

## ON THE BRINK OF A CRIME.

### CHAPTER I.

It was an ideal summer day. The low ripple of the river, the hum of the insects, and the song of birds were the only sounds that broke the silence of the vast woods that surrounded Carolin Towers.

The arching trees swept their tender graceful branches into the cool stream that bubbled and gurgled, as though with joy at the sweet caresses.

The July sun was at its height, but here beside the flowing water, it was shady and restful; the background of dense woods, with Nature's carpet of emerald green moss forming a spot calculated to soothe overstrained nerves, in which to forget awhile earth's cares—a spot that seemed so far away from the hurry and bustle of great cities—in fact, a place in which to dream away a gorgeous midsummer day.

And in this paradise was one dreamer—a girl, young and beautiful; no overstrained nerves were hers.

Life's fitful fever had not touched her as yet, but love had come to her—love, with outstretched hands, in a golden haze of hearts' sunlight.

Small wonder that she dreamed, and that it possible, the lovely face took a softer, sweeter expression.

Reclining on the mossy bank, she made a picture over which an artist would have raved.

She appeared little more than a child—at that adorable age where childhood and womanhood meet, the one coy and uncertain, the other grave, yet wondering what the future may have in store.

Her dress was pure white, the material of the gown, however, suggesting the idea that the wearer was not too lavishly endowed with this world's goods; whilst the broad black ribbon on the shade hat which she had removed from her small, exquisitely-shaped head, was certainly a badge of mourning.

This, indeed, was the case. Only a month ago Mavis Dunscombe had lost her best, her only friend—her mother.

She had grieved bitterly, and at first could not, and would not, be consoled; but in that month—so long, but now so short—love had stepped in, and though Mavis still grieved, the keenness of her sorrow had passed. Was not Adrian her own; were not her sorrows his?

He had told her so, many and many a time, and she had fondly believed every word he had said. And then, the joys that were to be! Would they not share them also—together?

Of grief, of parting, of shame, of the great tragedy of life, she thought nothing. To her it was a sealed book; or, if she thought at all, the golden curtain hung always between, and the dark moving shapes that were to make up the drama of her life were indistinct and vague.

This was as it should be. Was she not young and beautiful? and did not all the world lie fair and smiling before her in the mystic light of love's young dream?

And so she sat beneath the drooping beeches and thought a girl's innocent thoughts of her lover—of Adrian Carolin, who was the only son of the owner of the stately pile of castellated building, known in all the country-side as Carolin Towers.

It was all but three short weeks since Mavis Dunscombe had met the man who was to day all the world to her, and whose influence, be it for weal or woe, would color the whole of her existence, to make or to mar the fair life as he thought fit. A deep and solemn responsibility for any man.

But to Adrian it came in the form of a terrible temptation.

'His own,' she murmured to herself again and again; and lighting her eyes, she saw hastening towards her the man she

loved with all the pure trustfulness of a first love.

Could she have foreseen the future that now looked so smiling, she would have been tempted to throw herself into the river at her feet, which, lower down in its course, was deep and treacherous, ere she turned, with the lovelight in her blue eyes to meet him who was her hero and her king.

He took her in his arms and kissed her passionately.

'I knew I should find you here, Mavis, my own.'

Mavis did not answer him.

Her heart was too full, her love too perfect to need words; and, indeed, at the present moment, it seemed so with Adrian Carolin also.

He clasped her closer to his breast, and smoothed the bright hair, which was one of Mavis' chief charms.

And so they sat on in a perfect silence and around them the birds warbled their happy song, and the river at their feet laughed, and chattered, and mocked, as it went its way over rocks and boulders, on to the great silent pool, which the country folk around believed to be bottomless.

They were superstitious about these things simple folk.

It was said to be haunted by the spirit of a young girl, the bride of one of the great lords of Carolin, dead and gone this century and more, and few were bold enough to pass the spot after dusk.

The legend went that Adrian—a family name—Lord Carolin had wedded the fair daughter of a neighboring squire, believing her to be richly endowed, and, on finding out that, instead of being the heiress he had imagined, she was quite the reverse—being, indeed, through her father's extravagance, almost penniless—he had put her from him with a curse, which so turned this unhappy bride's brain that she sought refuge in the pool that tells no tales, and sank beneath its dark waters, to rise no more.

Her body was never recovered, although her spirit was said to haunt the spot.

Why did this sad story enter into the mind of Mavis Dunscombe, even as she lay sheltered by her lover's strong arms? Who shall say?

### CHAPTER II.

The Honourable Adrian Carolin was, as has already been hinted, the only son, and, therefore, the heir of Lord Carolin, the great man of the county.

Not only was he the lord of the manor, and owned the whole of the picturesque, straggling village which took its name from him, but he was also the possessor of a fine mansion in Park Lane, a shooting-box in the Highlands, and various other estates more or less important.

But Lord Carolin was not rich—at least, not for a peer of the realm.

The Carolins had, from time immemorial, been wild, imprudent, and, in several cases, wicked.

That they were utterly unscrupulous where their own desires were concerned was a fact well known; but, for all that, the old lord and his handsome son were well beloved in the neighbourhood, where for centuries the Lords of Carolin had reigned as little kings.

Although reckless to a degree and mortgaged up to the hilt, there was an almost royal generosity about father and son alike that went far towards covering those sins, which, indeed, to their dependents and poorer neighbours seemed far away, and by them were but little understood.

What did they know of London and its ways in this quiet, peaceful village on the Cornish coast? For, the broad acres of Carolin Towers sloped towards the great ocean, which stretched full three thousand miles away to lap the orange and cypress laden shores of Florida.

The wife of the present lord, and the mother of Adrian, had died soon, after giving birth to the heir.

Some said that her husband's 'London ways' had had something to do with the early death of the gentle lady who had borne the great name for so brief a period.

She, too, was of noble birth.

On Lord Carolin's side it had most certainly been a love-match, for the Lady Alice Mountjoy had had nothing save her beauty and goodness to bestow.

On her side—well, she had always been a little afraid of her lord, who was also her master.

Be this as it may, she died young, and thus Adrian had never known a mother's care and influence, and so he, too, grew up a true Carolin—the very apple of his father's eye, handsome, and somewhat overbearing, as became his race.

At the time this story opens, it would have been hard to find a face more beautiful, a form more striking, than Mavis Dunscombe's lover possessed.

He had now reached his thirtieth year, and, although, as was but natural, his name had been freely coupled by the gossips with every marriageable young lady in the county for years past, he himself had shown no sign of preference.

The handkerchief had not been thrown to any one of the fair damsels who still sighed in vain.

In London it was the same story. The marketable damsels of Mayfair angled, it is true, somewhat differently from their country-bred sisters, and baited their hook with another bait; but they angled no less assiduously.

Mamas in Belgravia gave dances, dinners, what not, all in the fond hope of se-

curing a good old name and title for their daughters, but Adrian was impervious.

His heart remained adamant until the fatal day when his dark, splendid eyes lighted on the fair perfect beauty of Mavis Dunscombe.

It was in a tiny, creeper covered cottage on Lord Carolin's estate that Mrs. Dunscombe had lived.

She had been the widow of an officer, who, dying in India, had left her but poorly provided for, her sole source of income being her pension; and now she was dead, and with her pension, leaving Mavis with but a small annuity which would cease upon her twenty-first birthday—she was now seventeen years of age.

Chance had brought the mother and daughter to the retired Cornish village, where the last five years of the girl's young life had been spent—happy, happy years!

The rent of the wee cottage had tempted them.

Mrs. Dunscombe was in delicate health; in short, it suited them.

And so Mavis had grown to womanhood in an atmosphere of love, untainted by the snares of a world only too ready to wipe the bloom from the peach, to open the eyes of innocence, and destroy the illusions of youth.

Such was the girl whom Adrian loved, with the only love of which such a one as he was capable—selfish, exacting, wavering. At present he loved her madly, passionately; so he told himself and her.

To the man of the world, sated with its flattery, its hollowness, the fresh young charm of Mavis came as a revelation, and in the more serious moments of his solitude he vowed that he would never bring a shadow of sorrow or shame over the brightness of her soul.

Alas! for human resolutions.

He had come upon her in her grief, three short weeks ago, in the very spot where they now sat clasped in each other's arms, and, gazing upon her unseen, had felt his fickle heart go out to her.

Hers he had won, perhaps, too easily. Lightly gained, with men of Adrian's stamp, too often means lightly held.

The afternoon shadows fell upon them; still they sat whispering love's low whispers.

'And now, my dearest, about your future. Have you made any plans? I cannot leave my bird in such a lonely nest as Myrtle Cottage alone, and I must go to town shortly,' said Adrian at last, putting her gently from him, but still retaining her small hand, and looking into the pure depths of her wonderful eyes.

'To town! to London! Oh, Adrian! and the red lips quivered like a timid child's. 'How lonely I shall be! Plans? Oh, no; how could I make plans now without you?'

Adrian frowned slightly; he hated responsibility in any shape or form.

'You are angry. What have I said to vex you?' Mavis exclaimed, with love's quick instinct.

'Vexed me, darling? No, of course not; but, you see, we must think about the future, bore as it is! My father being absent from the Towers, at present he knows nothing of my bird of our secret.'

'Secret, Adrian! Need we have a secret from him? Will he be very angry with you for marrying me—at our marriage?'

And she hid her blushing face from her lover's eyes.

Adrian started, and the frown deepened.

It was the first time the ominous word 'marriage' had passed between them, and now it was Mavis who had used it.

'Marriage!' The very word suggested a whole train of thought, which, to judge by the expression on Adrian's face, were decidedly unpalatable.

'We will talk of your plans and your future later on, Mavis.'

And Mavis remarked, with a strange chill at her heart, that it was not 'our plans,' but 'yours.'

'Come I will see you home. I am dining at my uncle's Lord Mountjoy's to-night.'

Saying this Adrian rose, and together they passed through the woods to the cottage almost in silence.

It was the first tiny cloud on the horizon of Mavis Dunscombe's happiness.

That night she cried herself to sleep.

### CHAPTER III.

On the following morning, Adrian received a letter from his father bidding him travel up to London without loss of time, as he had important matters to talk over with him, adding also that he was far from well.

Adrian was somewhat surprised at this request, as Lord Carolin was not, as a rule apt to consider anything of much importance save his own royal will and pleasure.

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In this respect the son was like his father.

'I shall not have a moment to spare in which to say no 'good-bys' to Mavis, but I will send one of the men down to the cottage with a note.'

A species of relief came Adrian as he thought thus, giving at the same time orders for catching the first available train, to town.

When he thought of Mavis' a thrill of compunction seized him.

Her words, her face, haunted him strangely, and when he found himself in the train being borne swiftly towards, it was Mavis and Mavis only, on whom his thoughts dwelt.

How innocent she was! How little of the world—of his world—she knew, poor child! Marriage, impossible!

If she only knew the truth, would she cast him from her or would she cling to him, looking to him for her happiness and her all?

Bah! what a fool he was to worry his head about troubles that might never be! He would hear what his father had to say. One thing however, was very certain he must not reveal his love for Mavis. His father and Mavis must never meet.

He lighted a cigar and puffed moodily away, trying to banish the dark thoughts that would rise, do what he could to prevent them.

He thought of his folly and his past, and cursed them both.

Before the express train had reached the London terminus, he had made up his mind on one subject. In the teeth of everything—in spite of the past, the present, and the future, Mavis Dunscombe should be his, be it by fair means or by foul. She should be his! He could not lose her.

It was late when Adrian reached the family mansion in Park Lane; the night was intensely, suffocatingly hot. He was expected.

Although the season was dying, it was dying hard, and it seemed to Adrian one big rush of pleasure-seeking, jaded men and women, this West-end wherein his lines were cast, and of which he knew so much.

How different from the cool shade of Carolin Woods—from the rippling river! and how different these painted, powdered women from—Mavis!

Quickly removing his dusty and travel-stained garments, Adrian sought his father who he was informed, had dined, but was sitting over his wine in the small dining-room, which father and son generally used when alone.

'His lordship is far from well, sir,' remarked Lord Carolin's confidential man, who waited upon the heir; 'and he has not been out of the house all day expecting you every minute.'

'But I could not possibly get here sooner, Boyd!' replied Adrian, smiling.

'So I told his lordship, sir; but he was that restless, making me bring the Bradshaw and look out the trains every half-hour.'

So his father had something of real importance to communicate! As a rule, he took life easily.

The meeting between father and son was affectionate and cordial.

There were bon camarades in the true sense of the word. They had so much in common; and they were wonderfully alike, too, in form and features, as they stood facing one another, grasping each other's hands.

Lord Carolin was still a strikingly handsome man, apparently on the right side of sixty.

It was easy to see from whom Adrian had inherited his good looks and tall, stately bearing.

'And now, father, what is it?' said Adrian, as soon as his physical needs had been ministered to, and he had partaken of the contents of a tray of refreshments thoughtfully prepared for him.

'You would not have sent for me in this tremendous hurry had you not some valid reason. What is it? Nothing serious, I hope,' he added, seeing his father looked grave and troubled.

'You are right, Adrian. There is a reason, the very best of reasons; it has to do with you. I have news for you that may—nay, will—alter the whole tenor of your life. Can you not guess it, my boy?'

And Lord Carolin looked long and steadily at the son who, with all his faults, was so dear to him.

### CHAPTER IV.

Adrian sat silent. A crowd of thoughts—of memories, surged over him unbidden rendering him for the moment speechless.

What was this news that would mean to him so much—that would change his very life itself?

Oh! if only it could be—it only it was—that!

With an effort he roused himself, and faced his father.

'I cannot guess. It cannot be—you must tell me.'

'You have guessed it my boy; I see it in your face; but you cannot grasp the full fact yet, for it is a fact. You have your freedom, Adrian; she is dead.'

'Dead?' exclaimed Adrian, starting to his feet, and pacing the room nervously.

'Dead—Lucilla dead?'

He paused, adding, in a voice strangely unlike his own—

'When and how?—tell me!'

'It is a strange story,' replied Lord Carolin, thoughtfully; 'but truth is often stranger than fiction, and a chain of ordinary circumstances brought the knowledge of her death, and manner of it, to me. Prepare yourself for a shock, Adrian. Lucilla, your wife, died a violent death.'

'Murdered?' The dread word came from Adrian's lips in horrified tones.

'Thank God, no! not that. At the inquiry, they brought it in 'Accidental'; it may have been suicide—God only knows! She is dead; who are we to judge her? But you shall hear the whole story.'

'As you are aware, I have been travelling for the past month abroad, and caprice took me from the South, which had become unbearably hot and relaxing, to the North of France—to Normandy.'

'Charmed with the simplicity of the people, and the extreme beauty of the scenery, I wandered from place to place, travelling quietly and unpretentiously, with Boyd only as my attendant. Chance, or maybe Fate—which you will—took me to a small hotel, picturesquely situated, far up on the hills, among the pine trees. I was comfortable, and resolved to spend a week there.'

'One day, being told of an excursion to be made to a neighboring place of interest I ordered a carriage, and set out to see and explore. Putting up at the only hostelry Aixville—the name of the place—boasted, I started on foot for the famous woods and well of which I had come in search.'

'After half an hour's walk, I reached the spot, the beauty of which well repaid me for my trouble. As I gazed down into the depths of the dark waters, a figure—a woman's figure—rose suddenly, and confronted me from the other side. Imagine Adrian, my horror, my dismay, when I recognized Lucilla.'

Lord Carolin paused, pouring himself out a glass of wine, as though to nerve himself to his task.

'Go on,' was all that Adrian said. His face was buried in his hands, but he was listening with feverish intensity. The story meant so much to him.

'She was changed,' resumed Lord Carolin, 'almost beyond recognition. Remember it is full seven years since I had seen her. Her vice—to my mind the lowest of all possible vices—drink—had bloated the beauty that caught your fancy nearly ten years ago—Adrian writhed there was a sneer in his father's tones that cut him like a knife—had disfigured her to such an extent that her looks, such as they were, had entirely departed; but I knew her at once, and recognition was mutual.'

'That she had been drinking heavily recently was evident. She attacked me at once like a fury, demanding your address—demanding money. I reminded her that she was provided for—that on condition of her living abroad, and keeping the wretched marriage a secret, she received a sum which I considered ample for her respectable maintenance. I fear some of my remarks angered her. She blazed out more furiously than ever.'

'I am sick and tired living a false life, under a false name,' she said. 'I will come to England, and take my rightful place in the country, as the wife of your son and heir, the Honourable Adrian Carolin; and I will track and dog your footsteps till I find him.' 'Truly a nice prospect both for you and me, Adrian!'

'Having once made up her mind to it, she would have been capable of that or anything else. I know her well,' groaned his son.

'Hush! Remember she is dead. Well, to cut the story short, she followed me back to the inn, where I found she was well known, raving—declaring she was my daughter-in-law. This statement, however I could see, was not believed. To avoid her, I contrived to escape by a garden-entrance, and drove rapidly away, and the last I saw was the landlord endeavoring to pacify her, as he would a lunatic; and indeed, she appeared but little removed from one.'

'Drink, and the life she led, may have turned a brain always weak and excitable,' said Adrian.

'Let us hope so; and now comes the tragic ending of my story. The wretched creature pursued me from place to place, I however, eluding her successfully. She was travelling by rail to Paris, in search of me, when, by some inexplicable accident—or was it design?—she was found upon the line, mutilated past recognition by a passing train. The door of the carriage in which she had been was open.'

'And you are sure—quite sure—that it was Lucilla?' said Adrian, with cold lips.

'I saw the—the body. Yes, Adrian, your wife is dead—you are free. I saw her buried. Here is the certificate,' and Lord Carolin placed a paper before his son.

'No, no!' exclaimed Adrian, shuddering. 'She lies buried in a quiet country churchyard, but you shall have all particulars later on. Come! This has been a shock, Adrian—but remember that you are free, that the fatal folly of your youth has been wiped out by an all-merciful Providence, and be thankful!'

Adrian arose and wrung his father's hand.

He had much, indeed, to thank him for. Just now, his mind, his brain, was in a state of chaos.

More than ever now must the existence of Marvis and his love for her be kept a secret from the haughty Lord of Carolin.

'Go and rest, my son. To-morrow we will talk matters over. I should advise a few months' travel. Fresh scenes will take the memory of the past from you more surely than anything else,' said his father, kindly.

And Adrian took him at his word, thankful to be alone with his thoughts.

### CHAPTER V.

A week had gone by, and still Mavis was alone.

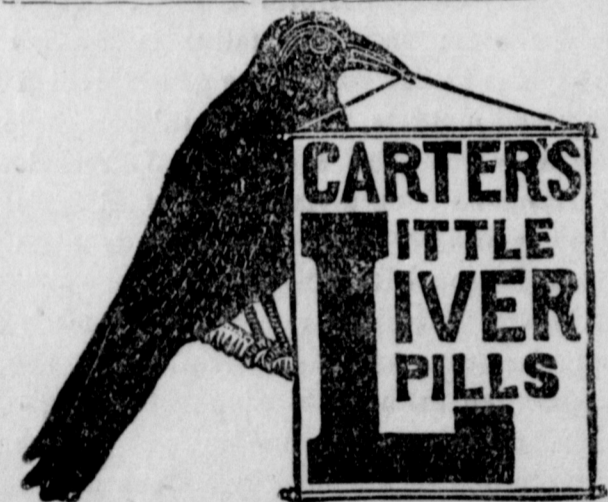
Adrian had not come. Nothing but the scanty note that told of his father's need of him—of his hurried departure.

This note Mavis read over and over again.

It was fond, loving, as ever; but Mavis felt the vagueness, although she did not

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)

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