

***MAY AGNES
FLEMING***



***THE BARONET'S
BRIDE; OR,
A WOMAN'S
VENGEANCE***

May Agnes Fleming

The Baronet's Bride; Or, A Woman's Vengeance

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CHAPTER I.

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THE BARONET'S BRIDE.

"And there is danger of death—for mother and child?"

"Well, no, Sir Jasper—no, sir; no certain danger, you know; but in these protracted cases it can do no harm, Sir Jasper, for the clergyman to be here. He may not be needed but your good lady is very weak, I am sorry to say, Sir Jasper Kingsland."

"I will send for the clergyman," Sir Jasper Kingsland said. "Do your best, Doctor Godroy, and for God's sake let me know the worst or best as soon as may be. This suspense is horrible."

Doctor Parker Godroy looked sympathetically at him through his gold-bowed spectacles.

"I will do my best, Sir Jasper," he said, gravely. "The result is in the hands of the Great Dispenser of life and death. Send for the clergyman, and wait and hope."

He quitted the library as he spoke. Sir Jasper Kingsland seized the bell and rang a shrill peal.

"Ride to the village—ride for your life!" he said, imperatively, to the servant who answered, "and fetch the Reverend Cyrus Green here at once."

The man bowed and departed, and Sir Jasper Kingsland, Baronet, of Kingsland Court, was alone—alone in the gloomy grandeur of the vast library; alone with his thoughts and the wailing midnight storm.

A little toy time-piece of buhl on the stone mantel chimed musically its story of the hour, and Sir Jasper Kingsland lifted his gloomy eyes for a moment at the sound. A tall, spare middle-aged man, handsome once—handsome still, some people said—with iron-gray hair and a proud, patrician face.

"Twelve," his dry lips whispered to themselves—"midnight, and for three hours I have endured this maddening agony of suspense! Another day is given to the world, and before its close all I love best may be cold and stark in death! Oh, my God! have mercy, and spare her!"

He lifted his clasped hands in passionate appeal. There was a picture opposite—a gem of Raphael's—the Man of Sorrows fainting under the weight of the cross, and the fire's shine playing upon it seemed to light the pallid features with a derisive smile.

"The mercy you showed to others, the same shall be shown to you. Tiger heart, you were merciless in the days gone by. Let your black, bad heart break, as you have broken others!"

No voice had sounded, yet he was answered. Conscience had spoken in trumpet-tones, and with a hollow groan the baronet turned away and began pacing up and down.

It was a large and spacious apartment, this library of Kingsland Court, dimly lighted now by the flickering wood-fire and the mellow glow of a branch of wax-lights. Huge

book-cases filled to overflowing lined the four walls, and pictures precious as their weight in rubies looked dusily down from their heavy frames. Busts and bronzes stood on brackets and surmounted doors; a thick, rich carpet of moss-green, sprinkled with oak leaves and acorns, muffled the tread; voluminous draperies of dark green shrouded the tall, narrow windows. The massive chairs and tables, fifty years old at least, were spindle-legged and rich in carving, upholstered in green velvet and quaintly embroidered, by hands moldered to dust long ago. Everything was old and grand, and full of storied interest. And there, on the wall, was the crest of the house—the uplifted hand grasping a dagger—and the motto, in old Norman French, "Strike once, and strike well."

It is a very fine thing to be a baronet—a Kingsland of Kingsland, with fifteen thousand a year, and the finest old house in the county; but if Death will stalk grimly over your threshold and snatch away the life you love more than your own, then even that glory is not omniscient. For this wintry midnight, while Sir Jasper Kingsland walks moodily up and down—up and down—Lady Kingsland, in the chamber above, lies ill unto death.

An hour passes—the clock in the turret and the buhl toy on the stone mantel toll solemnly one. The embers drop monotonously through the grate—a dog bays deeply somewhere in the quadrangle below—the wailing wind of coming morning sighs lamentingly through the tossing copper-beeches, and the roar of the surf afar off comes ever and anon like distant thunder. The house is silent as the tomb—so horribly silent that the cold drops start out on the

face of the tortured man. Who knows? Death has been on the threshold of that upper chamber all night, waiting for his prey. This awful hush may be the paeon that proclaims that he is master!

A tap at the door. The baronet paused in his stride and turned his bloodshot eyes that way. His very voice was hollow and unnatural as he said:

"Come in."

A servant entered—the same who had gone his errand.

"The Reverend Cyrus Green is here, sir. Shall I show him up?"

"Yes—no—I cannot see him. Show him into the drawing-room until he is needed."

"He will not be needed," said a voice at his elbow, and Doctor Parker Godroy came briskly forward. "My dear Sir Jasper, allow me to congratulate you! All is well, thank Heaven, and—it is a son!"

Sir Jasper Kingsland sunk into a seat, thrilling from head to foot, turning sick and faint in the sudden revulsion from despair to hope.

"Saved?" he said, in a gasping whisper. "*Both?*"

"Both, my dear Sir Jasper!" the doctor responded, cordially. "Your good lady is very much prostrated—exhausted—but that was to be looked for, you know; and the baby—ah! the finest boy I have had the pleasure of presenting to an admiring world within ten years. Come and see them!"

"May I?" the baronet cried, starting to his feet.

"Certainly, my dear Sir Jasper—most certainly. There is nothing in the world to hinder—only be a little cautious, you

know. Our good lady must be kept composed and quiet, and left to sleep; and you will just take one peep and go. We won't need the Reverend Cyrus."

He led the way from the library, rubbing his hands as your brisk little physicians do, up a grand stair-way where you might have driven a coach and four, and into a lofty and most magnificently furnished bed-chamber.

"Quiet, now—quiet," the doctor whispered, warningly. "Excite her, and I won't be answerable for the result."

Sir Jasper Kingsland replied with a rapid gesture, and walked forward to the bed. His own face was perfectly colorless, and his lips were twitching with intense suppressed feeling. He bent above the still form.

"Olivia," he said, "my darling, my darling!"

The heavy eyelids fluttered and lifted, and a pair of haggard, dark eyes gazed up at him. A wan smile parted those pallid lips.

"Dear Jasper! I knew you would come. Have you seen the baby? It is a boy."

"My own, I have thought only of you. My poor pale wife, how awfully death-like you look!"

"But I am not going to die—Doctor Godroy says so," smiling gently. "And now you must go, for I cannot talk. Only kiss me first, and look at the baby."

Her voice was the merest whisper. He pressed his lips passionately to the white face and rose up. Nurse and baby sat in state by the fire, and a slender girl of fifteen years knelt beside them, and gazed in a sort of rapture at the infant prodigy.

"Look, papa—look? The loveliest little thing, and nurse says the very picture of you!"

Not very lovely, certainly; but Sir Jasper Kingsland's eyes lighted with pride and joy as he looked. For was it not a boy? Had he not at last, after weary, weary waiting, the desire of his heart—a son to inherit the estate and perpetuate the ancient name?

"It is so sweet, papa!" Miss Mildred whispered, her small, rather sickly face quite radiant; "and its eyes are the image of yours. He's asleep now, you know, and you can't see them. And look at the dear, darling little hands and fingers and feet, and the speck of a nose and the dot of a mouth! Oh papa! isn't it splendid to have a baby in the house?"

"Very splendid," said papa, relaxing into a smile. "A fine little fellow, nurse! There, cover him up again and let him sleep. We must take extra care of the heir of Kingsland Court. And Mildred, child, you should be in bed. One o'clock is no hour for little girls to be out of their nests."

"Oh, papa! as if I could sleep and not see the baby!"

"Well, you have seen it, and now run away to your room. Mamma and baby both want to sleep, and nurse doesn't need you, I am sure."

"That I don't," said nurse, "nor the doctor, either. So run away, Miss Milly, and go to sleep yourself. The baby will be here, all safe for you, in the morning."

The little girl—a flaxen-haired, pretty-featured child—kissed the baby, kissed papa, and dutifully departed. Sir Jasper followed her out of the room, down the stairs, and back into the library, with the face of a man who has just been reprieved from sudden death. As he re-entered the

library, he paused and started a step back, gazing fixedly at one of the windows. The heavy curtain had been partially drawn back, and a white, spectral face was glued to the glass, glaring in.

"Who have we here?" said the baronet to himself; "that face can belong to no one in the house."

He walked straight to the window—the face never moved. A hand was raised and tapped on the glass. A voice outside spoke:

"For Heaven's sake, open and let me in, before I perish in this bitter storm."

Sir Jasper Kingsland opened the window and flung it wide.

"Enter! whoever you are," he said. "No one shall ask in vain at Kingsland, this happy night."

He stepped back, and, all covered with snow, the midnight intruder entered and stood before him. And Sir Jasper Kingsland saw the strangest-looking creature he had ever beheld in the whole course of his life.

CHAPTER II.

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ACHMET THE ASTROLOGER.

An old man, yet tall and upright, wearing a trailing cloak of dull black, long gray hair flowing over the shoulders, and tight to the scalp a skull-cap of black velvet. A patriarchal board, abundant and silver-white, streamed down his breast, and out of a dull, white face, seamed and wrinkled, looked a pair of eyes piercing and black.

Sir Jasper took a step backward, and regarded this singular apparition in wonder. The old man folded his arms across his bosom—and made him a profound Oriental salaam.

"The Lord of Kingsland gazes in amaze at the uninvited stranger. And yet I think destiny has sent me hither."

"Who are you?" the baronet demanded. "What jugglery is this? Are you dressed for an Eastern dervish in a melodrama, and have you come here to play a practical joke? I am afraid I can not appreciate the humor of the masquerade. Who are you?" sternly.

"Men call me Achmet the Astrologer."

"An astrologer? Humph! your black art, it seems, could not protect you from a January storm," retorted Sir Jasper, with a cynical sneer. "But come in—come in. Astrologer or demon, or whatever you are, you look too old a man to be

abroad such a night, when we would not turn an enemy's dog from the house. The doors of Kingsland are never closed to the tired wayfarer, and of all nights in the year they should not be closed to-night."

"When an heir is born to an ancient name and a princely inheritance, you speak rightly, my Lord of Kingsland."

"How say you? What do you know of the events of this night, Sir Astrologer?"

"Much, Sir Jasper Kingsland, and for the very reason you deride—because I am an astrologer. I read the stars, and I lift the veil of the future, and, lo! I behold your life years before you have lived it!"

Sir Jasper Kingsland laughed a cynical, unbelieving laugh.

"You jeer at me, you scoff at my words," murmured the old man, in soft, steady tones, "and yet there was no one to tell me on my way here that a son and heir had been born to the house of Kingsland within the past hour."

He lifted his arm and pointed to the clock, his dark eyes fixed upon the baronet's changing face.

"You deride the power I profess, yet every day you quote your English poet, and believe him when he says: 'There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy.' But I am accustomed to derision, and it does not offend me. Let me prove my power, so that even the most resolute skeptic dare doubt no longer. Judge of my skill to read the future by my ability in reading the past. I have come here—I have taken a long journey to look into the future of your new-born son. Before I begin, let me look

into the past of his father. Sir Jasper Kingsland, let me read your palm."

But Sir Jasper drew back.

"You have taken a long journey to look into the future of my son?

Pray, what is my son to you?"

"That is my secret, Sir Jasper, and my secrets I keep. Come, hold forth your hand, and test my skill."

"Why should I? Even if you can bring before me my past life, of what use will it be, since I must know all better than you?"

"My power to read the past may prove my power to read the future."

"Nay, you may easily know the past, without magical skill. Many thanks, my venerable friend, but I will not put your necromancy to the test."

"Is Sir Jasper Kingsland afraid?" he said. "Surely not, for he comes of a daring race. And yet it seems like it."

"By Heaven! if a younger man had spoken those words I would have hurled him by the throat from yonder window. Be careful of your words, old man, else even your hoary hairs may fail to save you."

Once more the astrologer bent servilely.

"I cry your mercy, my haughty Lord of Kingsland. It shall be as you say. I will depart as I came. I will not serve you nor your new-born son, since you refuse to be served. I will depart at once. I fear no earthly storm. Good-night, Sir Jasper Kingsland. Look to the heir of your house yourself. When 'angels unaware' visit you again, treat them better than you have treated me."

With a gesture indescribably grand and kingly, the silver-haired old man turned to go, folding his long cloak about him. But the voice of the baronet called him back.

"Stay," he said. "You speak of serving my son. What danger threatens his infant life that you can avert?"

"I know of none. I have not cast the horoscope yet."

"Then you wish to do so?"

"With your good permission. I have taken a long journey for that very purpose, Sir Jasper."

"Then you shall," the baronet cried, yielding to a swift impulse—"you shall cast his horoscope. If it can avert no evil, it can, at least, cause none. But, first, there is no action without its ruling motive. What are me or mine to you, to make you take a long and toilsome journey on our account?"

The old man paused, drawn up to his fullest height, imposing as a new

King Lear, his deep, dark eyes glowing with inward fire.

"I will tell you," he said. "Years ago, Sir Jasper, when you were a young man, you did an honor and a service to one I dearly love; that I have never forgotten and never will forget! You have ceased to remember it years ago, no doubt; but I never have, nor ever will until my dying day."

"A service! an honor! What could it have been? I recollect nothing of it."

"I expected as much; but my memory is a good one. It is stamped on my heart forever. Great men like Sir Jasper Kingsland, grandees of the land, forget these little things. I owe you a long debt, Sir Jasper, and I will pay it to the uttermost farthing, so help me God!"

His black eyes blazed, his low voice rose, his arm uplifted fiercely for an instant in dire menace. Then, quick as lightning flashes, all was transformed. The eyes were bent upon the carpet, the arms folded, the voice sunk, soft and servile.

"Forgive me!" he murmured. "In my gratitude I forget myself. But you have my motive in coming here—the desire to repay you; to look into the future of your son; to see the evils that may threaten his youth and manhood, and to place you on your guard against them. 'Forewarned is fore-armed,' you know. Do not doubt my power. In far-off Oriental lands, under the golden stars of Syria, I learned the lore of the wise men of the East. I learned to read the stars as you Englishmen read your printed books. Believe and trust, and let me cast the horoscope of your son."

"First let me test your vaunted power. Show me my past, before you show me my son's future."

He held forth his hand with a cynical smile,

"As you will. Past and future are alike to me—save that the past is easier to read. Ah! a palm seamed and crossed and marked with troubled lines. Forty years have not gone and left no trace behind—"

"Forty years!" interrupted Sir Jasper, with sneering emphasis. "Pray do not bungle in the very beginning."

"I bungle not," answered Achmet, sternly. "Forty years ago, on the third of next month, you, Jasper Southdown Kingsland, were born beneath this very roof."

"Right!" he said. "You know my age. But go on."

"Your boyhood you passed here—quiet, eventless years—with a commonplace mother and a dull, proud father. At ten,

your mother went to her grave. At twelve, the late Sir Noel followed her. At thirteen, you, a lonely orphan, were removed from this house to London in the charge of a guardian that you hated. Am I not right?"

"You are. Pray go on."

"At fourteen, you went to Rugby to school. From that time until you attained your majority your life passed in public schools and universities, harmlessly and monotonously enough. At twenty-one, you left Cambridge, and started to make the grand tour. You were tolerably clever; you were young and handsome, and heir to a noble inheritance. Your life was to be the life of a great and good man—a benefactor to the human race. Your memory was to be a magnificent memento for a whole world to honor. Your dreams were wild, vague, and impracticable, and ended in—nothing."

Sir Jasper Kingsland listened and stared like a man in a dream. Achmet the Astrologer continued to read the palm with a fixed, stony face.

"And now the lines are crossed, and the trouble begins. As usual, a woman is at the bottom of it. Sir Jasper Kingsland is in love."

There was a pause. The baronet winced a little.

"It is in Spain—glowing, gorgeous Spain—and she is one of its loveliest children. The oranges and pomegranates scent the burning air, the vineyards glow in the tropic sun, and golden summer forever reigns. But the glowing southern sun is not more brilliant than the Spanish gypsy's flashing black eyes, nor the pomegranate blossoms half so

ripe and red as her cheeks. She is Zenith, the Zingara, and you love her!"

"In the fiend's name!" Sir Jasper Kingsland cried, "what jugglery is this?"

"One moment more, my Lord of Kingsland," he said, "and I have done. Let me see how your love-dream ends. Ah! the old, old story. Surely I might have known. She is beautiful as the angels above, and as innocent, and she loves you with a mad abandon that is worse than idolatry—as only women ever love. And you? You are grand and noble, a milor Inglese, and you take her love—her crazy worship—as a demi-god might, with uplifted grace, as your birthright; and she is your pretty toy of an hour. And then careless and happy, you are gone. Sunny Spain, with its olives and its vineyards, its pomegranates and its Zenith the Gitana, is left far behind, and you are roaming, happy and free, through La Belle France. And lo! Zenith the forsaken lies prone upon the ground, and goes stark mad for the day-god she has lost. There, Sir Jasper Kingsland! the record is a black one. I wish to read no more."

He flung the baronet's hand away, and once more his eyes glowed like the orbs of a demon. But Sir Jasper Kingsland, pale as a dead man, saw it not.

"Are you man or devil?" he said, in an awe-struck tone. "No living mortal knows what you have told me this night."

Achmet the Astrologer smiled—a dire, dark smile.

"Man, in league with the dark potentate you have named, if you like. Whatever I am, I have truthfully told you the past, as I will truthfully tell your son's future."

"By palmistry?"

"No, by the stars. And behold!" drawing aside the curtain, "yonder they shine!"

"Take me to an upper room," the astrologer exclaimed, in an inspired tone, "and leave me. Destiny is propitious. The fate that ruled your son's birth has set forth the shining stars for Achmet to read. Lead on!"

Like a man in a dreamy swoon, Sir Jasper Kingsland obeyed. He led the astrologer up the grand sweeping staircases—up and up, to the very top of the house—to the lofty, lonely battlements. Cloudless spread the wide night sky; countless and brilliant shone the stars; peaceful and majestic slept, the purple sea; spotless white gleamed the snowy earth. A weird, witching scene.

"Leave me," said the astrologer, "and watch and wait. When the first little pink cloud of sunrise blushes in the sky, come to me. My task will have ended."

He waved him away with a regal motion. He stood there gazing at the stars, as a king looking upon his subjects. And the haughty baronet, without a word, turned and left him.

The endless hours wore on—two, three, and four—and still the baronet watched and waited, and looked for the coming of dawn. Faintly the silver light broke in the Orient, rosy flushed the first red ray. Sir Jasper mounted to the battlements, still like a man in a dazed dream.

Achmet the Astrologer turned slowly round. The pale, frosty sunrise had blanched his ever-white face with a livid hue of death. In one hand he held a folded paper, in the other a pencil. He had been writing.

"Have you done?" the baronet asked.

"I am done. Your son's fate is here."

He touched the paper.

"Is that for me?" he asked, shrinking palpably from it even while he spoke.

"This is for you." The astrologer handed him the paper as he spoke. "It is for you to read—to do with after as you see fit. I have but one word to say: not I, but a mightier power traced the words you will read—your son's irrevocable fate. Don't hope to shirk it. My task is ended, and I go. Farewell!"

"No, no," the baronet cried; "not so! Remain and breakfast here. The morning is but just breaking."

"And before yonder sun is above the horizon I will be far away. No, Sir Jasper Kingsland, I break no bread under your roof. I have done my work, and depart forever. Look to your son!"

He spoke the last words slowly, with a tigerish glare of hate leaping out of his eyes, with deadly menace in every syllable. Then he was gone down the winding stair-way like a black ghost, and so out and away.

Sir Jasper Kingsland took the folded paper and sought his room. There in the pale day-dawn he tore it open. One side was covered with cabalistic characters, Eastern symbols, curious marks and hieroglyphics. The other side was written in French, in long, clear, legible characters. There was a heading: "Horoscope of the Heir of Kingsland." Sir Jasper sat down and began to read.

Nearly an hour after, a servant, entering to replenish the faded fire, fled out of the room and startled the household with his shrieks. Two or three domestics rushed in. There lay Sir Jasper Kingsland prone on his face on the floor, stiff and stark as a dead man. A paper, unintelligible to all, was

clutched tightly as a death grip in his hand. Reading that crumpled paper, the strong man had fallen there flat on the floor in a dead swoon.

CHAPTER III.

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THE HUT ON THE HEATH.

Far away from the lofty, battlemented ancestral home of Sir Jasper Kingsland—straight to the seashore went Achmet the Astrologer. A long strip of bleak marshland spreading down the hill-side and sloping to the sea, arid and dry in the summer-time—sloppy and sodden now—that was his destination. It was called Hunsden's Heath—a forlorn and desolate spot, dotted over with cottages of the most wretched kind. To one of these wretched hovels, standing nearest the sea and far removed from the rest, Achmet swiftly made his way.

The sun was high in the heavens; the sea lay all a-glitter beneath it. The astrologer had got over the ground at a swift, swinging stride, and he had walked five miles at least; but he paused now, with little sign of fatigue in his strange white face. Folding his arms over his breast, he surveyed the shining sky, the glittering sea, with a slow, dreamy smile.

"The sun shines and the sea sparkles on the natal day of the heir of Kingsland," he said to himself; "but for all that it is a fatal day to him. 'The sins of the father shall be visited on the children even to the third and fourth generation,' saith the Book Christians believe in. Christians!" he laughed

a harsh, strident laugh. "Sir Jasper Kingsland is a Christian! The religion that produces such men must be a glorious one. He was a Christian when he perjured himself and broke her heart. 'Tis well. As a Christian he can not object to the vengeance Christianity teaches."

He turned away, approached the lonely hut, and tapped thrice—sharp staccato knocks—at the door. The third one was answered. The door swung back, and a dark damsel looked out.

"Is it thee, Pietro?"

"It is I, Zara."

He stepped in as he spoke, closed the door, took her face between his hands, and kissed both brown cheeks. The girl's dark face lighted up into the splendor of absolute beauty as she returned his caress.

"And how is it with thee, my Zara, and thy little one?"

"It is well. And thyself, Pietro?"

"Very well. And the mother?"

"Ah, the mother! Poor mother! She lies as you saw her last—as you will always see her in this lower world—dead in life! And he"—the girl Zara's eyes lighted fiercely up—"didst see him, Pietro?"

"I have seen him, spoken to him, told him the past, and terrified him for the future. There is a son, Zara—a new-born son."

"Dog and son of a dog!" Zara cried, furiously. "May curses light upon him in the hour of his birth, and upon all who bear his hated name! Say, Pietro, why didst thou not strangle the little viper as you would any other poisonous reptile?"

"My Zara, I did not even see him. He lies cradled in rose leaves, no doubt, and the singing of the west wind is not sweet enough for his lullaby. No profane eye must rest on this sacred treasure fresh from the hands of the gods! Is he not the heir of Kingsland? But Achmet the Astrologer has cast his horoscope, and Achmet, and Zara, his wife, wilt see that the starry destiny is fulfilled. Shall we not?"

"If I only had him here," Zara cried, clawing the air with her two hands, "I would throttle the baby snake, and fling him dead in his father's face. And that father! Oh, burning alive would be far too merciful for him!"

Achmet smiled, and drew her long black braids caressingly through his fingers.

"You know how to hate, and you will teach our little one. Yes, the fate I have foretold shall come to pass, and the son of Sir Jasper will live to curse the day of his birth. And now I will remove my disguise, and wash and breakfast, for I feel the calls of hunger."

The lower apartment of the hut on the heath was the very picture of abject poverty and dreary desolation. The earthen floor was broken and rough; the sunlight came sifting through the chinks in the broken walls. A smoky fire of wet driftwood smoldered, under a pot on the crook. There was neither table nor chairs. A straw pallet with a wretched coverlet lay in one corner; a few broken stools were scattered around; a few articles of clothing hung on the wall. That was all.

"The little one sleeps," the man said, casting a swift glance over at the pallet. "Our pretty baby, Zara. Ah, if Sir

Jasper Kingsland loves his first-born son as we love our child, or half so well, we are almost avenged already!"

"He had need to love it better than his first-born daughter!" Zara said, fiercely. "The lion loves its whelp, the tiger its cub; but he, less human than the brutes, casts off his offspring in the hour of its birth!"

"Meaning yourself, my Zara?" the man said, with his slow, soft smile. "What would you have, degraded daughter of a degraded mother—his toy of an hour? And there is another daughter—a fair-haired, insipid nonentity of a dozen years, no more like our beautiful one here than a farthing rush-light is like the stars of heaven."

He drew down the tattered quilt, and gazed with shining eyes of love and admiration at the sleeping face of a child, a baby girl of scarce two years, the cherub face rosy with sleep, smiling in her dreams; the long, silky black lashes sweeping the flushed cheek; the abundant, feathery, jet-black curls floating loosely about—an exquisite picture of blooming, healthful, beautiful childhood.

Zara came to where the man knelt.

"My beautiful one! my rosebud!" she murmured. "Pietro, the sun shines on nothing half so lovely in this lower world!"

"And yet the black, bad blood of the Gitana flows in her veins, too. She is a Spanish gypsy, as her mother and grandmother before her. Nay, not her mother, since the blue blood of all the Kingsland's flows in her veins."

"Never!" cried Zara, her eyes ablaze. "If I thought one drop of that man's bitter blood throbbed in my heart, the first knife I met should let it forth. Look at me!" she wildly

cried, "look at me, Pietro—Zara, your wife! Have I one look of him or his abhorred English race?"

"My Zara, no! You are Sir Jasper Kingsland's daughter, but there is no look of the great Sir Jasper in your gypsy face, nor in the face of our darling, either. She is all our own!"

"I would strangle her in her cradle, dearly as I love her, else!" the woman said, her passionate face aflame. "Pietro, my blood is like liquid fire when I think of him and my mother's wrongs."

"Wait, Zara—wait. The wheel will turn and our time come. And now for breakfast!"

She whipped off the pot, removed the lid, and a savory gush of steam filled the room. The man Pietro laughed.

"Our poached hare smells appetizing. Keep the choicest morsel for the mother, Zara, and tell her I will be with her presently. There! Achmet the Astrologer lies in a heap."

He had deftly taken off his flowing cloak, his long, silvery beard and hair, and flung them together in a corner, and now he stood in the center of the room, a stalwart young fellow of thirty or thereabouts, with great Spanish eyes and profuse curling hair of an inky blackness.

"Let me but wash this white enamel off my face," he said, giving himself a shake, "and Pietro is himself again. Sir Jasper would hardly recognize Achmet, I fancy, if he saw him now."

He walked to a shelf on which was placed a wash-bowl and towel, and plunged his face and head into the cold water. Five minutes' vigorous splashing and rubbing, and he

emerged, his pallid face brown as a berry, his black hair in a snarl of crisp curls.

"And now to satisfy the inner man," he said, walking over to the pot, seizing a wooden spoon, and drawing up a cricket. "My tramp of last night and this morning has made me famously hungry, Zara."

"And the hare soup is good," said Zara. "While you breakfast, Pietro, I will go to mother. Come up when you finish."

A steep stair-way that was like a ladder led to the loft. Zara ascended this with agile fleetness, and the late astrologer was left alone at his very unmagician-like work of scraping the pot with a wooden spoon. Once or twice, as the fancy crossed him of the contrast between Achmet, the Astrologer reading the stars, and Pietro the tramp scraping the bones of the stolen hare, he laughed grimly to himself.

"And the world is made up of just such contrasts," he thought, "and Pietro at his homely breakfast is more to be dreaded than Achmet casting the horoscope. Ah! Sir Jasper Kingsland, it is a very fine thing to be a baronet with fifteen thousand pounds a year, a noble ancestral seat, a wife you love, and a son you adore. And yet Pietro, the vagabond tramp—the sunburned gypsy, with stolen hares to eat, and rags to wear, and a hut to lodge in—would not exchange places with you this bright March day. We have sworn vendetta to you and all of your blood, and we will keep our vow!"

His swarthy face darkened with passionate vindictiveness as he arose.

"'As a man sows so shall he reap,'" he muttered between his clinched teeth, setting his face toward Kingsland Court. "You, my Lord of Kingsland, have sown the wind. You shall learn what it is to reap the whirlwind!"

"Pietro! Pietro!" crowed a little voice, gleefully. "Papa Pietro! take Sunbeam!"

The little sleeper in the bed had sat up, her bright, dark face sparkling, two little dimpled arms outstretched.

The man turned, his vindictive face growing radiant.

"Papa Pietro's darling! his life! his angel! And how does the little Sunbeam?"

He caught her up, covering her face with kisses.

"My love! my life! my darling! When Pietro is dead, and Zara is old and feeble, and Zenith dust and ashes, you will live, my radiant angel, my black-eyed beauty, to perpetuate the malediction. When his son is a man, you will be a woman, with all a woman's subtle power and more than a woman's beauty, and you will be his curse, and his bane, and his blight, as his father has been ours! Will you not, my little Sunbeam?"

"Yes, papa—yes, papa!" lisped the little one.

"Pietro!" called his wife, "if you have done breakfast, come up.

Mother is awake and would see you."

"Coming, *carissima*!"

He kissed the baby girl, placed her on the pallet, and sprung lightly up the steep stair.

The loft was just a shade less wretched than the apartment below. There was a bed on the floor, more

decently covered, two broken chairs, a table with some medicine bottles and cups, and a white curtain on the one poor window.

On the bed lay a woman, over whom Pietro bent reverently the moment he entered the room. It was the wreck of a woman who, in the days gone by, must have been gloriously beautiful; who was beautiful still, despite the ravages years, sickness, and poverty had wrought.

The eyes that blazed brilliant and black were the eyes of Zara—the eyes of the baby Sunbeam below—and this woman was the mother of one, the grandmother of the other.

Pietro knelt by the pallet and tenderly kissed one transparent hand.

The great black eyes turned upon him wild and wide.

"Thou hast seen him, Pietro?" in a breathless sort of way. "Zara says so."

"I have seen him, my mother; I have spoken to him. I spent hours with Sir Jasper Kingsland last night."

"Thou didst?" Her words came pantingly, while passion throbbed in every line of her face. "And there is a son—an heir?"

"There is."

She snatched her hand away and threw up her withered arms with a vindictive shriek.

"And I lie here, a helpless log, and he triumphs! I, Zenith, the Queen of the Tribe—I, once beautiful and powerful, happy and free! I lie here, a withered hulk, what he has made me! And a son and heir is born to him!"

As if the thought had goaded her to madness, she leaped up in bed, tossing her gaunt arms and shrieking madly:

"Take me to him—take me to him! Zara! Pietro! Take me to him, if ye are children of mine, that I may hurl my burning curse upon him and his son before I die!"

She fell back with an impotent scream, and the man Pietro caught her in his arms. Quivering and convulsed, she writhed in an epileptic fit.

"She will kill herself yet," Pietro said. "Hand me the drops, Zara."

Zara poured something out of a bottle into a cup, and Pietro held it to the sick woman's livid lips.

She choked and swallowed, and, as if by magic, lay still in his arms.

Very tenderly he laid her back on the bed.

"She will sleep now, Zara," he said. "Let us go."

They descended the stairs. Down below, the man laid his hands on his wife's shoulders and looked into her face.

"Watch her, Zara," he said, "for she is mad, and the very first opportunity she will make her escape and seek out Sir Jasper Kingsland; and that is the very last thing I want. So watch your mother well."