching for you. You are followed, I will put them on your track. Choose!" "Stella, you would not do this thing!" he was almost paralyzed with amazement; this jealous fury that would annihilate the object it loved was incomprehensible to his generous mind. "I shall do it. Choose!" "Reflect a little," he said quietly. "You are in my power. If I really believe you capable of treachery, I can check the danger, now at once." She shivered again. "I would rather you killed me than scorn me," she murmured half inarticulately, and he answered gravely: "You need have no fear; I do not forget that to you I have once owed my life. I would die rather than injure one hair of your head." She sprang to the ground with a sudden movement, and caught the horse's rein as she cried, vehemently, wildly. "Give her up, for your life's sake, your honor's sake, your safety. Promise me that you will give her up, and no danger shall touch you." "Give up Lady Joan!" Vesey repeated and the thrill in his tongue set Stella's heart ablaze. "Never, as long as my heart beats, or my brain thinks!" "Then take the consequences," the gipsy cried with a mocking laugh, and she was gone, vanished from his sight like a shadow on his path. His first sense was one of relief, his next anxiety; the dangers of his path were multiplied indeed by Stella's enmity. If she was no powerless foe, he knew too well. However he could only gallop on as best he might, letting his horse choose the road rather than himself, for the darkness became pitchy, and then the storm came down. With all the fierce intensity of storms in that part of the country, it beat and drove its way across the unprotected moor, and after struggling in its teeth until he and his steed were both exhausted, Esmond Vesey was fain to alight and stand beside his trembling steed in the shelter of a rock. He fretted against the delay; he had counted upon crossing this moor before daybreak; but surely, as the violence of the storm at last abated, that was surely the light of morning stealing cold and pitiless over the scene around. He mounted again, and his good horse, fresh from its rest, answered bravely to rein and spur. Perhaps a couple of miles they traversed, then what was that sound that froze his heart's blood as its distinct significance was borne on the air? The clatter of more than one steed's hoofs plainly on the track; and the cold grey light was growing stronger each minute—very soon his pursuers would see him. He urged the brown horse to its utmost pace, and the noble animal answered well; but either those behind were fresher or more used to the dangerous ground they traversed, for inch by inch they gained, instant by instant the death chase grew more certain. The pursuers saw their quarry now, and on the still air came the shout: "Stop in the king's name!" Vesey dug his spurs into his horse's sides and laughed an answer as the gallant animal flew on. "Surrender, or I fire!" was the next cry, and a couple of bullets whizzed by his ears. It was too far to aim surely. Vesey touched his own pistols, holding them ready for a surer mark, then suddenly as he swept round a corner, he saw before him a ravine deep and dark, widening on one side into a deep precipitous coombe, thickly entangled with brush-wood, but narrowing at another point as his practised hunter's eye saw quickly, until—was it a possible leap from bank to bank? His breath came fast, his heart beat loud as he rode his horse straight for it.

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