

The Beautiful Coquette

BY LAURA JEAN LIBBEY

CHAPTER I.

"I wonder if it is true that coming events cast their dark shadows on before? To-day of all days I should be happy, for Aurelia is coming home; and yet—somehow there is a heavy oppression at my heart, a sense of coming evil that I cannot shake off.

"But, pshaw! I know it is wrong to allow my mind to run upon presentiments—they never come true," and Margaret Lancaster, a pale, slight young girl, turned slowly from the cottage window where she had been standing—gazing dreamily out over the wheat fields, waving golden under the rays of the June sunshine—crossed the room, and paused, with clasped hands, before two portraits hanging side by side on the opposite wall.

They were the portraits of two young and lovely girls—twin sisters—but as widely different in features as two mortals well could be.

The names carved on the gilded frames read "Margaret," and "Aurelia."

In the portrait of Margaret there was no mistaking the girl who stood before it, with her pale, sweet face, innocent blue eyes, and fair curling hair.

It was just such a face, with a pure white soul shining through it, that the old masters gave to the faces of angels.

But Aurelia! How can I describe to you what Aurelia was like? The artist who painted the portrait went mad for love of her.

Aurelia had a dark, dimpled face, with the deep crimson of a wild rose's heart on cheek and smiling, pouting lips; dark, curling hair, and wine-dark eyes, passionate and wholly irresistible.

They were danger signals that might have warned men, but somehow they always courted the danger of looking into them.

A face like Aurelia's was never painted upon the pictured faces of angels; rather of the beauties of the gilded salons of Paris.

They were only seventeen, these twin sisters—Margaret and Aurelia Lancaster—whose past was so bitter, and whose future was to be the strangest that ever pen portrayed.

Alas, how cruel it was that the love of one man was destined to wreck the life of both!

How long Margaret stood there in silent contemplation of the portrait, she never knew. She was startled by a step and a cheery voice outside that brought the color to her face in a great surging glow.

The door was swung hastily open, and a tall, stalwart young man, with a fair, handsome face, came hurriedly into the room.

"Ah, here you are, Margaret," he said, cheerily, advancing and taking one of her little hands in his. "I have been looking everywhere for you. I might have known that I should find you here before Aurelia's portrait. Why, this is perfect idolatry, I should say, Margaret. I do not quite like it."

The girl laughed in a low, happy, sweet laugh.

"You must idolize Aurelia, too, for my sake, Gerald," she said, softly. "She is so bright—so beautiful."

Gerald Romaine bent his fair, handsome head and kissed the lily-white hands he held.

"Very generous of my wife—that is to be, making arrangements for a place in my heart for another," he said, amusedly.

"But it is only for Aurelia," she answered, opening her blue eyes wide, "and for nobody else."

"Aurelia will, indeed, be very dear to me for your sake, Margaret," he responded; "but forgive me for changing the subject; I must tell you, hurriedly, that which I have sought you to say. And that is, that I cannot go over to the train; I have just received a telegram from New York which requires my presence there for the next two days. I

start immediately. Rather will be at the station to meet Aurelia. I am sorry, indeed, not to be here to welcome her, but it cannot be helped, dear. I have barely time to snatch one good-bye kiss. I must be off, Margaret."

A moment later her fair, handsome lover was waving her adieu as he galloped past the window, and was quickly lost to sight in a bend of the road.

Margaret turned away from the window with a beating heart.

"How good Heaven is to give me his love," she murmured, softly; "it was the one gift of God that I craved and prayed for above all others. I wonder, despite the fact that the wedding-day is already set, if I really am to be his wife? It seems too great a joy to be real."

"Margaret—Margaret, child! where are you?" called another voice. This time it was Mrs. Romaine summoning her, from the old farmhouse kitchen, where all manner of good things known to culinary art were in a state of preparation in honor of Aurelia's coming.

"I do hope Aurelia will be glad to get home, but I almost doubt it," said Mrs. Romaine, seating herself on the cool, wide doorstep, and fanning herself vigorously with her gingham apron.

"What a deal of difference there is between you two sisters, anyhow," she went on, energetically; "you are as sensible as an old woman, Margaret, and Aurelia is that feather-brained—"

A little white hand came down suddenly over her lips.

"Don't speak in that way of Aurelia," said Margaret, in a pained voice; "indeed you hurt me, dear Mrs. Romaine. She is willful, roguish, gay, but she has a true heart—dear little Aurelia."

Mrs. Romaine shrugged her shoulders, but answered never a word. Margaret would not have been pleased had she known what her thoughts were.

The story of the presence of these two young girls in the Romaine household was certainly a sad one—a few words will explain how it came about.

Sixteen years before the Romaines had kept the village inn down at the fork of the roads, and the hospitable, cheery place was known far and wide from the travelers who had chanced to pass that way.

One dark, stormy night—ah! how well Mrs. Romaine remembered it—the driver of the stage, who always stopped there to change horses, deposited a traveler at the inn—a young and lovely woman—traveling alone, save for the two wee nites she carried in her arms. Despite the storm, Mrs. Romaine hurried out to meet her, and relieve the pale, slight creature of her burden.

"Come right into the sitting-room, ma'am," she cried, cheerily. "Lord bless me! it's an awful night to be traveling; and alone; are you going far?"

"I was to have gone to New York—but I—I took the wrong train," said the stranger with a sob in her voice. "I—I was not used to traveling, you see," she went on piteously. "The hurrying crowds, the clanging bells, and deafening sounds confused me. I found out my mistake when the conductor came around to take up the tickets—they told me it would be best to stop off at the next station—stop over night at this inn, and take the early morning train down at the cross-roads for New York—and I followed their advice!"

"It was certainly the best you could have done," assented Mrs. Romaine, proceeding to unwarp the folds of the heavy shawls that enveloped the babies. She gave a cry of delight as she saw them; never, in the whole course of her life, had she beheld anything so beautiful as the two infantile faces turned simultaneously and wonderingly towards her—one dark—the other fair.

"What beautiful darlings!" she

cried, with all a woman's rapture; "are they twins?"

A quick, sharp cry broke from the lips of the woman cowering over the blazing fire.

Mrs. Romaine asked the question a second time before she answered "yes."

"Of course you want a nice room with a comfortable fire in it and a hot supper," said Mrs. Romaine briskly. "I'll see that you have it at once, and I'll come and help you with the little ones."

"You are very kind," said the lady, laying a detaining hand on Mrs. Romaine's arm—"but I shall not require any supper—food would choke me—I want only—rest—rest"—and the words ended in a heavy sob.

"But the children would like something to eat, wouldn't you, dears?" asked Mrs. Romaine, stooping and kissing their velvety lips.

A little later Mrs. Romaine announced that the room was ready, and soon after the trio were ensconced in it.

"I wish you would let me bring you a glass of wine at least," she said, turning towards the door—"you look so very pale, ma'am—like you might faint—"

"I do feel weak," assented the stranger—"yes, you may bring me the wine if you like, I—"

The sentence never was finished: there was a low, stifled cry, and the beautiful lady who had been standing before the fire, staggered suddenly backward and sunk down apparently lifeless at Mrs. Romaine's feet.

In a trice Mrs. Romaine had raised her in her arms.

"My God!" she cried out in horror as her eyes fell on the ghastly face and staring eyes, "she is dead!"

But no—the heart beat faintly. The thread of life in that fair body was loath to snap in twain so easily—but there was a grayish pallor on the cheek and lips that struck terror to Mrs. Romaine's heart.

Restoratives were quickly applied and strong brandy forced between the white lips, but it was all useless.

"Mercy on us!" cried Mrs. Romaine in great alarm to the housemaid whom she had summoned, "the lady is dying!"

CHAPTER II.

But even as Mrs. Romaine spoke, the lady's eyes opened slowly, and she cast a strange, yearning look into the kind, homely, pitying face bending over her.

"Am I dying?" she gasped; "tell me the truth, am I really dying? Answer me—do not mislead me."

"I am afraid so, my poor soul," replied Mrs. Romaine, huskily. "I have sent for a doctor, but the nearest one lives many a mile away."

"That was—useless," murmured the stranger; "my time has come, I feel it in my heart; oh, the poor babies—the poor little ones."

A terrible convulsion shook her frame as she spoke, which was rapidly followed by a second and a third, and, looking at the white, stark face, Mrs. Romaine saw that the shadow of death was indeed creeping over it.

Oh, if the flickering flame of light might last until the doctor arrived. But it was not to be. The stranger grew worse so rapidly that Mrs. Romaine's alarm increased with each passing moment.

"My life is ebbing out!" she gasped, speaking with difficulty; "but oh, I cannot die with the dark, horrible story I have to tell—untold. For the love of Heaven, send for a minister; I should not rest in my grave, though they buried me fathoms deep, with this on my soul."

"Oh, lady," sobbed Mrs. Romaine, pityingly, "there isn't a minister this side of Stillwell, and that's twenty odd miles from here. Is it anything you could tell me, poor soul?"

The strangely luminous eyes turned upon her, and their steady gaze seemed to burn down into the very depths of her soul—she felt almost afraid of being all alone with the dying stranger.

"Oh, God, if I could but trust you," the pale lips murmured. "You can trust me," replied Mrs. Romaine with simple dignity.

"Take an oath that you will never betray that which I have to say to you—swear it, make your oath so binding that nothing on this earth could tempt you to break it!"

"No word that you may confide in me shall ever pass my lips in life or even on the threshold of death—say that—swear it!"

Mrs. Romaine repeated the awesome words slowly after her, and in the dark time to come she would have given her life if that solemn oath had not been wrung from her lips.

(To be Continued.)

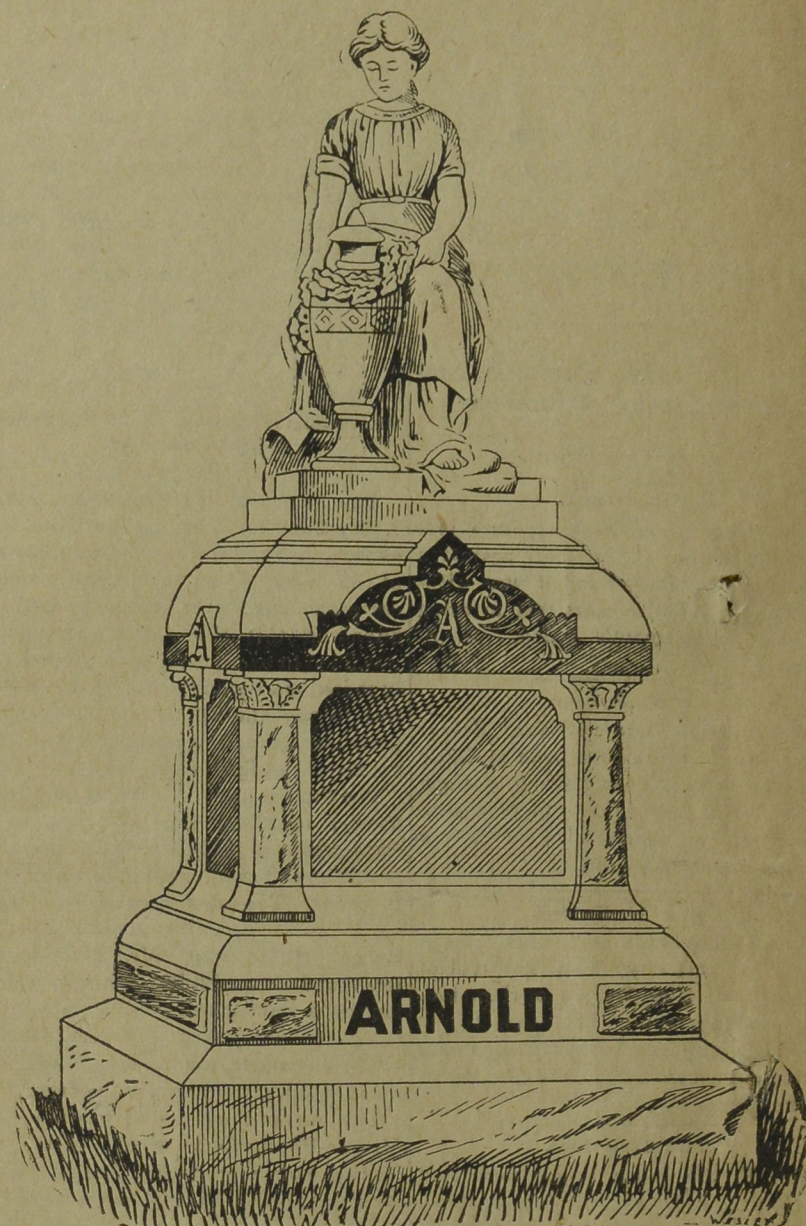
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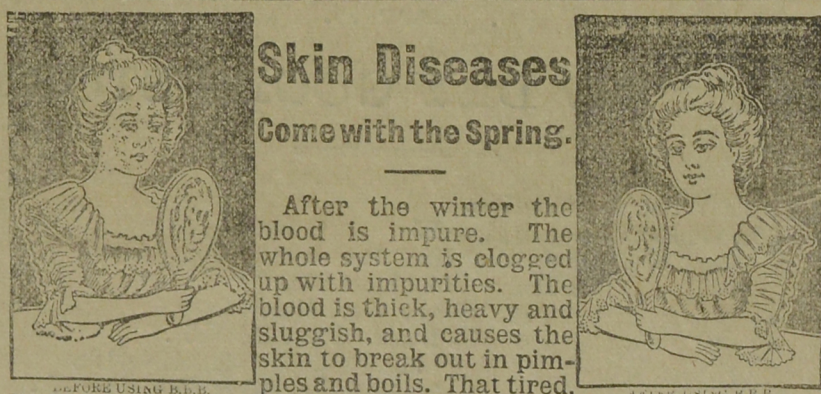
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