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room beyond, when he thought he heard footsteps behind him. It was a sliding, shuffling sound, and he turned his head to see what it was. As he did so he received a blow which staggered him, and which would have felled an ordinary man to the floor. He gathered himself quickly up, but before he could fairly turn about he received a second blow, heavier than the first, which brought him upon his knees. In an instant all four of the men were upon him, and he could see that they had ropes in their hands with which to bind him. With all his might he threw the fellow who held his right hand back against the wall, and another he sent in an opposite direction, and in a moment more he would have been upon his feet; but just at that instant a noose was adroitly slipped over his head, and as the rope tightened about his neck he was drawn back upon the brick floor again.

"Now resist any more, and we'll choke you as sure as fate," cried the man who had held the lantern, and who now had a hold upon the rope.

"Oh!" groaned Ruric, while the massive cords worked like cables in his arms and shoulders, "give me a fair chance. Let me be up and free—then lock your doors, if you please."

"No, no, good sir," replied the ruffian, with a wicked smile. "We know your power, and we are not disposed to test it further. We have had trouble enough already. Shall we—"

The man stopped speaking, for at that moment another noose was slipped down over Ruric's head, and ere he could avoid it, it had been drawn tightly about his arms. He was now at the mercy of his captors, and having rolled him over upon his breast they proceeded to secure his arms behind him, which being done they bade him to rise. Of course he could have no desire to lie there upon the cold bricks, and he got upon his feet as well as he could.

"Now, Ruric Nevel, I will conduct you to your own apartment," said the leader of the gang.

"But wherefore is this?" the gun-maker gasped, rendered almost speechless with the mingled emotions of surprise and anger. "Why have ye done this? Whose hirelings are ye that ye thus waylay and seize upon an honest man who has done no harm to any of you?"

"Never mind that now, sir," the ruffian coolly answered, "suffice it for you to know that you are safe for the present."

"But will ye not tell me what this is for? There is some intent."

"Yes—and come with me and you shall see. Come."

Thus speaking the man turned once more, and having picked up his lantern he moved on, while the others, taking Ruric by the arms, followed after. The prisoner made no resistance now, for he knew that it would be useless. At a short distance another flight of stairs was reached.

"Down here!" uttered Ruric, with a shudder.

"Of course. You'd freeze up here." These words struck harshly upon the youth's soul, for it meant that he was to be detained in this lonesome place.

At the bottom of these stairs they came to a vaulted passage, at the end of which was a door. This was opened, and Ruric was led through into the place beyond. He cast his eyes quickly about, and he found himself in a narrow apartment, the walls and floor of which were of stone, and the roof of brick, the latter being arched. In one corner was a couch, and upon it was some old skins.

And here the youth was to be left. His guide simply pointed to the low couch, and then turned away. Ruric asked a question, but it was not answered. In a few moments more the heavy door was closed upon him, and he was in total darkness. He sought the couch, and with a deep groan he sank down!

CHAPTER XII.

A CONFERENCE AND HOW IT WAS INTERRUPTED.

Rosalind Valda and Zenobie were together in their sitting room, and the former had been weeping. She looked paler than when we saw her before, and her brow was heavy. Smiles no longer crept about the dimples of her cheeks, and her eyes had a sad, mournful look. Her face plainly showed that she had suffered much.

"My dear mistress," urged the faithful Zenobie, throwing her arms about Rosalind's neck, and drawing her head upon her bosom, "weep no more. Oh, there must be some hope. Surely God will not suffer such an unholy work to be done."

"Ah, Zenobie," returned the fair maiden, in a fluttering, melancholy tone, "where can I look for hope?"

"I say, in God. You have told me we must look to Him, and I have believed you. Have you not always been good to God?"

"I have been as good as I knew how, though I have sinned."

"How sinned? Oh, my mistress, if you have sinned, then who is pure? Tell me."

"We all sin, Zenobie. It is our nature."

"So I have often heard, but I hardly think you have sinned. What have you done which you knew to be wrong?"

"Nothing—nothing."

"Then how have you sinned?"

"Ah, Zenobie, we all do things which we ought not to do; but yet I mean to do as near right as I can."

"Then leave the rest with God. Oh, when poor mortals do as near right as lies in their power, surely they may leave the rest with God without fear. And now, if God is just, as you tell me, why should He allow the wicked duke to triumph over you? What justice would there be in that—when you are all goodness, and he is sin itself?"

Rosalind was puzzled. She had tried to teach her attendant to love and honor God, and she had so far succeeded that Zenobie understood all the principles of Christianity, and embraced them gladly and joyfully; but now how should she make this point understood? How should she reconcile this apparent injustice with God's universal mercy and justice?

"Can you not tell me?" the young girl asked again. "Why should God allow such a thing? You say he is all-powerful and can do what he will."

"Zenobie," returned the maiden, after pondering for awhile, "you do not look on the subject in a proper light. God does not operate by petty, individual decisions, as an emperor does. He sees that certain laws are necessary for the good of mankind—and not a single law of all his code is there but is very good. Last night your head ached and you suffered; and of course you had violated some natural law. It was your own fault. And so this suffering which has now come upon me is the result of a violation of one of God's laws."

"Ah," cried Zenobie, eagerly, "but you are the one who suffers, while another violates the law. In my case I did both and do not complain."

"But listen," pursued Rosalind, with a brightening countenance, for the true idea had come to her mind. "It would not be just for a person to enjoy all the good of a law and leave others to suffer all the evil. God has established in us a social nature, and through that nature comes the sweetest of our earthly enjoyments. Such a law—the law of sociality—must be universal, and if men break the law they must suffer, and the only just way in which God could shield me from suffering would be to release me from the effects of the law. Then I should be a poor, lonesome outcast; forced to live all my days alone like a barren rock on the top of some bleak mountain. But I would rather live among people, and enjoy the companionship of my fellows. I have freely accepted the boon, and now, when its evils come, I must suffer. Had God's intent been followed out there would have been no suffering. It is not His fault that the duke sins. Do you understand me?"

"I don't know," murmured the young girl dubiously.

"But see," resumed Rosalind; "you choose to exercise your social nature, and of your own accord you mingle among your fellows. Do you not see that thus you are enjoying one of God's richest blessings—the blessing of sociality, friendship and love?"

"Yes—I see."

"Well, so far God is good in having given you that power for such enjoyment?"

"Yes—I see."

"Well, now, under that law, when my father and mother died, I found a friend in the duke, and here have found a home. But circumstances have changed. The duke has become wicked in thought—he wants more money—and he will prostitute a power which, in obedience of God's law would be good, to my ruin. Now God can not save me without rendering to pieces one of His most powerful laws, and one which is meant for a universal good. The moment He does that He destroys that principle of human dependence whence flow those most holy virtues of love, friendship and charity. He must act by universal laws, and not by partial rules and individual exceptions. So as long as I can enjoy the blessings of social life, I must be subject to the evils of treachery and social wickedness. Do you not understand now?"

"I see—I see," the girl murmured, thoughtfully.

"Aye, Zenobie," the mistress added, while a holy light shone upon her countenance, "God has made us subject to ills here; but look beyond the grave, and how bright it is with hope! I have a father and a mother there. Oh, in all my misery—even in the worst state to which the bad duke can reduce me, I would not change places with him. You seemed to intimate that God would see me suffer, and yet let the duke triumph. Triumph? Oh, Zenobie, for what would you have that man's heart in your bosom, and his soul in you keeping?"

"I would rather die!" the girl cried, while a cold shudder ran through her frame.

"Then you see he does not go clear. Oh, how blind and simple are those who imagine there can be pleasure in sin!"

This opened a new theme to Zenobie's mind and she pondered upon it a long while. But by and by she came back to the theme from whence they had started; and in pursuance thereof she said:

"My mistress, are you sure the duke will persist in this?"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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