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A Transferred Identity.

By EDITH SESSIONE TUPPER.
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CHAPTER I.

THE CITY IN THE NIGHT.

The night had grown very dark. Black clouds were drifting over the moon and blotting out the sallow light of the cold stars.

I leaned from the carriage and with straining eyes vainly sought to pierce the gloom of the night the soughing of the wind through the great pines forested the coming storm.

A feeling of intense depression seized me. Why had I come? At this moment I wished myself miles away. What a senseless quest this upon which I had entered! Suppose I were to find my old friend; would she be glad to see me? Was it not an unparadise intrusion to arrive thus, unheralded, at dead of night? Was there, in fact, any greater imbecility in my driving here, near midnight, over miles of rough country road in search of Prudence Vane?

Ten years had gone by since Prudence Vane had been graduated from the Canadian convent to which we had spent our first, uneventful years. During that time we were as inseparable as any schoolgirl friends. I had idolized the beautiful, amiable southern girl, whose tales of plantation life in all its tropic color and innocence had completely captivated me. Bored and brought up in a rigid northern atmosphere, the glimpses I got through her conversation and letters of Prudence's home life were visions of a far-off, ideal world.

Prudence was stately, clever and talented. I was poor, inferior and plain. But the loveliest and wealthiest girl in the convent singled me out as her friend, and my gratitude and devotion to her were unbounded.

After our graduation we corresponded for two years, during which time I was employed in teaching and laying by money, for I intended some day to visit Prudence in her southern home. She wrote me of her approaching marriage, urging me to be one of her bridesmaids, which pleasure I was forced to forego. I received a few letters after her marriage, in which she spoke in glowing terms of her new life. Then I heard no more. We drifted apart, as all school friends invariably do.

It is always the unexpected which happens. Whoever would have fancied that from his numerous train of relatives my uncle, John Mason, would have selected me, poor Prudence Mason, as the bride to his great property? When I had finished gazing over the announcement his lawyers made me, my first thought was of Prudence, and that I would seek her at once to tell her the good news. Perhaps we might travel together; perhaps she was poor and needed assistance. Possibly there were children for whom I might do something. Remembrance of those days in the convent, of my friends and never in all my desolate, colorless existence had I so clung to any human being as I clung to Prudence.

I thought of her now as the carriage went jolting through this wilderness over uneven roads, occasionally banging against a stump or the root of a tree. I saw her sweet face and heard again her gentle voice and remembered all her gracious and kind acts.

"Will we soon be there?" I asked my driver.

He was a typical specimen of the southern "cracker," and in the monotone, mellow accents borrowed from the negroes drawled out:

"Putty soon, ma'am, it ah 'bout twi mile. Soon's you uns git by Dead Man's swamp ye kin see the lights down yond."

"Dead Man's swamp?" I repeated involuntarily. "What a horrible—a dismal name!"

"Dismal place, tu," he replied, "thah hain't white no niggah dah go in thah at night. All sorts o' curus an awful goin' on thah."

"So you mean?" I asked.

"No, you mean't," he replied, "I hardly know myself what I du mean. Thee's it, you know, ma'am, it's the mystery, thee's what skahs. Now, if ye knows what's happenin', it takes half the seat off, but whif's only stories a nobody willin' to find out it's kind o' awful. Anyway, I kin tell ye this much—thah's lights seen in thah at midnight, and terrible sounds heard. An some says, an thah don't habbly like to whispah the word, thah thah's whah the voodooes meet."

"The voodooes?" I said.

"Yes, niggahs, ye know, what du un-early things—eat dead babies, thah out folks' hearts an play with serpents!"

"Oh, don't tell me anything more!" I exclaimed. "I've read of them."

"Was, ma'am, it's somethin' disgustin' an awful to think on. I'm allus powh-ful glad when I'm past the place."

A few rods farther the great forest broke away a little, and in the pallid light I could discern under the scattered trees stretches of morass, black, slimy and filthy. From the gauzy trees the long grass moss hung like lifeless figures dangling and dipping in the sea of water and the stagnant pools. The swamp seemed interminable, reaching away in endless gloom under the low hanging branches. The moon came out from the clouds for one moment and sent a cheerless light down on the forbidding scene, but quickly withdrew, as if alarmed at what she saw.

It was a frightful place—weird and uncanny. The wind whistled through the trees, and ghostly shadows seemed to lurk beneath their swaying, writhing branches.

"What a horrible place!" I exclaimed.

"Horrible? Yes, this lyah is Dead Man's swamp," whispered my companion.

"So you believe in it?" I asked.

"I've grown old, Prudence," she said in answer to my inquiring looks, "and our southern climate has not improved my complexion. Then, too, I have lived a monotonous life, have been very much alone, and that, you know, is not good for one," and then she laughed.

I recalled Prudence's laugh—mirth-provoking, contagious, hearty. I could hear again its silvery sweetness ringing through the leafy avenues of the old convent gardens. My hostess's laugh was hollow, sibilant and hoarse, like the rattle of thorns under a pot. Had the years wrought a complete revolution in her character as of her face?

"I'm sorry Colonel Marchmont is not at home," she said after she had graciously pressed a second cup of tea upon me. "He went to Atlanta last week. I expect him back very soon—possibly to-morrow."

"You have children, Prudence?"

"One," she replied coldly, as if the subject were obnoxious—"a little girl 6 years old—a headstrong little creature. I can do nothing with her. I'm glad I have but one."

I looked at her in amazement. I had

"They're at it," whispered my driver, and he struck the tired horse with the blow, which sent them flying over sticks, stones and roots of trees. On, on we dashed in our wild flight from a cry.

It was not repeated.

The dead silence that followed by its contrast made the remembrance more appalling.

We were both relieved when we turned into a broad avenue lined on either side by shock-headed pines, at the end of which lights could be seen.

I followed, with a strange sinking at my heart. My reception through courtesy, had been utterly mechanical. I saw my blunder in having thrust an unsolicited visit upon an old friend who, alas! was not the friend of old. I regretted, however, that it was not necessary to prolong my stay and decided that as soon as possible I would return north with my stock of disillusion, which now weighed upon me like the burden on Prudence's shoulders.

The room into which Prudence led me was large and gloomy. There were a vase four post bed and a huge wardrobe with carved panels. A fireplace had an ancient iron mahogany table, chairs and old fashioned lounge, made up the main furnishings of the apartment. There were quaint gilt candelabra on the marble mantel, and a few portraits of dead and gone Marchmonts adorned the walls. The only modern piece of furniture was a tall chevel glass standing directly opposite the enormous window, which, by its opening on a balcony, running the entire side of the house.

The room oppressed me quite as much as Prudence's dismal forebodings. My eyes followed the somber hangings of the hall. The great front doors were opened from my long, tedious night ride, as well

as from my disappointment. I was on the verge of giving way. However, I managed to control myself and receive my hostess's good night kiss.

I listened to the sound of her retreating footsteps as they died along the corridor.

I heard a distant door open and shut. At last I was alone.

Conscious of my relief, I yet experienced half defined sensations of terror quite new to me. I had always been a singularly self-reliant and courageous woman. But for the first time in my life I felt the presence of mystery. My eyes scanned the walls of this gloomy room and on the icy face of the woman who had just left me.

"Well," I said aloud, and my voice sounded thin and strange in the lonely room. "I don't know what it means. Never did a human being change as she has changed. I was an idiot to come, and I'll go as soon as I can make an excuse."

The air of the room was oppressive

and musty, and I opened the shutters to allow the fresh night air to creep in, but the light which fell and proceeded to make myself as comfortable as possible for the night. Back and forth across the room I walked, each time passing the tall chevel glass, and each time, as I was during one of these turns that, changing to glance in the mirror, I saw something which caused my heart to stop beating and my blood to freeze.

"Prudence," I cried involuntarily. "I expected to see Prudence. It is Prudence I saw in the glass. In its glittering depths I saw the reflection of a face."

But what a face! Malignant, crafty and full of terror. I listened for a return of those velvet footsteps, but no sound was heard.

I threw myself dressed as I was on the bed. I did not dare sleep. The candles and these scarlet verbenas and lower. I watched them with straining eyes, shuddering as I thought of the darkness which would come. At last they went out. I was alone in the profane and awful silence night.

Toward morning I slept from utter exhaustion, and when I awakened the sun was shining fall in my eyes. I turned drowsily. Then, sitting upright, I looked at my dusky, travel-stained gown in which I had slept. Suddenly the occurrence of the night before returned to me.

What did it mean? Why was Prudence's face there? What possible explanation could there be of that stealthy survey through the window?

"She must be mad," I said as I wearily rose. "Yes, that must be it. She has had poor health, and possibly her brain may be turned a trifle. But I don't recall the idea of being watched like that. Well, I must get away as soon as possible. I wonder if it would do to go today?"

There was a knock at the door, and a trim quadroon maid entered with hot water. She explained that her mistress had delegated her to wait upon me during my stay.

"I'm all dressed already," she cried in surprise.

Without thinking, I carelessly answered, "Yes, I slept in my clothes."

The girl gave me a quick glance, and then said, "I said, 'that I must have dropped to sleep before knowing it.'"

"Yes," she glibly replied, but there was a queer expression on her face. Presently she went over to the window and peered at one.

"There is a letter from Colonel Marchmont," she said. "Now I shall know when he is coming."

As she read, her face became transfigured. The hard, stern lines softened; a flush crept to her cheek. She looked more like the old Prudence than at any previous time.

"Why?" I demanded.

"Waal," she answered in some confusion, "I don't no, but sometimes folks gits kinder skeery. Wouldn't sleep wid my shuntins open, dead I wouldn't. I'd like to see my windows shut, but den I'm on de swamp side—dat's worse."

"Why is it worse?" I asked.

"Waal, miss, we ain't 'lowed to speak 'bout it—missus dat mad 'n' she hyahs an sayin' anythin'. But I tell ye sometimes de goin' on in dat swamp just orful."

"Look here," I said, with a considerable show ofasperity. "What do you mean by goin' on?"

"Waal," she hesitated, "screeams an hollerin an de debil's own noise some-times. They say dat wah de voodooes go."

"Why doesn't Colonel Marchmont put a stop to it?"

"Lord bless ye, miss, he don't care nuffin 'bout it. A lot ob drunken niggahs, he says. He jest gives 'em a dose ob de niggahs ob de plantation go dah. An dey don't do nothin'."

"An dey don't do nothin'?" I asked, with a considerable show of indignation.

"No, miss," she said, with a look of interest.

"All right, miss," Lizzie said meekly, and as my toilet was now completed I told her she might go. I laughed heartily when I was alone.

"I'm a tasting some of the delights of southern life," I said. "Prudence used to tell me about these superstitious slaves, but I don't remember that she said anything about voodooism. I must speak to her about it. It should be quite an interesting study. Of course that hideous scream I heard last night must have come from some of their horrid orgies."

Musing thus, I went my way down the corridor and stairs into the lower hall. The great front doors were opened, and a flood of glorious sunshine was pouring across the tessellated floor. The sunlight cheered me. I banished all care and forgot my uneasiness of the night.

"I must have been mistaken," I urged. "It was only my tired nerves and disordered fancy. Of course Prudence would never stoop to spying in that fashion. Absurd!"

I stood in the door and looked down the noble avenue before the house. The grounds of Swamplands were extensive and carefully cared for. Great beds of brilliant blossoms, glistening fountains, parterres of closely clipped box and spruce and winding paths combined to make the picture most attractive. In the distance I could see the cotton fields, vander stretched Dead Man's swamp, and here on the piazza, with her back turned to me and evidently quite unaware of my presence, sat Prudence.

She was dressed in a filmy white gown. Her massive coils of hair revealed the shapely neck. Her head was bent. She was reading.

Before I could speak a side door opened and a little girl about 8 years of age came out upon the piazza. She held a bunch of scarlet blossoms in her hand and approached Prudence with a timid air which betrayed her presence, sat Prudence.

"I saw the reflection of a face," I murmured to myself. "I was on the verge of giving way. However, I managed to control myself and receive my hostess's good night kiss."

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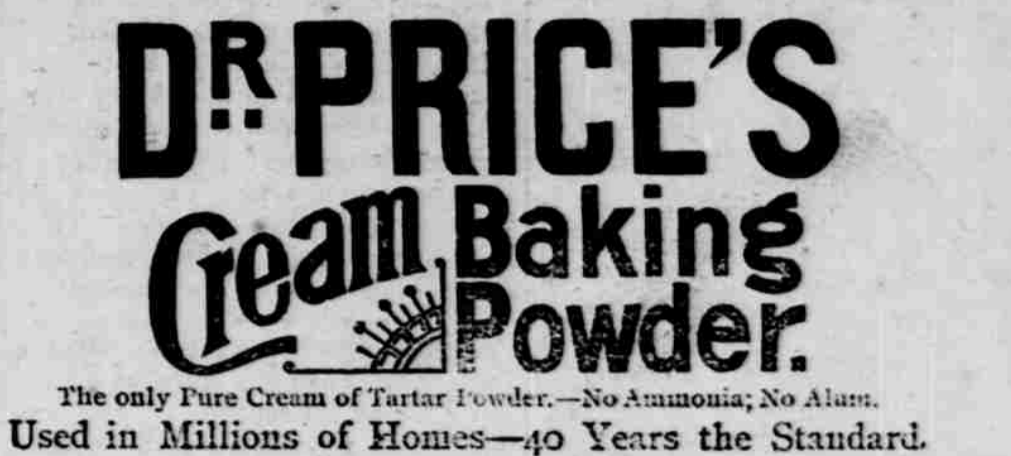
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"He is coming," she cried, "coming tomorrow. Thank God! I haven't lived since he went. I have simply existed. Prudence, you will see him—my husband, my love, my god."

Her passionate tones amazed and delighted me. The little one's hand stole into my lap. "She has at least kept her love for her husband pure and fresh," I said to myself. "That is a good sign. But if she loves him so intensely, why is she so irritable to his child?"

"He will be in time for the ball," she rattled on, "and you, Prudence, must go with us. It's a ball at the next plantation. We have so little gayety in this forsaken country that we appreciate every opportunity for pleasure."

"Oh, you will excuse me," I said. "I would cut a sorry figure at a ball. Let me stay at home with Dalphine."

"The little one's hand stole into my lap. I pressed the tiny fingers warmly."

"As you please," cried Prudence. "What's this?"

A shadow crossed her face. She bit her lip and stared desperately at the letter she still held in her hand.

"What shall I do?" I heard her mutter. "What shall I do?"

Then without one word of apology Mrs. Marchmont abruptly rose from the table and left the room.

CHAPTER IV.
THE CLOSED GATE.

When Prudence rejoined me, two hours later, her eyes were heavy and swollen from weeping.

"Pardon me, my friend," she said sadly, "for leaving you so unceremoniously, but I had received a terrible blow. I felt I must get away by myself. Come, Prudence," she concluded, "come let us walk. I cannot remain quiet."

"Puzzled by her looks and manner, I complied with her request. We went to the house and entered one of the broad, densely shaded and winding paths. For some time we walked in silence. When I spoke occasional glances at my companion. I could see that she was composed. The anxiety lurking in her eyes, the hard, despairing lines about the lips, betokened the inward conflict. At last I spoke.

"I am really grieved, Prudence, to see you suffering so. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"No, nothing," she broke out wildly. "There is nothing you can do, or, for that matter, that any one can do. I tell you, Prudence, and stopping short at a turn in the path she seized my arm in a convulsive grasp. "God himself could not help me. I am in awful danger."

"Danger?" I cried.

"Hush!" she exclaimed, looking apprehensively about. Hush! Yes, in dan-ger."

"My dear, my dear," I said soothingly patting her arm as I touch a child's "your nerves are in a bad state. You need rest. Why, Prudence, what danger can there be to you in your own home and with your husband's protecting arm?"

"Mamma," she said a little louder. Prudence lifted her head and turned her face toward the child. I could see the mother's profile. She was frowning ominously.

"Here are some beautiful flowers I picked for you, mamma," said the little girl, still with that air of timidity. She approached me and placed the flowers in my hand. I saw Prudence's eyes, fasten them in her bosom and kiss the child for her sweet attention. Judge the child for her sweet attention. Judge

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"Oh, yes," she sighed. "For two years I have either been torn with feverish attacks or plunging into depths of moribundity. But today—today—"

"There, there, never mind. Don't think of it," I murmured; "think of something pleasant. Look at the glorious sky, the sunlight, the trees, the flowers. Think of some happy event of your life. Think, Prudence, of our school days—wonderful days of long ago—our school days—wonderful days of long ago—"

I stopped abruptly. Prudence's face had become again assumed that inexplicable expression—a look of mingled cunning and alarm; the same awful glance I had seen through the window the night before I received now. But I flourished on.

"Do you remember, dear girl, what Sister Agatha said to you the morning of our graduation? I can see her now, as she laid her hand upon your shoulder—"

"Oh, yes!" interrupted Prudence. "Dear Sister Agatha, she was always so lovely and gentle, and her precepts so sound and wise."

I stared at her in amazement.

"Why, Prudence, you must be dreaming. Sister Agatha was anything but gentle. She was the terror of the school. No one was so feared and dreaded next to Mother Patricia."

"Why, of course," laughed Prudence—that same sinister, mocking laugh of last night—"how stupid of me! I must have been thinking of some other sister."

"Don'tless you were thinking of Sister Madeline."

"Yes—Sister Madeline. It was she."

"Sister Agatha said, if I recall it rightly, 'you have every prospect of happiness. Wealth, youth, beauty, are yours. See to it, my child, that the avenue along which the beacons of this life are placed leads to the heavenly city.' Prudence, I can never forget that scene. The sun, with her white, asetic face glowing with spiritual fervor, one hand lifted as in benediction; you, in the flush of beauty and expectancy listening to the farewell of that good woman. What a picture it would have made!"

"I cannot remember it very well," Prudence said, with a curious air of impatience as if the subject bored her, "at all events I am convinced that I am not in spirit very near the party days. I really think I am in the neighborhood of the bottomless pit. But come, Prudence, how much longer are you going to dawdle here? and springing up she hastily walked on, leaving me to follow in a more perplexed state of mind than ever."

I had hoped to touch Prudence with the remembrance of that convent goodby, but had only succeeded in annoying her. She appeared vexed when I spoke of our school days, and now that I gave the subject some reflection I recollected that the night before when I had once or twice passed by her window I had noticed that she had quickly changed the conversation. She had not asked once after any of our former associates and appeared absolutely to have no interest in the old life.

We passed the tangled tangle of the fountain, the drip of the fountain, and the rustle of the leaves and the shrill, sweet tones of the mocking birds broke the stillness. Occasionally Prudence would send over a bed of flowers, examine them intently, pick one or two, then aimlessly wander on.

We came at last to a little slope which descended abruptly toward Dead Man's swamp. Here the tangles of thicket and vine grew closer and denser. Birds rose in frightened flight at our coming. Once I saw a snake wriggle quickly across our path.

"This is a gloomy part of the grounds," I returned. "It is near the swamp, is it not?"

"Yes," said Prudence, almost sullenly. "Yes, I hate it. I never walk here. I don't know why I have come today. Is it an omen, I wonder?"

"An omen of what?" I asked lightly. "You surely do not expect to be voodooed."

Again I passed abruptly at sight of my friend's face.

"Voodooed!" she cried angrily. "What do you mean? What do you know of voodooism?"

"Only what I have read and heard," I retorted.

"Oh!" she returned, as if relieved. "I didn't know but some of the servants had been chattering their abominable stuff to you. I don't allow it to be talked if I know it."

"Well, is there nothing in it, Prudence?" I asked carelessly. "My driver was telling me that it was a common rumor in these parts that the unholy rites are practiced in that swamp, and as we came by it last night I heard—"

"What did you hear?" she demanded, with distended eyes and quivering lips.

"I heard an awful cry—a fearful scream. Do you know I could only think of one thing."

"And that?"

"Murder!" I scarcely breathed.

Prudence turned so pale I was alarmed.

"Oh, my dear girl, forgive me for speaking of these things when you are already so unstrung. But why did we come to this desolate spot? The very surroundings suggest all sorts of ghastly topics. Let us return."

But Prudence went on down the slope as if impelled by some unseen power. Straight toward the swamp she went.

"Come back, dear," I urged. "come."

"Come away," she hissed.

A sudden quick turn in the path brought us up against a high wall completely overrun with creepers and other vines.

"See!" whispered Prudence. "See, beyond that wall lies the swamp. Yes, it is a gruesome place. I hate it! I fear it!"

My eyes running along the wall caught the outlines of a door or gate half hidden under the luxuriant growth of tangled and running vines.

"Why, Prudence!" I cried, "here is a gate! Let us open it and have a peep into this land of terror."

As I pushed the vines away a cold hand—the hand of a corpse—was laid on mine. I turned in terror to see Prudence's mad eyes burning like hot coals in her livid face.

"Come away, she hissed in my ear. "Come. Don't dare to try to open it. Come, come."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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