

IN THE Clutch of Rome.

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CHAPTER XIII. THE TEMPTRESS FOILED.

Miss Martha prayed fervently for light. Then pale and stern, she took her way to the family parlor, which was opposite the reception room.

An idea that Miss Martha had become insane, passed through the priest's mind, but he stood still at the command.

"No; I am not Bedlamite, sir," she said, intuitively reading his mind, "and it is to keep others sane, that I have stopped you to request you not to step inside yonder house again, till my brother, Senator Maxwell, returns home."

Well, really, my dear lady, as Mrs. Maxwell herself has given me no such orders, I do not see that—

Again Martha raised her long arm before the face of the astonished priest.

"I know all you would say, sir, so don't say it. I am not the mistress of the mansion, and have no right to interfere with the incoming and outgoing of any one the wife of Senator Maxwell may choose to see. But you must know, sir, that my brother gave me a sacred charge before he went to his duties abroad. His charge to me was, 'and Martha came a step nearer the priest and though she was not his equal in height, she seemed now to tower above him:'

"Martha, stand by my wife and children, should any danger assail them in my absence."

"The danger has come. Time has proved that he left in his house a she-wolf in sheep's clothing. Her mate has now broken into the fold and together they seek to devour the unwary lamb they are deluding and trying to beguile into their green and flowery pastures, which are but a snare and a delusion. For your green daisies are artfully concealed pitfalls, and your banks of flowers are rank poison, and are the homes of slimy reptiles."

The large black eyes of the youthful priest fell before the angry steel blue ones of the follower of Calvin. Angry in spite of himself at being so harangued, he said, ironically:

"Allow me to congratulate you, madam, on your ability to preach in such figuratively beautiful language. And now, will you allow the wolf to pass, seeing that he is not bodily carrying off the lamb; and well—catamounts are not to his taste."

An amused and mocking laugh rang out on the air and Dr. Wood came from behind a laurestina bush.

Martha and the priest both started, turned quickly.

Father St. John, quickly recovering himself, lifted his hat and walked rapidly away.

"You dosed him well, my dear Miss, upon my word, you did. He got it back on you at last, though, didn't he, now? The sleek wolf draws the line at catamounts, eh? Ha! ha!"

Miss Dillon, from a window, took note of the couple and smiled: "Those two old felines will pair off some day, or I'm a my guess; and may the saints speed the union."

Father St. John went direct to the office of the archbishop. His grace ushered him into his inner room, and listened calmly and nodded approval now and then as Father St. John related to him how he had awakened the conscience of the woman who had so nearly escaped the church.

"I think we have in her a true penitent, your grace. God grant she may not turn back."

"Amen," responded the archbishop. Then, in the same breath, "You did not tell her of the fortune we hold in trust for her?"

"No," said St. John, "I did not think the time quite ripe for that."

"Your discretion is commendable, St. John. You are doing your work well. Continue to the end without faltering and the church will reward you."

"I have yet to tell, your grace, that I encountered a lion, or more strictly speaking, a lioness in my path, as I left the residence of Mrs. Maxwell. A sister of the senator, who proved herself to be a ranter of the worst form. She forbid me the house till the return of her brother." And Father Fabio repeated as nearly as possible the uncomplimentary figures of speech the hater of Catholicism had hurled at his priestly head. "And, your grace, in spite of myself, I felt a little guilty."

The archbishop frowned darkly. "You felt guilty, you say? Guilty of what? Does your conscience prick you when you are doing your duty. Verily, I think you need to pluck the beam out of your own eye before you undertake to take the mote from the eye of another."

"I did not mean that I felt guilty of any great sin, your grace," said Father Fabio, humbly. "I felt that I was truly stealing into the fold when the master was away."

"The church knows no master, my young follower, when in the discharge of her duty. I thought I had made this plain to you on a certain occasion which you can scarcely so soon have forgotten."

"I have not forgotten, your grace, and I am indeed weak. But I pray daily for strength."

The archbishop arose and the interview was ended. Poor Father Fabio! He had yet to learn that he must strangle his scruples ere he could give them voice.

When Father St. John reached his home, he found on his table a square white envelope addressed to himself. He opened it and a look of impatience came over his face as he read the delicate writing on the thick, cream-colored, rose-scented paper. The letter summoned him to the home of his wealthiest parishioner. Mrs. Ida Olney was rich, accomplished and very beautiful. Her husband, a wealthy railroad magnate, was in every respect a thorough man of the world. Theirs had been a union purely physical, a passion begotten in a ball-room by the commingling of slow, voluptuous waltz, and its life was as short as the life of the flowers which breathed their dying perfume over it. But their vows had been plighted before the altar of the Lord and a high nuptial mass had made their marriage holy in his sight. But the months had not numbered a year, when this husband and wife found themselves too indifferent to each other for hate; so each sought to make the best of life, interfering as little as possible one with the other.

Robert Olney, though baptized and confirmed in the Catholic church, was the most indifferent of members. He rarely entered a church of any description to attend a funeral or a wedding. His religion was his money and the pleasures it brought him. Seven years had passed away since the union of these two lives. No children had come to them, and as the years went by leaving this great void unfilled, their ways grew further apart. Ida Olney was a regular attendant at church. It was part of her life to glide down the aisle of the cathedral and sink on her knees on the velvet prayer cushion. Her devotions were material and her thoughts never soared beyond what her eyes could see. But since the handsome young half Spanish priest had been appointed to the pastorate of the church of the blessed sacrament, she had generously paid for her pew in the cathedral and dedicated it to the use of strangers. And when it was known that she paid her devotions to the Lord in the distant and more humble church, no one questioned this queen of fashion whose scepter was great beauty wreathed with gold.

Mrs. Olney was waiting in her boudoir for her self-appointed spiritual adviser. A fitting ante-room to Paradise, this luxurious private room of Ida Olney. The mosaic floor was almost hidden by the skins of leopard and tiger, and prayer mats from Persia and Turkey. The walls were hung with the richest fabrics the Oriental looms could produce. The ceiling seemed like a sea of roses, so perfect had been the art of the decorator. Tall vases of jasper and jade, small marble statues and bronzes in various nooks, and bric-a-brac from every land; ottomans of rose-hued plush, low chairs which invited pressure, a couch covered with

cloth of gold, and heaped high with cushions of silk and elderdown, bowls of roses on tables of ebony and burl, all united to make the owner comfortable when she chose to pass a few hours in it.

In an alcove swung an Egyptian lamp whose burning oil diffused an odor of sandal-wood through the room.

In this luxurious room, whose very pictures on the wall appealed to the senses, Ida Olney awaited the only man who in the seven empty years of her married life had awakened her passionate nature into life enough to make her ignore the fact that she was the wife of another. She had fallen in love with the young priest in the very sanctuary of the Lord, and the knowledge that the fruit she longed for was so far above her reach, made the longing fiercer.

Mrs. Olney was deeply read in literature which developed only certain senses. Fiction and history told her that priests had been the lovers of women. Why should not this one love her?

Ida had at last found a man suited in every way to make her happy; but her days of fire had fallen on marble. To-night, robed in black velvet which molded itself to every outline of her tall slim form, which was as graceful and supple as that of a cat, with carbuncles glowing with their deep perpetual fire on the tips of her ears and at her throat, holding together the high Medici collar of her gown, with her hair piled in a blue-black mass on top of her head, and held in place by a dagger of dull gold, she waited with impatience her priest visitor. The wavy fringe of hair falling over her forehead shaded great black hungry eyes, brilliant with the reflection of the fire within. Her mouth, molded like the mouths of the voluptuous Egyptian women, showed a vivid scarlet against the dead white of her complexion. With her slim, nervous fingers, she lit a lamp nearly as tall as herself, a lamp which was a masterpiece of carving in alabaster, and representing a feast of the gods, the god of revelry himself holding high above his head the wine-cup which held the burning oil. From this room all gas or electric lights were excluded. Close to the lamp stood a small table of onyx and gold, on which rested an ivory crucifix beside a rosary of malachite. Mrs. Olney seated herself beside this table and idly picked up the beads, each one of which represented a rich man's prayer; and as she passed them carelessly through her fingers, the fire from her rings mingled with the delicate green of the beads. A low knock at the door, and Ida Olney threw the rosary from her and stepped quickly to the door and opened it. Father St. John stood before her, handsome and elegant in his dead-black clerical dress, unrelieved except by the narrow white priest's collar which encircled his slender neck.

When they were seated, Ida Olney furtively watched the priest with her heavily lidded eyes half veiled, as their conversation flowed smoothly on in tones of cultivation and refinement. Ida Olney had several times been seated thus, opposite the young priest, in the subdued light of the room, and devoured him with gleaming eyes half veiled by their heavy lashes, as a velvet tigress might have lain, half hidden in the tangle of the jungle, making amorous parley with some indifferent mate.

Mrs. Olney was chairman of the committee of arrangements for a fair to be held for the benefit of a convent, and this had been her excuse for sending for Father St. John to consult with him about some of the important details of the affair.

Father Fabio was a priest. He had taken the vows of celibacy. He had made a vow to Heaven never to look upon women as other men looked upon them. These fetters had rested upon him as light as thistle-down. In his calling as priest he had mingled freely with women, but they had been to him simply the daughters of Eve, whom it was his duty to keep in the path which would lead them to the Paradise their sinful mother had lost. But Father Fabio was never quite at his ease in the presence of Mrs. Olney. He knew that this woman, with her twenty-five years and her Cleopatra-like beauty would prove a temptation that a man of any age would find difficult to resist, if he came in the slightest degree under her influence. Seductive as she was, and as close as their relationship had been as priest and parishioner, Father St. John had never yet felt his pulses throb or the blood run faster in his veins when brought into close contact with her. But tonight, in spite of himself, he felt a certain something stealing over his senses that he had never known before in the presence of women. By slow degrees, Mrs. Olney had introduced the subject of love and her own unhappy life.

"No; you priests cannot comprehend. You commune with the saints, and your spiritual love for women of earth is annihilated before it is born, is it not?" And the temptress leaned forward and looked the priest full in the face with hungry gleaming eyes. Father Fabio St. John was a priest, but he was also a man, with the hot blood of his Spanish ancestors in his veins, and this woman was beautiful and seductive enough to make St. Peter himself surrender to her the key of Heaven. And Fabio was

no saint, but a mortal man of twenty-six years. His pale face flushed crimson.

Mrs. Olney exultantly noted the emotion of the priest. It was the first symptom of a passion which she had felt confident could be awakened. She had concentrated all the guile in her nature and thrown it into her eyes to subdue this man fore sworn to her will. "I will make him love me; he shall be mine, even if our two souls pay the forfeit," she had kept repeating to herself all the day.

Before Father St. John had regained his composure enough to answer her, she had thrown herself back in her chair with a heavy sigh, saying: "Ah, no; you priests can only look calmly down on us from your high pedestals, and bid us do our duty in the marriage which the church says God has blessed."

The last words of the woman, who was holding out to him luscious fruit of the tree of knowledge, recalled the priest to himself.

"Yes, Mrs. Olney; God and the church have joined you and your husband together; and no man, priest or layman may presume to break assunder or defile what His hands have welded." Then like a phantom there arose before him the image of another woman, whose union to the man of her choice no priest had sanctified; they, too, had defied all authority to consummate what the church must denounce as a Godless marriage. And to this sinful couple, whom man, not God, had joined together, sweet children had been sent, and the passing years added to, instead of decreasing their love. And this woman before him, whom God had given to a man for a wife, and over whose union a high nuptial mass had been celebrated—had confessed herself the most unhappy of women and was trying, he could ignore the fact no longer, to tempt him, a priest of the holy temple, to break his vows for her sake. Upon which of these marriages did the blessing of God rest?

Then his duty arose clear before him. He must interest this woman in some good work and make her see that her trouble was a thing of her own perverted imagination. So he said: "Mrs. Olney, did you ever look around you and see the real misery there is in the world? Trust me, you will find balm for your own suffering in relieving the pain of others."

A baleful, baffled light flashed from Mrs. Olney's eyes.

"I always give liberally to the church, your reverence, and to the poor fund, to the heathen fund, and all the rest of its charities. And I am now giving my money and my time to make this coming fair a financial success for the benefit of the convent."

And her bitter tone grew more bitter as she added:

"But I shall never go into the slums of the city and place myself in actual contact with creatures repulsive with dirt and disease to find happiness. Have you any other source of sweet comfort to offer me, my spiritual adviser?" And Ida Olney arose and made a mocking courtesy before the priest; then turned and walked to the extreme end of the room, the long train of her dress winding in and out among the furniture like the tail of a serpent, to the alcove where the Egyptian lamp swung languidly to and fro. The lamp was smoking so she turned it low.

Father St. John had slowly followed the angry, restless woman, thinking earnestly. He must not leave her in this rebellious frame of mind. She was, after all, a good church woman. If she refused to work among the slums, he would find work for her in the upper-tenement.

As Ida Olney turned from the lamp, she found the priest standing beside her. Pale and languid now she leaned on the back of a chair. The priest, grave and stern, stood opposite her. "My daughter, as your priest, I command you to cast from you the evil spirit which has taken possession of you tonight, and to listen to me, while I talk to you for your good."

Then, keeping back all that was sacred to the church, he told her of the effort he was making to bring again into the arms of the church the misguided but pure wife of Senator Maxwell, and related with reservations his interview with her in the afternoon. He besought her to help him in his great work, to strengthen and aid this erring woman; suggested that she get Mrs. Maxwell interested in the coming fair. To give Mrs. Olney time to think over his words, he turned to examine some curious heavy scented flowers which filled a bowl on a table near him. Mrs. Olney was acquainted with the wife of Senator Maxwell. She knew her to be one of the purest of women, with an idolatrous love for her handsome, distinguished husband. She had seen her informally in her home, surrounded by her lovely children; and even she, whose imagination was of a kind to give birth to any evil suspicion, could think no evil of the priest's interest in this fair pure woman. Then her woman's pride asserted itself and the polite subterfuge of the language of the world passed her lips.

"Yes, Father St. John, I will help you in this, so far as it lies in my power."

The priest turned from the flower and thanked her, saying: "You will

profit her much and yourself more by so doing." Then, bending over the flowers, he said: "These flowers are very curious, and are entirely unknown to me."

Ida Olney moved slowly to the table. "Yes," she said, "a friend sent them to me today. There are none like them in the city, I believe, except those in his conservatory. They are of the Dionaea species. They feed on insects. Their perfume intoxicates them and they and the flower closes over them. A happy death, after all, and the intoxication which leads to it, is perhaps worth an eternity of cold, scentless life."

The priest looked from the flowers to the dark, beautiful woman before him. Her hungry gleaming eyes were fixed upon his own and he was spell-bound. A young sister of Mrs. Olney's was entertaining a company of her own, in a distant room, and the tones of a mandolin played by some master-hand, came floating to them. The deep Oriental embroidery of the drawn curtain of the alcove fell against Ida Olney as she stood motionless looking at him.

The Egyptian lamp, its perfumed oil nearly exhausted now, swung dim and languid. The soft low music still floated around them. The distant light which the god of revelry held in his hand, filled the room with a soft rosy glow. The atmosphere was heavy and languorous with the combined odors of the murderous flowers and sandal wood and altar of roses. All moral obligations die in such a combination of voluptuousness; but the rank, murderous flowers of passion drive in it.

Father St. John, intoxicated like the insect, felt himself drawing nearer and nearer yet to those gleaming eyes and to that trembling scarlet mouth. He opened his arms, and clasped them tightly over a slim, lithe form which sprung into them. And he who since manhood had known no kiss except the pure one of his mother, was now in a delirium of the senses hitherto unknown, and unimagined, pressing burning kisses on the moist hot lips that had fastened upon his own. The for-

bidden fruit from this tree of knowledge, which he tasted tonight for the first time, was maddening in its sweetness. Closer and closer yet he held to him the form which had grown a dead weight now in his arms. Caught in that eye of passion which breaks all vows, kills honor and leaves red ruin and desolation in its track, Father St. John was in imminent danger of moral destruction.

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