A Terrible Temptation.

CHAPTER II.—Continued.

In the pause that followed, Edmond Vesey's glance met the Lady Joan's, one brief, flashing, intelligent look, then the young man arose quietly.

self," he said.

The other turned upon him a pleased and by no means surprised smile.

"From what you have already done I of seeing you here?" say at once that no better man than you, Master Vesey, will be forthcoming. If you accept the task, we accept your services gladly. The business you are to be entrusted with demands courage, secrecy, and some little ingenuity; I believe you linked her fingers through his arm as she I did?" possess them all. Success means an open spoke; and they were slowly moving on path to rank, fortune, and such honors as together. royal gratitude can bestow; failure means high treason. I wish you to plainly know what you undertake."

"I never shrank from undertaking any duty set before me. I may fail, but I farewell with Lady Joan, he had seen the shall not shrink from it."

"Fine words-savouring a little of boastfulness it seems to me, but that may, of course, be a mistake of mine," Lord Bellinger covertly uttered with a sneer.

handsome face as he heard the words, but I will just walk on this way and watch he took no notice.

me," he turned to the speaker.

"To be ready in one week, to ride wherever you may be commanded. Money will be at your service. The papers will be ready on the tenth of this month, and Joan would scorn an ugly rival, but one within three days of that date must be at their destination. They must on no ac- too lightly." count be destroyed, but if found upon you no earthly power will preserve your life. I | companion : tell you this that you may make your own preparations-take your own precautions."

"Tell me in what direction I shall have | ting it from Rube Garnet-" to ride," said Vesey after a moment's

The other mentioned the route, and Esmond recognised that it would lead him | serious." again across Exmoor.

"It is possible that, in spite of all our la?" precautions, you will not start on your mission secretly," said the tall grave man. "You may be followed, watched, pursued; the utmos. caution and silence will be re- here-with you?" quisite, also the utmost speed and endurance Esmond Vesey, are you indeed equal to this task ?"

or die!"

"Then I will see you alone for a few upturned face. moments if our other friends will retire," When he came from that room Vesey lously.

found the Lady Joan in his path. She grey eyes had a troubled expression.

"I have waited for you to put me into my chair," she said with a sweet but some- more fit to mate with you than this pavwhat uncertain smile. "My father, I find, has wearied and retired."

went slowly through the long passage to her. the door. The young man could almost have thought he felt the fingers tremble.

"Master Vesey," she began in low concentrated tones, and as he looked at her he in the pure proud face; his heart beat madly, his breath came thick and fast, impeding utterance. "I suggested you for this thing; I did not realize its danger then, I think. I thought it was a road for you to rank and honor, and, of course, we and if so, what was to become of her? must make any sacrifice for our sovereign."

"I am ready and willing, Lady Joan." harm happen to you-if-if you should evil, ignorant of it, no doubt.

lose your life?" grew deadly white, her eyes, as she turned | him; he was indebted to her for perhaps derness-a fear that thrilled him to the might be construed into ingratitude, yet very soul.

would gladly lose it to gain your approbation. You must know this." Half inarticulately he spoke; they were nearing the door and paused for a moment, walk. He drew the wrap more closely over her uncovered neck, and as he did so his hand touched and retained hers. "You know that, independent of all loyalty, all duty to our sovereign, for your sweet sake alone I would lay down my liberty or my life."

The low impassioned words reached her ears. She lifted her head, and it was difficult to see clearly in the flickering light; ney entirely alone ?" but Vesey thought there were tears glistening in those proud beauteous eyes.

moment with tender earnestness, and the fully. fingers he held clasped tightly round his. "I believe you," she whispered. "Do

this thing, return in safety-I will pray night and day that it may be so-and then ask what reward you will from me." He was almost dizzy with joy when he

heard her words, met that look; he murmured something-he knew not what, as he bent low and kissed the little jewelled the sedan-chair just now!"

Then she stepped into her chair and was borne away, and he, standing bare-headed in the street to gaze after his lady-love, felt a soft touch on his arm, a whisper in his ear.

There, standing by his side in the London streets, was the beautiful gipsy girl, Stella.

CHAPTER III. "Are you pleased to see me?" were the

a lie. I saw your face as you recognized intense gaze and breathless utterance. me, and you were not pleased."

"I am-upon my soul I am," Vesey rejoined. Quickly his projected journey recurred to him, and he foresaw the help "If no better man be found, I offer my- this child of the moor might be to him. "But it was astonishment prevented my looking glad at first. How did you get to London? Who would have dreamed

> "I told you it would be where you least | deed to-day the truth. expected to see me."

"Well, you have certainly proved your the expression of her eyes changed.

She had timidly, half-appropriatingly

Behind them walked a shadow with grim exultation on his features, no less a as he spoke in gratitude. personage than Lord Bellinger.

gipsy's greeting.

"A fine intrigue here, my young gentleman; almost in Joan's very sight you do her this insult. Well, a lucky thing A slight flush overspread Vesey's fair vantage, I am not the man I fancy myself that deep sigh of relief. "Tell me exactly what is required of lovely enough to turn any gallant's head. in the morning, but I should like to be -what eyes!" as Stella raised her glance for-just me." to her companion's beneath the light of

Meantime Stella was answering her wild unfettered child of nature?

"I have come to bring you back this She drew out and showed him his own lost watch. "I had great trouble in get-

"Ah, how is my champion?" Vesey interrupted with a smile. "As usual; your hurts were not

the vehemence with which she replied:

spouse would take good care of that. Upon my faith, I can hardly blame him in his face as she murmured: "I accept it, resolute to carry it through for being so jealous of you," he added

It blushed again suddenly, deeply, cur-

"I'd die rather than marry him!" the on the arm they held.

"You are quite right; the brute is no ing-stone!" kicking it as he spoke. "You are beautiful enough to marry a prince. Her hand rested on Vesey's arm as they Stella," he smiled carelessly down upon

> her face softened and glowed until it became in truth exquisitely lovely.

"I shall be content to marry the man I saw something he had never beheld before love," she said in constrained low tones. "No ambition could be more womanly," he said with approbation, and then he be-

> came a little puzzled. What was this beautiful extraordinary girl doing in London? Was she alone?

with him, yet she was walking on in frank "I know you are-I know, but, oh, if easy confidence by his side, thinking no him yesternight.

"And if so," tremulously he spoke, "I him hither, and though he knew nothing of the stealthy shadow on their track, he felt that the Lady Joan might disapprove should she know of even this midnight

The gipsy girl was too beautiful. "You are not alone here, are you, Stel-

la?" he asked with some anxiety. "I am with you at present," she said with a frank happy smile.

"Yes, yes-just for the present; but very thick, and sound could not pass easily. you have some friends you are staying with, surely? You did not take this jour-

one, should I ever have been allowed to Lady Joan turned them upon him for a stir from the camp?" she laughed scorn- these, thinking they might be of use to

abouts?" he asked. She laughed again.

"We gipsies have ways and means you like them for my sake!" Giorgios know nothing of." Then, with curious intentness and abruptness, she looked up straight in his face and asked : "Who was that lady you were placing in

"The Lady Joan Ambroise." "The Lady Joan Ambroise! She is

very beautiful, is she not?" "She is considered so."

"Considered so? By you?"

The words came out with little jerks, and as Stella spoke she pressed one hand quickly upon her heart; she looked at

him almost fiercely. "I think she is most beautiful," Vesey

replied calmly. "She is fair; her hair is gold, her eyes

gipsy's first words; then with that curious are light, her skin is like snow and pink contraction of eyebrows marking dis lea- may. She is like you. You might be sure, she added hastily: "No, don't tell brother and sister. Is it so?" with strained

He smiled happily.

"Not so, little Stella." "She is no relation of yours?" asked the girl sadly.

"She is my friend."

He said the words, with no intention of misleading her, proudly, blissfully. His mind was fully of the glorious possibilities held out to him, he uttered what was in-

Stella drew a deep breath of relief, and

"Only your friend!" she repeated softly. "Has she ever done you such a service as

"Never, little one. She has never beheld me in such a predicament." He stroked the brown clinging fingers

"Tell me one thing more. This Lady Jealously watching his rival's prolonged Joan, this proud Giorgio-is she more

beautiful than I am, think you?" He smiled down upon the eager face, amused by the vanity of the question, putting no other construction upon it.

"In your diverse styles you are equally Teas, for me. If I cannot turn this to some ad- beautiful," he said, and again the girl drew

"Will you give me lodging for to-night?" matters a little. By George! the girl is she asked suddenly. "I must return early What a figure—what grace of movement near you to-night. You have room surely

She was guileless as an infant, he knew; one of the lamps. "So much the better; she thought no evil, and he would not put the ideas into her head-nay, even if he as beautiful as herself may not be treated did she would scarce understand. What were social laws and proprieties to the

> Swallowing his perplexity as best he might, Vesey led his strange companion to the house in which he had rooms, and Lord Bellinger, with an exclamation of delight, saw them enter together.

Esmond Vesey would have given his own room up to Stella, but she shrank from the unaccustomed luxury of such a resting-place, and preferred to camp out, "You are not married yet, pretty Stel- as it were, before his sitting-room fire.

Next morning he introduced her to He was astonished at the start she gave, his landlady as his cousin from the country and they had breakfast together, after "If I were do you suppose I would be which he amused her by showing her various pictures and and such things, at "Well, no; I presume your ill-natured | which she gazed with delight, clinging to his arm the while, and looked adoringly

"I need not leave you just yet. I can with an admiring glance into the lovely stay an hour longer; it is so nice to be here with you. I will stay a little longer, and make more haste when I set out."

There came a rap at the door suddenly, and glancing from the window, Vesey saw was paler than her wont, and the glorious girl said, her fingers closing passionately a sedan-chair and a lady alighting from it at his door.

Could he believe his eyes? He turned to the gipsy girl with almost angry im-"Someone is coming to see me on im-

portant private business, Stella. You must go in here "-he almost pushed her Beneath his glance, his charming smile, into the next room-"and on no account stir or move until I call you. Do you understand?"

"I understand. I will obey," she said docilely, and the door closed upon her even as the landlady, with some uneasiness upon her features, announced:

"The Lady Joan Ambroise." With that inimitable proud grace of hers, Lady Joan advanced into the room she looked pale and nervous, but her deep It was out of the question, her being gray eyes as they met Esmond's held the same tender sweetness that had thrilled

"I am doing a strange thing, I know, He would have cut off his hand rather by coming here thus," she said with a faint Her lips quivered, her beautiful face than evil should happen to her through smile. "But I met Lord Bellinger just now, and he assured me that my only their lovely depths upon him, held a ten- life itself; he shrank from any word that chance of seeing you again before you started on your journey, was to force myhe was perplexed, for she had tollowed self upon you this morning in this unceremonious way."

> "I am at loss to know Bellinger's reason for so extraordinary a statement; but for once in my life I feel deeply grateful to him."

> Esmond had forgotten the gipsy girl's very existence as he held that dainty little hand, gazed into that exquisite face, and saw it color and falter beneath his ardent glance; the door between the rooms was

"I must not stay," Lady Joan said nervously. "I only came to-just to see you once again and beg you to take every "Had I breathed one word of it to any- care-neglect no possible precaution upon this dangerous errand. I brought you you when a larger weapon, perhaps, might ', How did you find out my where- fail, and also "-her voice sank lower, her glance was lifted for one moment, and his heart stood still-"I fancied you might

> She put into his hand as she spoke an exquisite pair of tiny pistols, gilded and jewelled-lovely little toys, but dangerous weapons all the same.

"How can I thank you?" the man said "By coming back to me unharmed. I

shall pray for you day and night." "Then I feel no fear. And when I do return, Lady Joan-you said-you promised I might ask you for a greater re-

ward than any king can give." "When you come back successful." "I ride for a heavier stake than freedom or a kingdom !" the young man said

She answered by a look more eloquent

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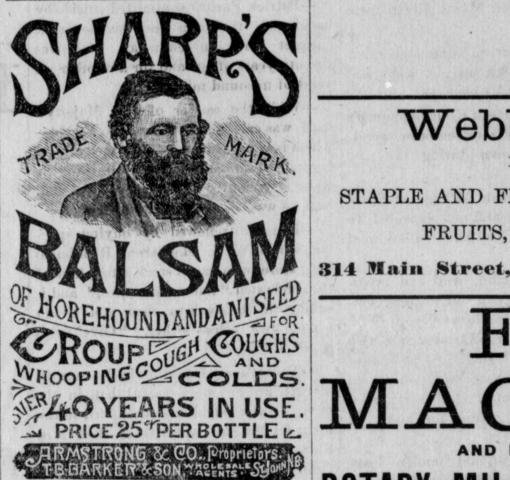
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