



AUTHOR—"AN ISAAC" Del

CHAPTER XVIII.—CONTINUED.

"You can put people to sleep? Anybody?" Sister Paul opened her faded eyes very wide. "But that is not natural," she said in a perplexed tone. "And what is not natural cannot be right."

"And is all right that is natural?" asked Unorna thoughtfully.

"It is not natural," repeated the other. "How do you do it? Do you use strange words and herbs and incantations?"

Unorna laughed again, but the nun seemed shocked by her levity, and she forced herself to be grave.

"No, indeed!" she answered. "I look into their eyes, and tell them to sleep—and they do. Poor Sister Paul! You are behind the age in the dear old convent here! The thing is done in half the great hospitals of Europe every day, and men and women are cured in that way of diseases that paralyze them in body as well as in mind. Men study to learn how it is done—it is common to-day as a means of healing as the medicines you know by name and taste. It is called hypnosis."

And again the sister gazed at herself.

"I have heard the word," she said, as though she were something diabolical. "Do you heal the sick in this means of this—this?"

"Sometimes," Unorna answered.

"There is an old man," she said, "whom I have kept in my room many years by making him sleep a great deal." Unorna smiled.

"But have you no words?"

"Nothing. It is my will. That is all."

"But if it is of good, and not of the evil one, there should be a prayer with it. Could you not say a prayer with it, Unorna?"

"I dare say I could," replied the other, trying not to laugh. "But that would be doing two things at once—my will would be weakened."

"It cannot be of good," said the nun. "It is not natural, and it is not true that the prayer can detract the will from the performance of a good deed." She shook her head more energetically than usual.

"And it is not good, either, that you should be called a witch, you who have lived here among us."

"It is not my fault," exclaimed Unorna, somewhat annoyed by her persistence. "And, besides, Sister Paul, even if the devil is in it, it would be right all the same."

The nun held up her hands in holy horror, and her jaw dropped.

"My child! my child! How can you say such things to me?"

"It is very true," Unorna answered, quietly smiling at her amazement.

"If people who are ill are made well, is it not a real good, even if the evil one does it? Is it not good to make him do good, if one can, even against his will?"

"No, no!" cried Sister Paul, in great distress. "Do not talk like that—let us not talk of it at all! Whatever it is, it is bad, and I do not understand it, and I am sure that none of us here could, no matter how well you explained it. Unorna, my dear child, then say a prayer each time, against temptation and the devil's works."

With that the good nun crossed herself a third time, and, unconsciously, from force of habit, began to tell beads with one hand, mechanically smoothing her broad starched collar with the other. Unorna was silent for a few minutes, plucking at the sable lining of the cloak which lay beside her upon the sofa where she had dropped it.

"Let us talk of other things," she said at last. "Talk of the other lady who is here. Who is she? What brings her into retreat at this time of year?"

"Poor thing—yes, she is very unhappy," answered Sister Paul. "It is a sad story, so far as I have heard it. Her father is just dead, and she is alone in the world. The abess received a letter yesterday from the cardinal archbishop, requesting that she would receive her, and this morning she came. His eminence knew her father, it appears. She is only to be here for a short time, I believe, until her relations come to take her home to her own country. Her father was taken ill in a country place near the city, which he had hired for the shooting season, and the poor girl was left all alone out there. The cardinal thought she would be safer and perhaps less unhappy with us while she is waiting."

"Of course," said Unorna, with a faint interest. "How old is she, poor child?"

"She is not a child—she must be five and twenty years old, though perhaps her sorrow makes her look older than she is."

"And what is her name?"

"Beatrice—I cannot remember the name of her family," Unorna started.



AUTHOR—"AN ISAAC" Del

CHAPTER XIX.—CONTINUED.

"We were talking together, this woman and I. She looked at me—she was angry—and then I fainted, or fell asleep, I cannot tell which. I awoke in the dark to find myself lying on the altar here. Then she took hold of me and tried to make me sleep again. But I would not. Let her explain, herself, what she has done, and why she brought me here!"

Sister Paul turned to Unorna and met the full glare of her catlike eyes with her own calm, half-heavenly look of innocence.

"What have you done Unorna? What have you done?" she asked very sadly.

But Unorna did not answer. She only looked at the nun more fixedly and savagely.

"Sleep!" said Unorna, putting up her hand. "Sleep, I command you!"

But Sister Paul's eyes did not waver. A sad smile played for a moment upon her waxen features.

"You have no power over me—for your power is not of good," she said, slowly and softly.

Then she quietly turned to Beatrice and took her hand.

"Come with me, my daughter." I have a light and will take you to a place where you will be safe. She will not trouble you any more tonight. Say a prayer, my child, and do not be afraid."

"I am not afraid," said Beatrice. "But where is she?" she asked suddenly.

Unorna had glided away while they were speaking. Sister Paul held the lamp high and looked in all directions. Then she heard the heavy door of the sacristy swing upon its hinges and strike with a soft thud against the small leather cushion. Both women followed her, but as they opened the door again a blast of cold air almost extinguished the lamp. The night wind was blowing in from the street.

"She is gone out," said Sister Paul. "Alone and at this hour—Heaven help her!" It was as she said. Unorna had escaped.

CHAPTER XX.

After leaving Unorna at the convent, the Wanderer had not hesitated as to the course he should pursue.

Meanwhile, she was in danger. She had aroused the violent and deadly resentment of Israel Kafka, a man who, if not positively insane, as Keyork Arabian had hinted, was by no means in a normal state of mind or body; a man beside himself with love and anger, and absolutely reckless of life for the time being; a man who, for the security of all concerned, must be at least temporarily confined in a place of safety, until a proper treatment and the lapse of a certain length of time should bring him to his senses.

There were two reasons which determined the Wanderer to turn to Keyork Arabian for assistance, besides his wish to see the bad business end quickly and without publicity. Keyork, so far as the Wanderer was aware, was himself treating Israel Kafka's case, and would, therefore, know what to do, if any one knew at all. Secondly, it was clear from the message which Unorna had left with the porter of her own house that she expected Keyork to come at any moment. He was, then, in immediate danger of being brought face to face with Israel Kafka without having received the least warning of his present condition, and it was impossible to say what the infuriated youth might do at such a moment. He had been shut up, caught in his own trap, as it were, for some time, and his anger and madness might reasonably be supposed to have been aggravated rather than cooled by his unexpected confinement.

The Wanderer drove to Keyork Arabian's house, and, leaving his carriage to wait in case of need, ascended the stairs and knocked at the door.

"My dear friend!" Keyork exclaimed in his richest and deepest voice, as he recognized the Wanderer. "Come in. I am delighted to see you. You will join me at supper. This is good indeed!"

He took his visitor by the arm and led him in. Upon one of the tables stood a round brass platter covered, so far as it was visible, with arabic inscriptions, and highly polished—one of those commonly used all over the East at the present day for the same purpose. Upon this were placed at random several silver bowls, mere hemispheres, without feet, remaining in a convenient position by their own weight. One of these contained snowy rice, in that perfectly dry but tender state dear to the taste of Orientals; in another there was a savory, steaming mess of tender capon, chopped in pieces with spices and aromatic herbs; a third contained a pure white curd of milk, and a fourth was heaped up with rare fruits. A flagon of Bohemian glass, clear and bright as rock crystal and covered with very beautiful traceries of black and gold, with a drinking vessel of the same design, stood upon the table beside the platter.

"My simple meal," said Keyork, spreading out his hands and smiling

faces of the two women, as they knelt there almost side by side.

The sweet singing of the nun came softly up from below, echoing in the groined roof, rising and falling high and low, and the full radiance of the many waxen tapers shone steadily from the great altar, gilding and warming statue and cornice and ancient moulding, and casting deep shadows into all the places that I could not reach. And still the two women knelt in their high balcony, the one rapt in fervent prayer, the other wondering that the presence of such hatred as hers should have no power to kill, and all the time making a supreme effort to compose her own features into the expression of friendly sympathy and interest which she knew she would need, so soon as the singing ceased and it was time to leave the church again.

The psalms were finished. There was a pause, and then the words of the ancient hymn floated up to Unorna's ears, familiar in years gone by.

"...præ tua clementia, Sis præsul et custodi, Procul recedent somni, Et nocentium fantasmatæ, Vestem que nostrum cæprime."

"Let dreams be far, and phantasms of the night—bind thou our foe," sang Beatrice in long, sweet notes.

Unorna heard no more. The light dazzled her and the blood beat in her heart. It seemed as though no prayer that was ever prayed could be offered up more directly against herself, and the voice that sang it, though not loud, had the rare power of carrying every syllable distinctly in its magic tones, even to a great distance.

Afraid to look around lest her face should betray her emotion, Unorna glanced down at the kneeling nuns. She started. Sister Paul, alone of them all, was looking up, her faded eyes fixed on Unorna's with a look that implored and yet despaired, her clasped hands a little raised from the low desk before her, most evidently offering up the words with the whole fervent intention of her pure soul, as an intercession for Unorna's sins.

For one moment the strong, cruel heart almost wavered, not through fear, but under the nameless impression that sometimes takes hold of men and women.

Then followed the canticle—Nunc dimittis, Domine—the voice of the prioress in the vestibles after that and the voices of the nuns, no longer singing as they made the responses—the Creed—a few more vestibles and responses, the short, final prayers, and all was over. From the church below came up the soft sound that many women make when they move silently together. The nuns were passing out in their appointed order.

Beatrice remained kneeling a few moments longer, crossed herself and then rose. At the same moment Unorna was on her feet.

"We seem to be the only ladies in retreat," she said.

"Yes," Beatrice answered. Even in that one syllable something of the quality of her thrilling voice vibrated for an instant. They walked a few steps farther in silence.

"I am not exactly in retreat," she said presently, either because she felt that it would be almost rude to say nothing, or because she wished her position to be clearly understood. "I am waiting here for some one who is to come for me."

"It is a very quiet place to rest in," said Unorna. "I am fond of it."

"You often come here, perhaps."

"Not now," said Unorna. "But I was here for a long time when I was very young."

By a combic of fate, as they fell into conversation, they began to walk more slowly, side by side.

"Indeed," said Beatrice, with a slight increase of interest. "Then you were brought up here by the nuns?"

"Not exactly. It was a sort of refuge for me when I was almost a child. I was left here alone, until I was thought old enough to take care of myself."

There was a little bitterness in her tone, intentional, but masterly in its truth to nature.

"Left by your parents?" Beatrice asked. The question seemed almost inevitable.

"I had none. I never knew a father nor a mother." Unorna's voice grew sad with each syllable.

They had entered the great corridor in which their apartments were situated, and were approaching Beatrice's door.

"My father died last week," Beatrice said, in a very low tone that was not quite steady. "I am quite alone—here and in the world."

"I am very lonely, too," said Unorna. "May I sit with you for a while?"

"Will you, indeed?" Beatrice exclaimed. "I am poor company, but I shall be very glad if you will come in."

She opened the door and Unorna entered.

"I only came this morning," Beatrice said, as though to apologize for the disorder.

"And do you expect to be here long?" Unorna asked, as Beatrice established herself at the other end of the sofa.

"I cannot tell," was the answer. "I may be here but a few days, or I may have to stay a month."

"I lived here for years," said Unorna, thoughtfully. "I suppose it would be impossible now—I should die of apathy and inanition. I was young then."

"Young then?" she exclaimed. You are young now."

"Less young than I was then," Unorna answered, with a little sigh, followed instantly by a smile.

"I am five and twenty," said Beatrice, woman enough to try and force a confession from her new acquaintance.

"Are you? I would not have thought—we are nearly of an age—quite, perhaps, for I am not yet twenty-six. But, then, it is not the years—" She stopped suddenly.

Beatrice wondered whether Unorna were married or not. Considering the age she admitted and her extreme beauty, it seemed probable that she must be. It occurred to her that the acquaintance had been made without any presentation, and that neither knew the other's name.

"Since I am a little the younger," she said, "I should tell you who I am."

Unorna made a light movement. She was on the point of saying that she knew already—and too well.

"I am Beatrice Varanger."

"I am Unorna." She could not help a sort of cold defiance that sounded in her tone as she pronounced the only name she could call hers.

"Unorna?" Beatrice repeated courteously enough, but with an air of surprise.

"Yes—that's all. It seems strange to you? They call me so because I was born in February, in the month we call Unor. Indeed, it is strange, and so is my story—though it could have little interest for you."

"Forgive me—you are wrong. It would interest me immensely—if you would tell me a little of it—but I am such a stranger to you—"

"I do not feel as though you were that," Unorna answered, with a very gentle smile.

"You are very kind to say so," said Beatrice, quietly.

She related her history, so far as it was known to herself, simply and graphically, substantially as it has been already set forth, but with an abundance of anecdote and comment, which enhanced the interest, and at the same time extended its limits, interspersing her monologues with remarks which called for an answer, and which served as tests of her companion's attention.

"Then you are not married?" Beatrice's tone expressed an interrogation, and a certain surprise.

"No," said Unorna. "I am not married. And you, if I may ask?"

"No," said Beatrice in an altered voice. "I am not married. I shall never marry."

A short silence followed, during which she turned her face away.

"I have pained you," said Unorna, with profound sympathy and regret. "Forgive me! How could I be so tactless?"

"How could you know?" Beatrice asked simply, not attempting to deny the suggestion. But Unorna was suffering, too. She had allowed herself to imagine that in the long years which had passed Beatrice might have forgotten. It had even crossed her mind that she might, indeed, be married. But in the few words, and in the tremor that accompanied them, as well as in the increased pallor in Beatrice's face, she detected a love not less deep and constant and unforgetten than the Wanderer's own.

"Forgive me," Unorna repeated. "I might have guessed. I have loved, too."

For a long time neither spoke again, and neither looked at the other.

Beatrice seemed scarcely conscious of what she was saying, or of Unorna's presence. The words, long kept back and sternly restrained, fell with a strange strength from her lips, and there was not one of them from first to last that did not sate his self like a sharp knife in Unorna's heart.

"I cannot tell you why I have told you—but I have. You shall see him, too. What does it matter? We have both loved, we are both unhappy—we shall never meet again."

"What is it?" Unorna tried to ask, holding the closed case in her hands. "It was like him," she said, watching her companion as though to see what effect the portrait would produce. Then she sank back.

"You knew him?" she cried, half guessing at the truth.

"I know him—and I love him," said Unorna slowly and fiercely, her eyes fixed on her enemy and gradually leaning toward her so as to bring her face nearer and nearer to Beatrice.

The dark woman tried to rise, and could not. There was worse than anger, or hatred, or the intent to kill, in those dreadful eyes. There was a fascination from which no living thing could escape. She tried to scream, to shut out the vision, to raise her hand as a screen before it. Nearer and nearer it came, until she could feel the warm breath of it upon her cheek. Then her brain reeled, her limbs relaxed, and her head fell back against the wall.

"I know him, and I love him," were the last words Beatrice heard.

Unorna gradually regained her self-possession. After all, Beatrice had told her nothing which she did not either wholly know or partly guess, and her anger was not the result of the revelation but of the way in which the story had been told. Word after word, phrase after phrase had cut her and stabbed her to the quick, and when Beatrice had thrust the miniature into her hands her wrath had risen in spite of herself.

She leaned back and looked at Beatrice during several minutes, smiling to herself from time to time, scornfully and cruelly. Then she rose and locked the outer door, and closed the inner one carefully. She knew from long ago that no sound could then find its way to the corridor without. She came back and sat down again, and again looked at the sleeping face, and she admitted for the hundredth time that evening that Beatrice was very beautiful.

She began to walk up and down the room as was her habit when in deep thought, turning over in her mind the deed to be done and the surest and best way of doing it. It occurred to her that Beatrice could not be allowed to live beyond that night.

There was nothing to prevent the possibility of a meeting between Beatrice and the Wanderer, if Beatrice remained alive.

There was no escape from the deed. Beatrice must die. Unorna could produce death in a form which could leave no trace, and it would be attributed to a weakness of the heart.

Unorna was sure of herself, and of her strength, to perform what she contemplated. There lay the dark beauty in the corner of the sofa, where she had sat and talked so long, and told her last story, the story of her life which was now to end. A few determined words spoken in her ear, a pressure of the hand upon the brow and the heart, and she would never wake again. She would lie there still until they found her, hour after hour the pulse growing weaker and weaker, the delicate hands colder, the face more set. At the last there would be a convulsive shiver of the queeny form, and that would be the end. The physicians and the authorities would come and would speak of a weakness of the heart, and there would be masses sung for her soul, and she would rest in peace.

Her soul? In peace? Unorna stood still. Was that to be all her vengeance upon the woman who stood between her and happiness? Was there to be nothing but that, nothing but the painless passing of the pure young spirit from earth to heaven? Was no one to suffer for all Unorna's pain? It was not enough. There must be more than that. And yet, what more? That was the question. What imaginable wealth of agony would be just retribution for her existence? Unorna could lead her, as she had led Israel Kafka, through the life and death of a martyr, through a life of wretchedness and a death of shame, but then, the moment must come at last, since this was to be death indeed, and her spotless soul would be beyond Unorna's reach forever. No, that was not enough. Since she could not be allowed to live to be tormented, vengeance must follow her beyond the end of life.

Unorna stood still, and an awful light of evil came into her face. A thought of which the enormity would have terrified a common being had it entered her mind and taken possession of it. Beatrice was in her power, Beatrice should die in mortal sin, and her soul would be lost forever.

For a long time she did not move, but stood looking down at the calm and lovely face of her sleeping enemy, devising a crime to be imposed upon her for her eternal destruction. Unorna was very superstitious, or the hideous scheme could never have presented itself to her. To her mind the deed was everything, whatever it was to be, and the intention or the unconsciousness in doing it could have nothing to do with the consequences to the soul of the doer. She made no theological distinction. Beatrice should commit some terrible crime, and should die in committing it. Then she would be lost, and devils would do in hell the worst torment which Unorna could not do on earth. A crime—a robbery, a murder—it must be done in the convent. Unorna hesitated, bending her brows and poring, in imagination over her task.

Keyork Arabian! He, indeed, possessed the key to all evil. What would he have done with Beatrice? Would he make her rob the church—murder the abess in her sleep. Bad, but not bad enough.

Unorna started. A deed suggested itself so hellish, so horrible in its enormity, so far beyond all conceivable human sin, that for one moment her brain reeled. She shuddered again and again, and groped for support and leaned against the wall in a bodily weakness of terror. For one moment she, who feared nothing, was shaken by fear from head to foot, her face turned white, her knees shook, her sight failed her, her teeth chattered, her lips moved hysterically.

But she was still strong. The thing she had sought had come to her suddenly. She set her teeth and thought of it again and again, till she could face the horror of it without quaking. Is there any limit to the hardening of the human heart?

The distant clocks chimed the half hour, three-quarters past midnight. Still she waited. At the stroke of 1 she rose from her seat, and standing beside Beatrice, laid her hand upon the dark brow.

A few questions, a few answers followed. She must be assured herself that her victim was in the right state to execute minutely all her commands.

She took Beatrice's hand. The dark woman rose with half-closed eyes and features. Unorna led her out into the dark passage.

"It is light here," Unorna said. "You can see your way. But I am blind. Take my hand—so—and now end me to the church by the nuns' staircase. Make no noise."

"I do not know the staircase," said the sleeper in drowsy terms.

Unorna knew the way well enough, but not wishing to take a light with her, she was obliged to trust herself to other victims, for whose vision there was no such thing as darkness, unless Unorna willed it.

"Go as you went to-day, to the room where the balcony is; but do not enter it. The staircase is on the right of the door and leads into the choir. Go!"

Without hesitation Beatrice led her out into the impenetrable gloom, with wife, noiseless footsteps in the direction commanded, never wavered, nor hesitating whether to turn to the right or the left, but walking as confidently as though in broad daylight.

The stairs ended abruptly against a door. Beatrice stood still. She had received no further commands and she impudently ceased.

"Draw back the bolt, and take me

into the church," said Unorna, who could see nothing, but knew the nuns fastened the doors behind them when they returned into the convent.

Beatrice obeyed without hesitation. A light from her hand, she came out behind the high carved seats of the choir, behind the high altar.

Unorna took her hand and led her forward. She could see now, and the moment had come. She brought Beatrice before the high altar and made her stand in front of it. Then she herself went back and groped for something in the dark. It was the pair of small wooden steps upon which the priest mounts in order to open the golden door of the high tabernacle above the altar, when it is necessary to take therefrom the Sacred host for the benediction, or other consecrated wafers for the administration of the communion. To all Christians of all denominations whatsoever the bread water when once consecrated is a holy thing. To Catholics and Lutherans there is there, substantially, the presence of God. No imaginable act of sacrifice can be more unpardonable than the desecration of the tabernacle and the wilful defilement and destruction of the sacred host.

This was Unorna's determination: Beatrice should commit this crime against heaven, and then die with the whole weight of it upon her soul, and thus should her soul itself be tormented forever and ever from ages to ages.

Beatrice, obedient to her smallest command, and powerless to move or act without her suggestion, stood still as she had been placed, with her back to the church and her face to the altar. Above her head the richly wrought door of the tabernacle caught what little light there was, and reflected it from its own uneven surface.

Unorna paused a moment, looked at the shadowy figure, and then glanced behind her into the body of the church, not out of any ghostly fear, but to assure herself that she was alone with her victim. She saw that all was quite ready, and then she calmly knelt down, just upon one side of the gate, and rested her folded hands upon the marble railing. A moment of intense stillness followed.

The clock in the church tower chimed the first quarter past one. She was able to count the strokes, and was glad to find that she had lost no time. As soon as the long, swinging echo of the bells had died away, she spoke, not loudly, but clearly and distinctly:

"Beatrice Varanger, go forward and mount the steps I have placed for you."

The dark figure moved obediently, and Unorna heard the slight sound of Beatrice's foot upon the wood. The shadowy form rose higher and higher in the gloom, and stood upon the altar itself.

"Now, do as I command you. Open wide the door of the tabernacle!"

Unorna watched the black form intently. It seemed to stretch out its hand, as though searching for something, and then again the arm fell to the side.

"Do as I command you," Unorna repeated, with the agony and dominant intonation that always came to her voice when she was not obeyed.

Again the hand was raised, for a moment groped in the darkness, and sank down into the shadow.

"Beatrice Varanger, you must do my will. I order you to open the door of the tabernacle, to take out what is within and throw it to the ground!" Her voice rang clearly through the church. "And may the crime be on your soul forever and ever," she added in a low voice.

A third time the figure moved. A strange flash of light played for a moment upon the tabernacle, the effect, Unorna thought, of the golden door being suddenly opened.

But she was wrong. The figure moved, indeed, and stretched out a hand and moved again. Then the sudden crash of something very heavy, falling upon stone, broke the great stillness—the dark form tottered, reeled, and fell to its length upon the great altar. Unorna saw that the golden door was still closed, and that Beatrice had fallen. Unable to move or act by her own free judgment, and compelled by Unorna's determined command, she had made a desperate effort to obey.

Unorna sprang to her feet and hastily opened the gate of the railing. In a moment she was standing by the altar at Beatrice's head. She could see that the dark eyes were open now. The great shock had recalled her consciousness.

"Where am I?" she asked, in great distress, seeing nothing in the darkness now, and groping with her hands.

"Sleep—be silent and sleep!" said Unorna in low, firm tones, pressing her palm upon the forehead.

But, to her amazement, Beatrice thrust her aside with such violence that she almost fell herself upon the steps.

"No—no!" cried the startled woman, in a voice of horror. "No—I will not sleep—do not touch me! Oh, where am I—help! help!"

"No—no—no!" she cried, struggling desperately. "You shall not make me sleep. I will not—I will not."

There was a flash of light again in the church, this time from behind the high altar, and the noise of quick footsteps. Neither Unorna nor Beatrice noticed the light or the sound. Then the full glow of a strong lamp fell upon the faces of both and dazzled them, and Unorna felt a cold, thin hand upon her own. Sister Paul was beside them, her face very white and her faded eyes turned from one to the other.

"What is this? What are you doing in this holy place and at this unholy hour?" asked Sister Paul, solemnly and sternly.