

THE NECKLACE.

[MARTHA PIERCE.]

Once only in my life have I possessed a bit of absolute beauty, flawless and soul-satisfying. Mine at least, when the gold necklace lay in my hands; and it seemed mine. It was of small beads, exquisitely chased and strung on a thin wire, flexible as silken thread, but strong, past the possibility of breaking: like one of those fine, steel chains they used to make in Florence long ago. Looking frail, to be snapped with one's fingers, but strong as the will of the Medici. At first I did not know about its strength. But afterwards, we tested it, George and I. It could not be broken. There was a little clasp of jade, curiously carved in mystic character. Its tiny case of ivory, was a marvel too. An egg shell inlaid with gold with a band about the middle to conceal the opening, and a tiny key, attached to the small lock, by a cobweb chain. Ah,—what having and holding of a mere gaud ever gave me such joy! Or for that matter such terror? And the terror came near to choking the joy. Yet, at first I could not, myself, believe, and half agreed with father when he growled from behind his newspaper: "Ump! Too much evening party and late supper." The first night it happened was the night of Mollie Harkless' fancy dress ball. I had gone as a lady of ye olden time in a gown of greenjade with my string of beads wound round my throat, and yellow hair floating free from my coronet, a band of gold set with emeralds. I copied my costume from an old picture which George had in his den, amongst all the other rubbish he has imported. Sir Somebody or other's notion of a lady of the castle. There was a fearful crash, the rooms were warm, and I got home in the small hours, quite worn out but happy, because—well, I was quite the belle of the evening, though it does not seem nice in me to say it. And then there was another reason, but never mind that, I undressed sleepily and crept into bed. In the first hour of sleep I was in the midst of the whirl again, then alone in the conservatory, standing in the shadow, waiting with beating heart, until someone came up behind me and put two strong hands on my shoulders. Then a fiend's grip on my throat—I struggled wildly, tried to scream. I was being throttled. Red seas swam before my eyes, thunder roared in my ears. Then suddenly, release; a flood of light; mother's voice.

"What ails you, child? I happened to be wakeful and heard you. Such a queer, strangled scream. . . . And I find you struggling and tearing at your throat. Your hair was wrapped around it, I think. What's here? Your precious necklace on your pillow! Child, you are actually idolatrous."

Shivering, but not with cold, I took the thing and locked it in its egg shell, and that in the drawer. I remembered dimly, that I had left it a glittering heap, on the dressing table an hour before. And at breakfast in the same day when father said: "Nightmare," I silently half acquiesced. But when the night came I knew. And I kept the malicious one closely locked away.

Once again, once only in my vanity and that while the broad day shone, I had it out and wore it. I had just

come in when mother called me, and for that one time forgetful, I left the case and drawer unlocked. Long immaturity creates a feeling of security. I retired without further thought of the thing which I guarded. That time I was near to death. When George rushed in, he found me on the floor black in the face. Happening to be coming in late, passing my room on his way to his own, he heard me fall. Again the beads glittering in the light, flung, as if by accident, on the floor.

Then I told George all I knew, thought, feared. For answer he caught up the necklace and made as if to snap it in pieces, but it ran through his hands like water, and would not be broken. With a white face he flung it from him. "I will put it in the vault tomorrow," he said as I locked it away, "and as soon as possible, it shall be melted. It is an evil thing, accursed, and vengeful. Some powerful spirit of old days has found a way to make his evil live after him."

But I loved the necklace, for its unmatched beauty, though it wrought death. I knew George was full of the mysteries and enchantments of the old East. He was ever ready to give credence to the incredible. Yet, was he not right? What strange power this thing possesses. Whence came the power? Did I do well to keep so evil a thing? Yet, for its very beauty's sake I could not destroy it. I kept it in my room, locked and double-locked.

II.

George married in June, that little gray mouse of a girl, Alice Rothwell, who was so good to me at boarding school, and came to visit me afterwards, when I was gloriously done with schools and happily begun with balls. Father, mother and I went down, of course, to the dear, gray-gabled, old parsonage, among the Berkshire hills and saw them married, and off for their honeymoon. When it was all over, we were tired to death, and came back to town to rest quietly for a few days, before we went to the shore. The first half of that first night, I slept like one of the Seven. When I awoke at midnight, it was with a delicious sense of satisfaction that morning was not yet come, and this delightful sleep was to recommence. Then I was suddenly wide awake; there was a strong white shaft of moonlight across the room; standing in the full radiance at the foot of my bed, was a tall, finely formed woman. She might have been the Milo Venus herself except that she was in possession of a fine pair of arms, clasped around between shoulder and elbow with heavy gold bands. For the rest, there was the portrait I had tried to copy, the jade green dress, the coronet, the floating, yellow hair, the deep eyes, and beauty, such beauty as caused kings to go forth to battle. Yet, withal, I saw she was as light and immaterial as a floating cloud. But that which shone from her eyes, was reality—Soul, steadfast, incorruptible. When she spoke, her low voice, soft as the moon light, stirred the ear, scarcely more than the breeze blowing across the strings of a harp.

"I am the Lady of Glenraven and I am come for my lover's gift. This thousand years I have sought it but it was hid in the house of an enemy and kept from my eager hands. From father to son, the charge descended for a thousand years, but Abaron, the last of his evil line, is a glutton for gold, wherefore he broke his vow, and took the necklace from its hiding place and sold it. It came to you, and brought evil upon you as it brought evil upon the daughters of the house of Abaron. Give it to me that good may come, the curse fail, and my soul and the soul of him who laid the curse, be at peace."

"Who laid the curse, and wherefore," I said, and waited,

The Lady was silent. At last: "Will you not deliver to me my lover's gift, without a reply?"

"No," I said unhesitatingly. "Tell me the tale, and why you would take from me my costliest possession. If you speak fair and your reason is good, I will yield it."

There was a moment's delay. Then the sweet, low articulation began and ran on to the end like a silver stream.

"I was a king's daughter, and counted the fairest in a land of fair women. I was to wed with the crown-prince of an adjoining kingdom, at my father's word. But on a day, it fell that the Black Knight, known far and wide, as the Raven of Glenraven, rode to my father's court with his hundred knights at his back. I, standing at the casement, saw him as he rode beneath, the gallantest knight, ever held a lance in rest. Nor can a thousand years efface the memory of his look, when he raised his eyes and saw me at the window. All the soul of the man in his eyes. And my heart made answer. He gained my father's slow consent, in his own knightly way, and there came a day when we were betrothed in the presence of king and court. Yon necklace, you wrapped so carelessly about your throat, was my knight's betrothal gift. He had got it from some old, maimed, brown heathen, whom he had rescued from a fate worse than mere death, when on his journey to the Holy Sepulchre. He took it, to relieve the old man's weight of gratitude, which bore him down, little dreaming when the wrinkled, brown idolator swore that it would do his will henceforth, forever,—that the day should ever come, when he should bid it, or any servant of his, to do evil.

"Least of all that day, when he wound it around my throat, and swore: 'Our love shall be like this, the thread that holds and cannot be broken,' did he dream of its power to drag a moment's anger through centuries.

"Ten years a happy wife—then, a day, when sitting in my bower, I heard the master's angry foot-fall, clanging in the corridor. I met him at the door . . . and when I saw his face, I knew that life was done. . . . Some snake had stung him. . . . None other than that black browed, hook-nosed, thin lipped, turbanned Abaron, called the Wizard, who, dog that he was, hung on my husband's bounty, lingered in his train, and dared at last to whisper to me, one evening, when my Lord was called away, while we three were at talk, such words, that I, unable to bear more, struck him full in his evil face, one blow that called the black blood out to hear my answer. He swore revenge, then, and took it afterwards. . . .

"How could my dear Lord come to be convinced of such things as he rained upon me in his anger? Mary knows, I was all innocent. . . . What could I reply? But when he turned to leave me, I found voice, tore the necklace from my throat, and cried out to him to remember, how his words had been, that love should be as strong as this inseparable cord. . . . How furiously he turned upon me! Mother of God! I shudder yet . . . after a thousand years."

"A curse," he cried, "a curse upon you and your bauble. May it strangle you in the hour in which you most desire to live. You and all women who possess it after you. Ye are liars all." Then sternly. "This night the Black Wolf attacks the castle. Pray for the defeat and death of the Raven and his knights, if you dare face God, and pray at all. Truth there, at least, though lies to me, and all the world," and he was gone.

"I heard his iron heel striking the shrieking stone all down the corridor. Then the long silence, of the empty room beat in upon me. . . .

"From the window in the tower I saw him place his bowmen on the walls, go here and there about the castle yard, cautiously strengthening the defences. Then, casque in hand, the sunlight beating on his bared head, he harangued his trusty knights. How they shouted. They loved him to a man. But Urquehart, (called the hard-hearted) loved him most and best. Then the storm rolled up from the west, and the Black Wolf crept up the cliff, his pack at his heels, not waiting for the night. God keep you ever free from such a sight as my eyes beheld that day. Blood flowed in rivers, yet that ravening pack of wolves came on, seemingly undiminished, clinging and clambering where no man thought they could so much as gain a foothold, fighting like tigers, till at last, our yeoman far outnumbered, went back and back; and all at once, no one knew why or how, the gate was down. . . . They gained the castle yard. . . . Our knights had barely time to win to the castle.—Abaron! I did not see him fling the gates wide open, but this much, I know; his was the traitor hand. I heard the knights swarm through the castle Urquehart's great voice, commanding.

"Where then was he? The master? Lord Raven of Glenraven? My husband? In vain my eyes had searched for him this hour past. Then suddenly, looking out once more, to see what plans the foe prepared, I saw him, holding six men at bay, with his broad sword, sweeping a ring of white fire about him, he backed toward the castle. . . . He was almost safe. . . . At that moment I heard Urquehart's shout, 'Are all within?' And the answering 'Yea.' 'Then bar the door!' No! no! to bar the Master's door, when his foot was all but on the threshold. . . . It must not be. . . . With all my gathered strength I ran, headlong down the stair, to call, to shriek to them 'Unbar the door!' . . . One moment more, and they must hear, even above the tumult and thunder. Oh, God, for wings. . . . Then, then—when I most desired to live one moment longer, the accursed necklace tightened on my throat, tightened and clutched like a hand of iron. I tried to scream, fought wildly, beat the air, choked, gasped, saw blood, blood everywhere, plunged headlong down and knew no more."

"And Lord Raven?"

"Was cut down on the thresh-hold by the Black Wolf, and died there. But not before his good sword did its work and ran the robber through. Afterwards our brave knights made a sally, and cleared the courtyard of the cowardly pack. Their blood was but curdled milk after their leader went down. Trusty Urquehart! He held and saved the castle for the young heir, away at my father's court when the blow fell. God was good to our son and left him Urquehart. This thousand years has Raven of Glenraven lain in purgatory. This thousand years yet his line of descent is not broken. Give me my lover's gift, I will take it to him, and he shall revoke the curse of Heaven's gate. Then the bauble shall return to the house of Glenraven, and two souls be at peace. This thousand years I have forsworn Heaven that the curse might be lifted, and we two may enter together."

Silence fell in the room. I rose and gave her the tiny egg shell, with its precious contents.

"If this can give you peace, Oh, unquiet Spirit, be at rest!" I cried.

I was alone; the silver moonlight had given way to golden sunlight. I yawned, and drowsily recalled my strange dream. Thinking to prove it but a phantasy, I unlocked the drawer in which I kept my hideous, beautiful treasure. It was gone!

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