

**IN THE
Clutch of Rome.**

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BY "GONZALES"

CHAPTER IX—Continued.

THE RESCUE FROM THE CONVENT.

If Mrs. Maxwell had heard nothing further from Spain, Father St. John had. He knew that the adopted daughter was dead; that never feeling quite right in her forced position, she had willed everything of which she had died possessed, to the original claimant. He also knew that it had been entrusted to a just and pious bishop of Spain to place the legatee in possession of her own.

"The abbess must have been very ill," he said, "to give no warning to her subordinates that an escape to supposed ruin was meditated by one of her most sacred charges."

Mrs. Maxwell's face flushed and her eyes dropped a little before the searching glance of her self-appointed confessor, as she said:

"She was very ill, I think, and how could she know that I had six more nights of grace before me?"

"She could scarcely have known that," said the priest. "She has been dead for some months," he added slowly.

"Poor lady. She was a holy woman and far removed from all earthly things, but she was not happy, I am sure," said Mrs. Maxwell, decidedly. "I hope she has now found a happier state."

The priest, knowing the nature of the death-bed confession of the abbess, shook his head.

"You remember what you told her of sinful nuns finding no rest in the here after?"

"Oh, but I was angry then, Father. In my sober moments I should not have thought of such a thing."

"Still," continued the priest, "may not some flagrant dereliction of duty have sealed for her that unhappy fate?"

And again the large black eyes of the priest (a legacy from his Spanish mother) looked searchingly into the fair face so near his own.

"I cannot presume to utter a judgment on such a question, Father St. John; but, come with me, and I will show you a painting I have made of the convent over which she ruled so many years."

As he followed the graceful form, he was vaguely conscious of thinking that the trailing blue-rose colored robe, confined at the waist by a silver girdle of the medieval pattern, so much affected by ladies of the present day, was more suitable to the woman who wore it than the coarse black garments of a nun would have been.

Mrs. Maxwell was a skillful artist, and the picture, as a picture, would have called for more than a passing notice at any time.

The convent, massive, turreted, and impenetrable, stood in the cold shadow of the Sierra Nevadas, like a veritable rock of ages, while in the distance, the towers of the Alhambra seemed to say: "Your time, also, will reach its climax."

And over all, a cold gray sky, which suggested no bright blue beyond it. The priest, as he looked at it, thought of the lonely woman, who had lived and ruled in the grim citadel of religion, and whose dying breath, like a cold frost, had breathed upon the flower of happiness a sudden beam which the clouded sun of her nature had helped to bloom and fragrance.

The silent thoughts of every individual are his own, independent of his calling in life. Once expressed, they become the property of all; so the priest's words were:

"Was the sky always cold and gray over the convent, Senora? Did the warm sun never gild the snow on the mountain peaks? You are still in the early hours of life. As the day lengthens and the alarms of the world sound in your tired ears, you may long for the gray calm you have pictured here, and think that the peace that you have lost and the hopes which have deserted you, are imprisoned in these strong stone walls."

Mrs. Maxwell shuddered. "I always remember it as gray and cold and forbidding. And may the great God grant I may never come to wish for the peace to be found within those cold hard walls."

Father St. John turned from the painting and picked up a photograph of the mother and her three children.

A flush of the pride of motherhood gave additional beauty to the face of the young mother as she said:

"Do you think I could ever regret the barren life of a nun, Father St. John, when I have known such joy as those sweet children have brought me?"

Father Fabio replaced the photograph on its rest and said in impressive tones:

"Heaven has placed upon you a great responsibility. It has given into your keeping three immortal souls. Always bear in mind that they will be demanded of you on the Judgment Day." A pause, a slight catching of the breath, and then he tore the ugly rent in the rich fabric of her life.

"You know the church holds the marriage sacrament holy; no shadow of doubt must ever rest upon it."

The face of the mother and wife grew crimson—she knew the teachings of her church—and the priest was very pale. At this moment a knock sounded at the further entrance to the long suite of rooms. Neither heard it. Then the folds of the portiere were drawn aside, and Miss Martha, followed by the family doctor who had called to see Mrs. Maxwell, and whom Martha had volunteered to escort to her presence, stood before them.

The doctor, a man who gave imaginative people the impression of a Mephistopheles, grown old in the service of many Fausts, had now stepped clear of the portiere, and its azure folds brought his black figure out in strong relief. Tall and thin, and dressed in deepest black, his hair forming a silver fringe around the tight skull-cap.

Dr. Wood disliked priests of any faith, and although bound to treat patients of the sex feminine with due courtesy, it was an open secret that he mistrusted them as a sex, and although once married and now a widower of many years, he had little liking for womankind. So, without connecting anything absolutely immoral with the two who had been so absorbed that his knock had fallen unheard, he observed with the cynicism of his nature the flushed face of his young and beautiful patient, and the pallor of the priest who was also young and handsome. He could not know that the paleness was the visible sign of honor bruised, and the crimson, the angry challenge of purity impeached.

"Excuse our rather abrupt entrance, Carmen," said Miss Martha. "I did not know you were engaged."

People of society soon recover themselves; and Mrs. Maxwell politely disclaimed any interruption.

The doctor of the spirit and the doctor of the body exchanged a few commonplace—they had met by many a sick bed. And then the priest, with a low bow to the three, took his leave. And soon after, Martha, saying that she was going to walk in the garden, left the doctor and his patient alone.

CHAPTER X.

A NEW TYPE OF WOMAN.

As Martha walked in the spacious grounds surrounding her brother's residence, she could scarcely realize that time had swung into a winter month.

The statuary gleamed white and bold on the vivid green lawn. Crimson roses and chrysanthemums and fuschias twining their combinations of colors around the corners of the conservatories and peeping boldly in at the royal orchids and their patrician neighbors, met the eye of the woman from a state where winter makes his cold power felt from his earliest reign.

She had stopped in her walk to remove a gaudy ribbon to which was attached some glittering object, from the neck of a statue of Flora, which one of the children had placed there. The Flora stood with her feet buried in a mass of rose-colored geraniums. She was busy with the knot, when a mocking voice behind her said:

"How can you be so cruel, Miss Maxwell?"

She turned, a little startled. Dr. Wood stood beside her.

"Cruel? I don't catch your meaning, Doctor. Is it cruel to remove this disfiguring ribbon from the neck of this marble woman?"

"It represents a female," replied the doctor; "and you know they prize their gaw gaws beyond all else."

"Do they? No doubt, you being a man, are the best judge of what women prize most."

"Ye gods! I think I am, Miss Maxwell."

"A woman, robbed of her personal adornments," continued Martha, "and a man, with his inordinate vanity wounded, are, without doubt, acute sufferers."

"You are meaning the dudes and fops, Miss, I presume, when you speak of the inordinate vanity of man."

"I am not meaning the dudes and the fops, sir. Their vanity is of the sort you credit womankind with. They are proud of their shape and the treasures of their wardrobes. I am thinking of the vanity of men of avowed intelligence, and who boast in every way of their want of it; for instance, I think you, Doctor, are a very vain man."

"Me!" exclaimed the doctor. "I am nearly sixty, Miss, and I really believe you are the first to make the discovery. I certainly never suspected that I possessed the quality. But, perhaps you will not object to telling me of what you consider me vain."

"Of your highly cultivated cynicism, Doctor. You know you thought you said a very cute thing when you called it cruel to take the ribbon from the neck of the Flora."

Dr. Wood laughed his ringing, sardonic laugh, and his parted lips showed a row of glistening white teeth, the preservation of which he was very proud.

"A man's code of politeness tells him not to contradict a lady, Miss Maxwell, so we will allow that I am very vain. Will you not accompany me to the conservatories? I must pay my devotions to the orchids. My love for them really amounts to adoration. Do you know they bear a strong resemblance to your sex, inasmuch as they take unto themselves many forms and colors. Ah! here we are at the palace of the beau-

ties. Allow me," and Mephistopheles held open the door of the flowery kingdom.

Miss Martha threw back the nuba from her head and shoulders, and stalked calmly on between walls of flowers. Dr. Wood had made several calls at her brother's house during her sojourn there. Although Miss Martha Maxwell's acquaintance with men was rather limited, this particular one was to her a curious specimen, a creature of the country, she supposed. She had had several wordy passes with him which had been of his own seeking. T. Dr. Wood, Miss Maxwell represented an entirely new type of woman, and, on the whole, he rather liked her. Miss Martha waited until the doctor had finished his rhapsody on the orchids, and then, with a sort of resignation to the fact, she said:

"Human nature is a strange thing."

"Granted, Miss. But what is it that strikes you just now?"

"Your excessive admiration for orchids."

"Really, Miss, I fail to find anything remarkable in my admiration of these curious flowers."

"Well, perhaps there is nothing strange about it; it may be that the hyena of the desert would give all the dead carcasses he tears to pieces with such seeming avidity for a bunch of white lilies of the valley."

The doctor's ringing laugh rang through the conservatory. Then, in a tone one would adopt in giving some important piece of information, he remarked:

"Do you know, Miss Martha, I have observed that plants change their expression at times as suddenly as persons do? For instance, that tree you are standing under, seemed to me a thing of rare grace and beauty a short time ago when Mrs. Maxwell stood there, in exactly the same position you now occupy. Today, its leaves strike my vision as dingy in color, and its branches certainly have a disconcerted droop. Of course, I cannot divine why the tree should be thus affected. I have always been a close student of plants, and I really believe that they are susceptible of external impressions."

"It is quite likely, Doctor, that the vegetable world has feelings which human egotism has appropriated to itself. By the way, Doctor, were you standing in such close proximity to this extremely sensitive tree a few days ago as you are now?"

Again the doctor's laugh rang through the conservatory. Ere the echo had died away among the flowers, he asked: "Are you going to hear the divine Sarah, as Cleopatra, tomorrow night?"

"I know of no divine Sarah, Dr. Wood. I recognize no claims to divinity but those of Jesus Christ."

"Ah! just so," said Dr. Wood. "By the way, I was surprised to find that Catholic priest in the form of the devil—I mean Apollo—in such close conference with your sister-in-law today. I have never met one in the house before, and I have practiced in the family for several years."

"I do not know what you mean by close conference, and I can banish your surprise by telling you that the priest had been summoned to the bed-side of the governess, who, I am sorry to say, is a Roman Catholic, and is now very sick. In my humble opinion, it was quite natural he should pay his respects to the lady of the house."

"Quite natural, Miss. Was a physician called in to attend said sick governess?"

"There was," answered Miss Martha. "One of the very first in the city, I understand. Strictly business. Never browses among the plants; knows nothing of their external impressions and feelings, but is satisfied with their medicinal effect on his patients."

"Sensible man," said the doctor.

"And now," said Martha, "I must beg you to excuse me. It is growing late and I must prepare for dinner."

The doctor bowed and Martha made her way towards the door which connected the conservatory with the reception room. Before she quite reached the door, she paused, seemingly interested in a flower. Dr. Wood had also turned to leave the conservatory, but his wicked eyes were looking after the tall, ungainly figure as if loath to see her depart. When she stopped before the flower, he also stopped and nervously took off his hat, replacing it with firmness and nodding his head, as if saying to himself: "I'll do it," he called after her:

"I beg your pardon, Miss Maxwell, for detaining you. But do you happen to remember the name of the non-browsing doctor who attends strictly to business?"

At his first word, Martha was seized with a sudden, severe fit of coughing from which she did not recover until she was fairly out of the conservatory, and which was succeeded by a chuckle of satisfaction, as she said to herself:

"I knew he'd ask me that before he left. A woman would have had brain fever before she would have asked of an antagonist such a question. But a man—oh, no."

The doctor, as he stepped out into the crisp, cold evening air—for the bright California winter day was well over now—mentally summed up Miss Martha as a "gritty old girl," strongly articulated but of really good flavor;

brain and nerves normal, and will be till the day of her death.

CHAPTER XI.

BETWEEN HUSBAND AND WIFE.
Young Father St. John left the house of Senator Maxwell with the consciousness of having done his priestly duty. He had held the mirror of truth before the eyes of the erring woman who was defying Rome, and she must have seen reflected there her sin against her God and the holy church. The church had decreed that a marriage between man and woman is no marriage unless a priest of Rome, to whom God alone has given his holy essence, and the power to make the marriage bond a divine ordinance, has made the twain one, thus making the union of the sexes pure and lawful in His sight. This woman, whom it was the duty of Rome to rescue from the burning, had been given a glimpse of her crime in its naked delinquency. Father St. John had flashed this priest-polished mirror in the face of this sinful woman, and a scorching ray of light had given keen and painful sight to eyes made blind with inordinate love for a husband who was not a husband, and for children who were the offspring of that love. Father St. John had done his duty. He had commenced the crusade his commander-in-chief had directed. But in hot rebellion against this religious duty arose the abstract conscience of the man. "I came not to bring peace on earth, but a sword," spoke the Master.

"It is meet his representatives forever wield this sword, in order that good may come," thus reasoned Father St. John, the priest.

Ah! that sword. Was it well, after all to wield it? The skillful handling of it was, perhaps, a lost art. Lost when He who brought it departed from the earth. For, surely, He did not deal such destruction as the awkward hands who have taken it up where He dropped it have done, down through all the centuries.

So agitated was the mind of the young priest with the conflict of the logic of religion and reason, that the daintily, though frugal, dinner Mrs. Gibbs had served him, seemed without salt or savor.

The table of Father St. John was ever innocent of wine, or he, as hundreds of men were doing at that very hour, might have deadened conscience and intoxicated reason.

Hurrying through the meal, he sought the residence of the archbishop. Father Fabio found his grace reclining on a sofa in his library, clad in a dressing-gown of some rich oriental stuff, and with one of Havana's purest products slowly turning to fragrant smoke and ashes between his priestly lips. He scarcely altered his position as his young auxiliary entered, merely laying his half-consumed cigar on a unique ash receiver which reposed on a tiny table beside his couch in close communion with a breviary. With a few well chosen words and a gesture of his hand toward a chair near himself, he made the young priest welcome. But the handsome, far-seeing eye of the prelate had marked the pallor of his visitor's face; and drawing his own inferences therefrom, the lines of cruelty around his mouth, which the sensuous influence of a generous dinner and its nerve-soothing sequel had nearly obliterated, deepened, as he waited for Father Fabio to begin his report.

At length, looking full at his chief, the young priest, with an expression of peculiar meaning, said:

"Well, your grace, I have planted a upas tree where the church thought the atmosphere was too pure for the spiritual health of those who breathed it."

St. Antinous arose from his couch and seated himself in an upright leather-cushioned chair beside a writing-desk. Then, in a tone of studied coldness, he commenced:

"I fail to understand you, St. John. But no," he added quick and sternly; "I will not stoop to the pretense of misunderstanding you. You, an ordained priest of God and the church, have called the sacred teachings the planting of the deadly upas tree. Young man, do you know that you stand in danger of excommunication?"

The pallor of the young priest grew more marked. He walked with bowed head and hands tightly clasped behind his back, to a remote part of the room, came back, and looking full into the eyes of his superior, said, proudly:

"Your grace, I worship and revere the great Godhead above us, [here he made the sign of the cross] the holy virgin, and the blessed saints. Their commands and loving example it is my great ambition to follow, and to make myself worthy to teach those entrusted to my care the true faith, by the constant watching of myself. But I cannot kill the thought that the gentle and justice-dealing Jesus, would not have asked me to enter the sacred portal of a pure and happy home and create misery and strife therein, because husband and wife worship Him at different altars."

"Father St. John," said the bishop, "if you will clear your mind of sickly sentiment and think a little, you will find that you were not asked to interfere for that reason, but because the wife, at least, worships at no altar, and, according to the doctrines of the church, the purity of this home is something more than doubtful."

Father Fabio resumed his seat and

shaded his eyes with his slim, white hand, as if the pale green light from the shaded lamp on the reading desk hurt them.

The archbishop continued:

"My young priest, do you believe marriage to be a divine ordinance?"

"Most certainly, I do, your grace. Who but an atheist or worse does not believe so?"

The prelate bowed. "Then do you believe that, in the sight of God, this man and woman are living together in a holy state of matrimony, by virtue of a marriage service read over them by a captain of a steamboat? Had they been married by a so-called christian minister of the Protestant persuasion, your scruples to open the eyes of this woman and mother, this straying lamb of ours, to the enormity of her sin, might be credited with the ghost of an excuse. But you, an ordained priest of the church, who have been taught that the uniting together in matrimony of man and woman is one of the most holy sacraments of the church, to be administered only by those of your most sacred calling, to which you are unworthy to belong, to those whom the church would save, can call the efforts to purify the immoral atmosphere of this particular home, the planting of a deadly upas tree—"

"Your grace," said Father Fabio, and his hand dropped from his eyes, and he looked his superior full in the face. "may not this man and woman, united by civil authority only, have the Divine blessing resting upon them and cementing their union by the virtue of their love for each other and the purity of the lives they lead? And would the church so greatly care for this recalcitrant daughter, if she were poor and lived in the slums of the city?"

It was now the archbishop who left his chair to walk the room with quick, impatient steps. As he walked, his wrath and indignation gathered force, and his brow grew dark and lowering, like a thunder-cloud above the blue lightning of his eyes. Suddenly he

paused before his rebellious subordinate, shook his clenched hand, from which, in his wrath the velvet glove had been torn, and in a low voice of concentrated anger, he said:

"How dare you! You, who have scarcely reached manhood; how dare you, I say, come to me, a man of mature years, and an arch divine, and show your fangs of unbelief in all their hideous nakedness. You stand before the high altar and perform the ceremonies of devotion. You take in your unholy hands the immaculate host and, even as you elevate it before your kneeling congregation who are prostrated with awe and the presence of the Holy Ghost, you must feel that you are a traitor."

Fabio had sat with bowed head and deathly pale face while this storm of righteous wrath was falling upon him, but at the last words of the prelate—a man only now—who had called him a traitor, he sprang to his feet with an angry gesture:

"Take care, sir; even you may go too far. I am neither traitor nor hypocrite, which great fault may perhaps be my undoing."

Towering above him the angry prelate took no heed, but continued:

"Not a bishop in my whole archbishopric would have had the effrontery to approach me as you, a simple priest, and a comparative novice in the service of the church have done. Never did the old proverb, 'Fools rush in where angels fear to tread,' apply better than in your case. It is well for your sainted mother, who dedicated you, her only one, to the church, that she left you when she did."

Nothing the archbishop could have said, no stroke of priestly policy have so softened Fabio St. John and brought him back to the arms of the church as this mentioning of his mother, and the thought had suddenly flashed into the mind of the wily Jesuit.

(To Be Continued.)

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