

The Necklace of Death.

CHAPTER I.

'Ewan is home, and wants to see us!' repeated Cora, looking up in her lover's face with wondering eyes. 'Why I thought he would never forgive us.'

'Well, he was very angry at the time; but I, at least, can hardly blame him,' said Douglas, laying a caressing hand on the chestnut head beside him. 'If he had robbed me of you, I daresay I should have felt like murdering him.'

'Only, I never belonged to him for a single instant, whatever he might think,' said Cora. 'And now you say he is home ill, and wants to see us. He must be very ill indeed, I should think.'

'I am afraid he is,' said Douglas, not noticing the little feminine innuendo in her last words. 'Poor fellow! it must be awfully wretched being laid up in a hotel. You'll come, won't you dear?'

'Oh, of course I will!' said Miss Dampier, readily. 'Douglas, you are a much higher-minded person than I am.'

'Why, what nonsense!' said he, ruffling his sweetheart's pretty hair with a very loving hand.

She was the daintiest and most winning of creatures, with her rose tinted skin, her grey eyes which in shadow were almost black, and that wonderful crown of chestnut hair which always made people want to see the face that went with it.

And so it was not to be wondered at that the cousins had fallen in love with her simultaneously, and at first sight the evening they had met her at a dance; but people did wonder a good deal when it became apparent that it was the cheerful, impetuous Douglas, who was making an insufficient living at the Bar, intermingled with journalism, whom the girl preferred to Ewan, who was the possessor of the Stewart estates, who had made some name as a traveller, and who was far handsomer than his cousin.

But no one's astonishment equalled that of Ewan himself.

All his life he had prided himself on his strength of will, and had never foregone the thing he desired; and now, to be thrown over for the man for whom he had always had a sort of contemptuous tolerance, and when Cora had falteringly told him she was engaged to Douglas, he had broken out into a tempest of rage that had fairly frightened the girl.

It was of that she was thinking when Douglas had come in and told her that his cousin had returned, and had written to him from the Metropole, asking to see them both.

The memory of Ewan's last words seemed to still ring in her ears as she went up stairs to get her hat.

Her father, a London doctor with a good connection, but a large family, had made no disguise of the fact that he would rather have seen her the wife of the cousin with a settled income and position; but it was the thing of the past now, and her wedding-day with Douglas was fixed for not quite a week ahead; and, when she came down, she found her mother speculating with Douglas as to whether Ewan did not wish to see them about a wedding present.

It was such a contrast to her last memories of the man who had made such stormy and masterful love to her, that Cora burst into a laugh.

'Oh, mamma, how delightfully commonplace you are!' she cried, stooping to give her a kiss as they went out.

It was rather an unusual treat for the girl to have a long drive in a hansom with her lover, and she enjoyed it without much thought of the end of their journey; but when, after being piloted through long corridors, the waiter delivered them over to the charge of Mr. Stewart's own irreproachable body-servant, and they were ushered into a darkened room, a sudden pity fell on her at the sight of the man who was lying on a sofa wrapped in furs for all the warmth of the day.

'Is that you, Douglas, and you, Cora? I thought you would never come,' he said, eagerly raising himself among his pillows, and showing a face as pale and fine as if cut out of old ivory; dark eyes gleamed out under thin, straight brows, and his lips met in an inflexible line between the square chin and the thin nose; every bone showed under the tightly drawn skin, and the long hand he held out to Cora closed on her's deathly cold.

'Oh, of course we came at once, old fellow!' said Douglas, quickly, looking down pityingly on his cousin. 'I hope you are not very bad.'

'Bad enough. This confounded malaria fever keeps on coming back. It would not matter; only, the doctors say

my heart is affected, and may give way under the strain.'

'Oh, don't talk like that! Doctors often make a mistake,' said Douglas warmly, but the sick man was not looking at him, but at Cora, who was gazing at him with a strangely fascinated glance.

'But it would be rather a good thing for you and Cora if they were right, wouldn't it?' said Ewan, with a savage sneer in his voice. 'You would come in for most of the property, you know, my good Douglas.'

'Come, Ewan; you know that is the last thing in my thoughts,' said Douglas, a hurt ring in his voice. 'Hang it all, man! I am not a ghoul; and Cora and I are quite content with our prospects, aren't we, darling?'

'Oh! quite.'

She involuntarily moved a little nearer Douglas, under the look of those dark eyes.

'Oh! I remember you were never flatterer to me,' said Ewan, with an unmitigated laugh. 'You preferred Douglas, with all his drawbacks. Well, well, that is all past now. A sick man forgets the follies he perpetrated when he is strong, and I did not send for you to reproach you, but to ask you to bury the past, and to only think of me as a well-wishing friend. I hear the wedding day is fixed; but, as things go now, I may not be alive then, and so I thought, Douglas, that you would not have any objection to my presenting Cora with a wedding present a little in advance.'

The dark eyes were fixed on them with something almost like anxiety in their depths, but Douglas never saw it as he answered, greatly touched—

'Of course not, my dear old fellow. It is awfully good of you to think of it, but I hope you will not only be alive at our wedding, but at your own one of these days.'

Ewan's lips parted slightly in a smile.

'No, never that. I am a man of few ideas, but those I hold to very firmly. You have no need to be jealous when I say there never was and never will be but one woman in the world for me.'

He was feeling feebly under his pillows as he spoke, and now drew out a queer Oriental looking bag of soft leather, worked with embroideries in crimson and gold.

'It's a queer-looking jewel-casse, isn't it?' he said, looking up at Cora. 'But out where I got this they don't go in for morocco boxes, lined with velvet. But, perhaps, the contents are not the less valuable. Here, Cora, tell me what you think of this.'

He put his fingers in the bag and drew out a necklace, made of green stones, cut in small oblongs, and set in gold, rudely beaten and chased.

'Why, whatever are those stones?' queried Douglas, looking over Cora's shoulder with interest. 'They can't be emeralds that size.'

'Oh, yes! they are; but of course they are not so valuable as properly cut and polished stones of that size would be,' said Ewan. 'It is rather quaint than valuable, but it took my fancy, and I thought I should like Cora to have it as a remembrance of me. I picked it up ever so far up in the Himalayas, and I brought it home on purpose for you, Cora. Do you care for it, little girl?'

'I think it is lovely, and it is very, very good of you to have thought of me in this way,' said Cora, slowly, looking from the dull green stones to the pale, eager face above them.

There was the most unreasonable reluctance in her mind to accepting the gift, though she was blaming herself greatly for want of generosity in the matter.

Perhaps Ewan read her thoughts, for he went on—

'You cannot guess how much I have wanted you to have this. I know that, when we parted, I was a very unreasonable man, and, in my pain, said a lot of things I had no right to say at all; but, Cora, will you not forgive me for that madness now?'

'Oh, of course I will!' said the girl, swiftly, her vague, unformulated misgivings suddenly melting away, and a warm contrition following.

'And so, you will take this from me, and in days to come you will look on it as the sign of our reconciliation, will you not?'

He had caught her hand, and held it in his own round the necklace, almost as if it were the symbol on which they were swearing faith.

'Yes, I will,' said Cora, simply, and then he loosed her fingers and laid the gift in them.

'That's right, then,' he said, with a low sigh, as if some heavy weight were suddenly lifted from his mind. 'Now I can die with an easier mind. I don't want you to wear them till you are married; Douglas can take care of them till then for you. Just put them on for a minute, though; I have a fancy for seeing you in them.'

'I always thought that emeralds would suit you. Yes, take off your hat—that's right.'

Cora clasped the necklace round her neck, over the plain, black serge she was wearing, and, with a natural, harmless, girlish vanity, glanced for a moment at herself in the glass.

The sombre green certainly became her, and smiling back at herself, Douglas watching her, neither of them saw the sudden flicker of savage admiration that sprang up in Ewan Stewart's eyes as he looked at her.

'Yes, emeralds suit you,' he said, in a conclusive tone. 'Well, wear them in memory of a man who could not help loving you.'

'We shall both always value the gift, and the kindly feeling that prompted it immensely, old man,' said Douglas, gravely. 'Cora, shall I help you with the clasp?'

'Oh, no! I have managed it,' said she, and, taking it from her neck, she held it out to him.

'Here's the bag, put it in that,' said Ewan, from his sofa.

Douglas looked critically at the curious embroidery of the leather.

'What queer work! It looks like characters. How did you manage to get hold of it, Ewan?'

'Oh, we travellers get hold of strange things at times! I took a fancy to the necklace the first time I saw it, and, you know, I generally manage to get what I want,' said Ewan, smiling. 'Except once, and that, as you know, was the most important thing in the world to me; but now I can't ask you to stay longer. Talking always does me up, and I feel a hot attack coming on. I had just got over a shivering one when you came. Good-bye, old man; good-bye, Cora; if we don't meet again, you won't forget me, will you?'

'The hand that held hers now was burning hot, and the eyes seemed piercing her through and through with their gaze.'

The girl was glad when, farewell said, they were out in the corridor again.

'Poor old Ewan, he does seem bad!' said Douglas, sympathisingly; 'but I am sure he will pull through. It was awfully nice of him to give us the necklace, and I am sure, in spite of all he may say, it is really very valuable.'

'I did not say anything before Ewan, but I am afraid I broke the clasp in taking it off,' said Cora. 'It got tangled in my hair.'

'Never mind, I will get it repaired before you want to wear it. Indeed, a jeweller's strong room would not be a bad place for it till we are married,' said Douglas.

'Yes; I shall have to start a jewel-box in its honour,' said Cora smiling. 'Oh, I beg your pardon!'

In her absorption she had brushed up against a handsome and dignified Hindoo, dressed in correct European costume, who was passing by the Metropole, with the look of a man who has not quite made up his mind as to the hotel he shall patronise.

Up in his room Ewan Stewart was panting and perspiring in the throes of a hot attack, but his lips were curled into an evil smile.

'In memory of a man who loved her! Ha, ha! I wonder how she will read that by-and-by. It was a gift of gifts, the revenge of revenges, nothing clumsy nor in artistic about that. What a brilliant thought of mine, to buy it from that recreant priest, who wished to work vengeance on his superiors; he warned me it would be a dangerous plaything, but I hardly thought they would be on the track so quickly.'

'The thing now, is to let them know it has changed hands. I wonder though how many it will pass before it finds its way back to the goddess' neck again, up in that lonely temple. They say there are members of that wonderful society, wherever there are Hindoos to be found. For a moment I thought Cora had her suspicions, she is a woman with a mind and an intelligence; but Douglas—bah!—the great, blundering fool—it is hardly worth while to deceive him,' and then sheer physical anguish cut short his exultation, and his man had to be summoned to administer the ether, to help his laboring heart.

CHAPTER II.

Douglas Stewart, coming out of the newspaper office where he was most employed, about one the next day, turned down towards the Strand in search of luncheon.

The evening newspapers were being cried out about the streets, and a shrill-voiced youngster ran so persistently by his side, crying 'Horrible murder in a London hotel, member of the hierarchy found mysteriously murdered!' that in sheer defence, he bought a copy of one of the papers, and glanced through the sheet.

What was this?

His own name seemed starting out to meet him, and, as in a dream, he read—

'A horrible discovery was made at the Hotel Metropole this morning. Some days ago, Mr. Ewan Stewart, a gentleman possessed of considerable property in Hampshire, and well known as a traveller, arrived there with his servant, and engaged a suite of rooms on the first floor. He was in weak health, and his servant had received orders not to enter his bedroom, unless summoned, as sometimes after a bad night

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Mr. Isaiah Willmot, a retired farmer living at 138 Elizabeth St., Barrie, Ont., said:

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his master slept late, but, as at ten o'clock the bell had not rung, he knocked at the door, and, receiving no answer, got alarmed and informed the manager.

The door was then forced, and Mr. Stewart was found apparently lying peacefully asleep in bed; but, on examination, it was discovered that life was extinct, the unfortunate gentleman having apparently been strangled. Neither his money nor his valuables had been touched, and at present it is difficult to suggest a reason for the crime. The matter is already in the capable hands of Inspector Reading, who will be remembered by his skillful following up of the thieves in the Ayrshire bank robbery.

Douglas walked on mechanically, his brain nearly stupefied by the shock.

Ewan, from whom he had parted only yesterday, dead—murdered within a few hours of their reconciliation!

It was incredible, impossible!

There must be some mistake.

He looked round for suggestion, and a passing cab gave it.

He must go at once to the Metropole, and, hailing the hansom, he jumped in.

In the hall of the great hotel there was a small group of officials, and, marching up to them, Douglas gave his name and business, and was at once shown up to the room where Inspector Reading was in charge, with a subordinate taking notes.

Everything looked as commonplace and as orderly as it had on the preceding day; only, on the bed in the next room was something covered with a white sheet but dreadfully suggestive in its rigid outlines.

The Inspector asked Douglas numberless questions about his dead cousin's habits and acquaintances; but Douglas had to own that, for the last year, they had been estranged, of which fact the man took note, and then interrogated him closely as to every word that had passed between them on the day before.

'Have you formed any theory as to the murderer of my poor cousin?' said Douglas, at last.

The Inspector shook his head oracularly. 'Only tools make a theory until they are in possession of all the facts; but I may tell you, as a matter of detail, that the gentleman was most scientifically strangled, no bungling amateur work about it. He must have been surprised in his sleep, and could hardly have had time to stir. The weapon must have been something soft and thick, as the skin of the neck is not even broken.'

Douglas shivered a little at the gruesome details.

'But how did the murderer get in?' he questioned.

'Ah, well, about that I am not yet quite certain. The outer door was locked, but I find on inquiry, that the duplicate key has been missing from the office for a couple of days, and no one can throw any light on its disappearance. On the other hand, it would be quite possible for an active man to get from the window of the adjoining room to this. I have ascertained that Mr. Stewart always slept with his window open, and last night the next room was not occupied.'

'And none of his valuables were touched?' said Douglas, interrogatively.

'No, so far as this man can tell us; but to me it looks as if a skillful search has been made among his possessions for something. For instance, the bed linen was disarranged, as if a hand had been thrust under it, and all his trunks were unlocked. People sometimes have a habit of carrying about with them documents of a valuable or compromising character and it may have been that the murder was in search for something of this kind. Could you give us any information, Mr. Stewart?' and the inspector suddenly turned a pair of keen eyes upon him.

'I am wondering,' said Douglas slowly. 'Yesterday evening, when I and Miss Dampier visited him, he gave me a necklace of emeralds as a wedding present for that young lady, whom I am about to marry. Could it have been that of which the murderer was in search?'

'H'm I don't know. Is it valuable? There were many valuable things not touched,' said the inspector meditatively.

'I do not know. I am no judge of jewels, but my cousin assured us it was curious rather than valuable.'

'I think we should like to have a look at it, sir.'

'Oh, you can do that now!' said Douglas. 'I have it in my pocket. The clasp is broken, and I was taking it to a jeweller's to have it repaired, and also for safe keeping.'

He drew out the little bag, and handed it to the detective, who shook his head at the sight of the necklace.

'No, I don't think it was that they were after, sir,' he said, finally. 'I shouldn't judge this to be worth more than about a couple of hundred pounds, and there were notes and gold to considerably over that amount, to say nothing of a lot of unset stones Mr. Stewart seems to have collected; but, of course we can get an expert's opinion on it.'

However, the jeweller, to whom the necklace was submitted, did not think it worth any more than Inspector Reading's valuation; so, as a factor in Ewan Stewart's death, it was quite dismissed by the authorities, and, greatly to Douglas's relief, he was able to keep Cora's name out of the papers altogether.

Great was the stir made over the mysterious murder of a man of position in a London hotel, with dozens of persons within call, and people wrote to the papers, making all sorts of ridiculous suggestions, about the need for nightly patrols of the corridors of the big hotels, where anyone could gain admittance without question, provided he only walked boldly on, and about the inefficiency of our detective force, which was unable to track the perpetrator of such an audacious murder.

Many, too, were the theories formed on the subject.

Ewan's immaculate man-servant was arrested on suspicion; but there proved to be

absolutely nothing against him, and he was released.

By degrees a sort of idea seemed to spread abroad that revenge had been the motive for the crime; that, in his many travels, the dead man had made an enemy, who had followed him home, and finally snatched a fearful vengeance.

There were various sinister stories about him.

How once, in a fit of ungovernable temper, he had nearly flogged to death one of his Kaffir attendants, while on a big-game expedition; and how he and his party had been hastily expelled from a Burmese town, on account of his insulting attentions to the young wife of a native official.

It was gradually understood that the mystery of his death would never be solved, and that, for the sake of the family name, the less mud stirred up the better.

He was laid to rest with his ancestors, in the quiet Hampshire village where he had spent so little of his life, and the poor cousin reigned in his stead.

Douglas had been very careful that none of the ugly stories about him should reach Cora's ears.

He knew she had never quite overcome her prejudice against him, and that the gift of the emeralds had troubled her a little.

It she heard what people said of the dead man, she would never like even to look at them, and a sort of feeling of family loyalty made Douglas anxious that what had been almost his cousin's last wish should be respected.

Ewan was dead—cut off cruelly and horribly in his prime.

Douglas was enjoying the money and rank that had been his, and the woman Ewan had loved was to be his wife.

A generous pity for the man whom he had thus supplanted sprang up in his heart, and made him hotly resent any reflections on his memory.

Cora guessed something of his feeling, and suggested that, out of respect to Ewan, their wedding should be put off a couple of months.

'Bless you for that gracious thought, my darling,' said Douglas, catching her hands in his and kissing them fervently. 'I think you know how I feel. Whatever may have come between us in latter years, Ewan and I were laid together, and friends, too, and I feel as if I were stepping into all that he valued over his grave. You know how badly I want you, don't you, dearest? and if I do without you all this time, I shall feel as if I were offering the poor fellow some sort of reparation.'

'I understand,' said Cora, softly.

'I cannot tell you how glad I am to think that we went to see him that day, and how nicely he spoke to us.'

'And the emerald necklace—where is that?' asked Cora, trying to smother down an unpleasant memory of the strange glint she had fancied for a moment she had seen in Ewan Stewart's eyes that day, as he had watched herself and Douglas.

'Oh! I took it to Faucet and Golding's to be mended, and asked them to keep it for a time. That is as good a way to keep it as any other. It's safe enough in their strong room,' answered he. 'Did you want to wear it?'

'Oh, no, no! not until we are married, anyhow,' said Cora, quickly. 'I—I do not think I am very fond of jewels, Douglas.'

CHAPTER III.

It was September now, and, empty as fashionable London was, there were two most happy people in it one afternoon, as they sat drinking tea in a dainty little tearoom in Bond Street.

The wedding of Dr. Dampier's eldest daughter to Douglas Stewart of The Towers, Beechington, Hampshire, was to be very different from what it would have been had that young man continued merely a struggling writer and briefless barrister, and a week ago the Morning Post had announced that it would take place at St. George's Hanover Square, on September 12th, which was now only two days away, and all day Douglas and Cora had been doing some of that indispensable shopping which, somehow, always seems to get put off till just before a wedding.

Cora's boudoir at The Towers was to be entirely refurnished, and this had necessitated many visits and consultations.

She sat sipping her tea now with an air of exhaustion.

'Oh, dear me! what terribly tiring work shopping is,' she said with a sigh of relief; 'but it must be even more tiring for the people who have to sell you things. I always pity the shop girls.'

'The waitresses here seem to have a pretty good time of it anyhow,' said Douglas, glancing round at the dainty attired girls. 'The tall one over there is decidedly pretty too.'

'Yes, is she not?' agreed Cora. She used to be at the ice shop in Oxford Street. I don't think I ever forget a face.

'Don't you? I am afraid I do, unless it is a very striking one. By the way, of course you, too, have noticed how, after you have run up against a person, you seem always meeting them afterwards wherever you go. They must get as tired of seeing you as you are of seeing them.'

'No, I do not think I have ever noticed it myself,' said Cora, idly.

'Well, one day—I should think it was about two months ago—I went down the Strand on a bus with a black fellow—looked like a Hindoo student, you know—and I seem always meeting him. I rather fancy he is a student at the Charing Cross Hospital. He is rather good a looking fellow in his way, and has the most piercing keen eyes I ever saw.'

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)



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