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HAGAR OF THE PAWN-SHOP

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HAGAR OF THE PAWN-SHOP

BY

FERGUS HUME

AUTHOR OF

"THE MYSTERY OF A HANSOM CAB," "THE CLOCK STRUCK ONE," ETC.

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HAGAR OF THE PAWN-SHOP.

CHAPTER I.

THE COMING OF HAGAR.

JACOB DIX was a pawnbroker, but not a Jew, notwithstanding his occupation and the Hebraic sound of his baptismal name. He was so old that no one knew his real age; so grotesque in looks that children jeered at him in the streets; so avaricious that throughout the neighborhood he was called "Skinflint." If he possessed any hidden good qualities to counterbalance his known bad ones, no person had ever discovered them, or even had taken the trouble to look for them. Certainly Jacob, surly and uncommunicative, was not an individual inclined to encourage uninvited curiosity. In his pawn-shop he lived like an ogre in a fairy-tale castle, and no one ever came near him save to transact business, to wrangle during the transaction thereof, and to curse him at its conclusion. Thus it may be guessed that Jacob drove hard bargains.

The pawn-shop—situated in Carby's Crescent, Lambeth—furthermore resembled an ogre's castle

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inasmuch as, though not filled with dead men's bones, it contained the relics and wreckage, the flotsam and jetsam, of many lives, of many households. Placed in the center of the dingy crescent, it faced a small open space, and the entrance of the narrow lane which led therefrom to the adjacent thoroughfare. In its windows—begrimed with the dust of years—a heterogeneous mixture of articles was displayed, ranging from silver teapots to well-worn saucepans ; from gold watches to rusty flatirons ; from the chisel of a carpenter to the ivory framed mirror of a fashionable beauty. The contents of Dix's window typified in little the luxury, the meanness, the triviality and the decadence of latter-day civilization.

There was some irony, too, in the disposition of incongruous articles ; for the useful and useless were placed significantly in proximity, and the trifles of frivolity were mingled with the necessaries of life. Here a Dresden china figure, bright-hued and dainty, simpered everlastingly at a copper warming-pan ; there a silver-handled dagger of the Renaissance lay with a score of those cheap dinner-knives whose bluntness one execrates in third-rate restaurants. The band-aged hand of a Pharaohonic mummy touched an agate saucer holding defaced coins of all ages, of all nations. Watches, in alternate rows of gold and silver, dangled over fantastic temples and ships of ivory carved by laborious Chinese artificers. On a square of rich brocade, woven of silks, multi-colored as a parrot's plumage, were

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piled in careless profusion medals, charms, old-fashioned rings set with dim gems, and the frail glass bangles of Indian nautch-girls. A small cabinet of Japanese lacquer, black, with grotesque gilded figures thereon ; talismans of coral from Southern Italy, designed to avert the evil eye ; jeweled pipes of Turkey, set roughly with blue turquoise stones ; Georgian caps with embroideries of tarnished gold ; amulets, earrings, bracelets, snuff-boxes and mosaic brooches from Florence—all these frivolities were thrown the one on top of the other, and all were overlaid with fine gray dust. Wreckage of many centuries ; dry bones of a hundred social systems, dead or dying ! What a commentary on the durability of empire—on the inherent pride of pigmy man !

Within doors the shop was small and dark. A narrow counter, running lengthways, divided the whole into two parts. On the side nearest the entrance three wooden screens by their disposition formed four sentry-boxes, into which customers stepped when bent on business. Jacob, wizen, cunning, and racked by an eternal cough, hovered up and down the space within the counter, wrangling incessantly with his customers, and cheating them on every occasion. He never gave the value of a pawned article : he fought over every farthing ; and even when he obtained the goods at his own price he grudged payment ; for every coin he put down was a drop of blood wrung from his withered heart. He rarely went outside the shop ; he

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never mingled with his fellow-creatures; and, the day's chicanery ended, he retired invariably into a gloomy back parlor, the principal adornment of which was a gigantic safe built into the wall. Here he counted his gains, and saw doubtful customers not receivable in the shop, who came by stealth to dispose of stolen goods. Here, also, in his lighter moments, he conversed with the only friend he possessed in Carby's Crescent—or, indeed, in London. Jacob was in no danger of becoming a popular idol.

This particular friend was a solicitor named Vark, who carried on a shady business, in a shady manner, for shady clients. His name—as he declared himself—proved him to be of Polish descent; but it was commonly reported in the neighborhood that Vark was made to rhyme with shark, as emblematic of the estimation in which he was held. He was hated only one degree less than Jacob, and the two,—connected primarily as lawyer and client,—later on, had struck up a mistrustful friendship by reason of their mutual reputation and isolation. Neither one believed in the other; each tried to swindle on his own account, and never succeeded; yet the two met nightly and talked over their divers rascalities in the dingy parlor, with a confidence begotten by an intimate knowledge of each other's character. The reputations of both were so bad that the one did not dare to betray the other. Only on this basis is honor possible among thieves.

Late one foggy November night Jacob was

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seated with his crony over a pinched little fire which burnt feebly in a rusty iron grate. The old pawnbroker was boiling some gruel, and Vark, with his own private bottle of gin beside him, was drinking a wineglass of it, mixed sparingly with water. Mr. Dix supplied this latter beverage, as it cost nothing, but Vark—on an understanding which dated from the commencement of their acquaintance—always brought his own liquor. A gutterring candle in a silver candlestick—a pawned article—was placed on the deal table, and gave forth a miserable light. The fog from without had percolated into the room, so that the pair sat in a kind of misty atmosphere, hardly illuminated by the farthing dip. Such discomfort, such squalor, was only possible in a penurious establishment like that of Jacob.

Vark was a little, lean, wriggling creature, more like a worm than a man made in the image of his Creator. He had a sharp nose, a pimply face, and two shifty, fishy eyes, green in hue like those of a cat. His dress was of rusty black, with a small—very small—display of linen ; and he rubbed his hands together with a cringing bow every time Jacob croaked out a remark between his coughs. Mr. Dix coughed in a rich but faded dressing-gown, the relic of some dandy of the Regency ; and every paroxysm threatened to shake his frail form to pieces. But the ancient was wonderfully tough, and clung to life with a kind of desperate courage—though Heaven only knows what attraction the old villain found in

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his squalid existence. This tenacity was not approved of by Vark, who had made Jacob's will, and now wished his client to die, so that he, as executor, might have the fingering of the wealth which Dix was reported to possess. The heir to these moneys was missing, and Vark was determined that he should never be found. Meanwhile, with many schemes in his head, he cringed to Jacob, and watched him cough over his gruel.

"Oh, dear, dear!" sighed Mr. Vark, speaking of his client in the third person, as he invariably did, "how bad Mr. Dix's cough is to-night! Why doesn't he try a taste of gin to moisten his throat?"

"Can't afford it!" croaked Jacob, pouring the gruel into a bowl. "Gin's worth money, and money I ain't got. Make me a little present of a glass, Mr. Vark, just to show that you're glad of my company."

Vark complied very unwillingly with this request, and poured as little as he well could into the proffered bowl. "What an engaging man he is!" said the lawyer, smirking—"so convivial, so full of spirits!"

"Your spirits!" retorted Jacob, drinking his gruel.

"What wit!" cried Vark, slapping his thin knees. It's better than *Punch!*"

"Gin-punch! gruel-punch!" said Dix, encouraged by this praise.

"He, he! I shall die with laughing! I've paid for worse than that at the theater!"

"More fool you!" growled Jacob, taking up

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the tongs. "You shouldn't pay for anything. Here, get out! I'm going to put out the fire. I ain't going to burn this expensive coal to warm you. And the candle's half-burnt too!" concluded Jacob, resentfully.

"I'm going—I'm going," said Vark, slipping his bottle into his pocket. "But to leave this pleasant company—what a wrench!"

"Here, stop that stuff, you inkpot! Has my son answered that advertisement yet?"

"Mr. Dix's son hasn't sent a line to his sorrowing parent," returned the lawyer. "Oh, what a hard-hearted offspring!"

"You're right there, man," muttered Jacob, gloomily. "Jimmy's left me to die all alone, curse him!"

"Then why leave him your money?" said Vark, changing into the first person, as he always did when business was being discussed.

"Why, you fool?—'cause he's Hagar's son—the bad son of a good mother."

"Hagar Stanley—your wife—your gipsy wife! Hey, Mr. Dix?"

Jacob nodded. "A pure-blooded Romany. I met her when I was a Crocus."

"Crocus for Cheap Jack!" whined Vark; "the wit this man has!"

"She came along o' me to London when I set up here," continued Jacob, without heeding the interruption, "and town killed her; she couldn't breathe in bricks and mortar after the free air of the road. Dead—poor soul!—dead; and she left me Jimmy—Jimmy, who's left me."

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"What a play of fancy——" began Vark; when, seeing from the fierce look of Jacob that compliments on the score of the dead wife were not likely to be well received, he changed his tone. "He'll spend your money, Mr. Dix."

"Let him! Hagar's dead, and when I die—let him."

"But, my generous friend, if you gave me more power as executor——"

"You'd take my money to yourself," interrupted Dix with irony. "Not if I know it, you shark! Your duty is to administer the estate by law for Jimmy. I pay you!"

"But so little!' whined Vark, rising; "if you——"

At this moment there came a sharp knock at the door of the shop, and the two villains, always expectant of the police, stared at one another, motionless with terror for the moment. Vark, who always took care of his skin, snatched up his hat and made for the back-door, whence, in the fog, he could gain his own house unquestioned and unseen. Like a ghost he vanished, leaving Jacob motionless until aroused by a repetition of the knock.

"Can't be peelers," he muttered, taking a pistol out of a cupboard, "but it might be thieves. Well, if it is——" He smiled grimly, and without finishing his sentence he shuffled along to the door, candle in hand. A third knock came, as the clock in the shop struck eleven.

"Who is there, so late?" demanded Jacob, sharply.

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"I am—Hagar Stanley!"

With a cry of terror, Mr. Dix let the candle fall, and in the darkness dropped also. For the moment,—so much had his thoughts been running on the dead wife,—the unexpected mention of her name made him believe that she was standing rigid in her winding-sheet on the other side of the door. One frail partition between the living and the dead! It was terrible!

"The ghost of Hagar!" muttered Dix, white and shaking. "Why has she come out of her grave?—and so expensive it was; bricked; with a marble tombstone."

"Let me in! let me in, Mr. Dix!" cried the visitor, again rapping.

"She never called me by that name," said Jacob, reassured, and scrambling for the candle; then, having lighted it, he added aloud: "I don't know any one called Hagar Stanley."

"Open the door, and you will. I'm your wife's niece."

"Flesh and blood!" said the old man, fumbling at the lock—"I don't mind that."

He flung wide the door, and out of the fog and darkness a young girl of twenty years stepped into the shop. She was dressed in a dark red garment made of some coarse stuff, and over this she wore a short black cloak. Her hands were bare, and also her head, save for a scarlet handkerchief, which was carelessly twisted round her magnificent black hair. The face was of the true Romany type: Oriental in its contour and hue, with arched eyebrows over large dark

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eyes, and a thin-lipped mouth beautifully shaped, under a delicately-curved nose. Face and figure were those of a woman who needed palms and desert sands and golden sunshine, hot and sultry, for an appropriate background ; yet this Eastern beauty appeared out of the fog like some dead Syrian princess, and presented herself in all her rich loveliness to the astonished eyes of the old pawnbroker.

"So you are the niece of my dead Hagar ?" he said, staring earnestly at her in the thin yellow light of the candle. "Yes, it's true. She looked like you when I met her in the New Forest. What d'ye want ?"

"Food and shelter," replied the girl, curtly. "But you'd better shut the door ; it might be bad for your reputation if any passer-by saw you speaking to a woman at this time of night."

"My reputation!" chuckled Jacob, closing and bolting the door. "Lord ! that's past spoiling. If you knew how bad it is, you wouldn't come here."

"Oh, I can look after myself, Mr. Dix, especially as you're old enough to be my great-grandfather twice over."

"Come, come ! Civil words, young woman !"

"I'm civil to those who are civil to me," retorted Hagar, taking the candle out of her host's hands. "Go on, Mr. Dix, show me in ; I'm tired, and want to sleep. I'm hungry, and wish food. You must give me bed and board."

"Infernal insolence, young woman ! Why ?"

"Because I'm kin to your dead Hagar."

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"Aye, aye, there's something in that," muttered Dix, and dominated, in spite of his inherent obstinacy, by the imperious spirit of the girl, he led her into the dingy parlor. Here she removed her cloak and sat down, while Jacob, in an unusual spirit of hospitality, induced by the mention of his late wife, produced some coarse victuals.

Without a word he placed the food before his guest; without a word she ate, and was refreshed. Jacob marveled at the self-possession of the gipsy, and was rather pleased than otherwise with her bold coolness. Only when she had finished the last scrap of bread and cheese did he speak. His first remark was curt and rude—designedly so.

"You can't stay here!" said the amiable old man.

The girl retorted in kind: "I can, and I shall, Mr. Dix."

"For what reason, you jade?"

"For several—and all good ones," said Hagar, leaning her chin on her hands and looking steadily at his wrinkled face. "I know all about you from a Romany chal who was up here six months ago. Your wife is dead; your son has left you; and here you live alone, disliked and hated by all. You are old and feeble and solitary; but you are by marriage akin to the gentle Romany. For that reason, and because I am of your dead rani's blood, I have come to look after you."

"Jezebel! That is, if I'll let you!"

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"Oh, you'll let me fast enough," replied the woman, carelessly. "You are a miser, I have heard ; so you won't lose the chance of getting a servant for nothing."

"A servant ! You ?" said Dix, admiring her imperial air.

"Even so, Mr. Dix. I'll look after you and your house. I'll scrub and cook and mend. If you'll teach me your trade, I'll drive a bargain with any one—and as hard and fast a one as you could drive yourself. And all these things I'll do for nothing."

"There's food and lodging, you hussy."

"Give me dry bread and cold water, your roof to cover me, and a bundle of straw to sleep on. These won't cost you much, and I ask for nothing more—Skinflint."

"How dare you call me that, you wild cat !"

"It's what they call you hereabouts," said Hagar with a shrug. "I think it suits you. Well, Mr. Dix, I have made my offer."

"I haven't accepted it yet," snapped Jacob, puzzled by the girl. "Why do you come to me ? Why don't you stay with your tribe ?"

"I can explain that in five minutes, Mr. Dix. We Stanleys are just now in the New Forest. You know it ?'

"Truly, lass," said Dix, sadly. "'Twas there I met my Hagar."

"And it is from there that I, the second Hagar, come," replied the girl. "I was with my tribe, and I was happy till Goliath came."

"Goliath ?" inquired Jacob, doubtfully.

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"He is half a Gorgio and half Romany—a red-haired villain, who chose to fall in love with me. I hated him. I hate him still!"—the woman's bosom rose and fell in short, hurried pantings—"and he would have forced me to be his wife. Pharaoh—our king, you know—would have forced me also to be this man's rani, so I had no one to protect me, and I was miserable. Then I recalled what the chal had told me about you who wed with one of us; so I fled hither for your protection, and to be your servant."

"But Goliath—this red-haired brute?"

"He does not know where I have gone; he will never find me here. Let me stay, Mr. Dix, and be your servant. I have nowhere to go to, no one to seek, save you, the husband of the dead Hagar, after whom I am named. Am I to stay or go, now that I have told you the truth?"

Jacob looked thoughtfully at the girl, and saw tears glistening in her heavy eyelashes, although her pride kept them from falling. Moved by her helplessness, mindful of the wife whom he had loved so well, and alive to the advantage of possessing a white slave whom he could trust, the astute ancient made up his mind.

"Stay," said he, quietly. "I shall see if you will be useful to me—useful and faithful, my girl. If so, bread and bed shall be yours."

"It's a bargain," said Hagar, with a sigh of relief. "And now, old man, let me rest in peace, for I am weary, and have walked many a long mile this day."

So in this fashion came Hagar to the pawn-

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shop ; and it was for this reason that Vark, to his great astonishment, found a woman—and what is more, a young and beautiful woman—established in the house of Jacob Dix. The news affected the neighborhood like a miracle, and new tales were repeated about Dix and his housekeeper, who, report said, was no better than she should be. But Hagar did not mind evil tongues ; nor did the old man. Without a spark of love or affection between them, they worked together on a basis of mutual interest ; and all the days that Jacob lived Hagar served him faithfully. Whereat Vark wondered.

It was not an easy life for the girl. Jacob was a hard master, and made her pay dearly for bed and board. Hagar scrubbed walls and floors ; she mended such pawned dresses as required attention ; and cooked the frugal meals of herself and master. The old pawnbroker taught her how to depreciate articles brought to be pawned, how to haggle with their owners, and how to wring the last sixpence out of miserable wretches who came to redeem their pledges. In a short time Hagar became as clever as Jacob himself, and he was never afraid to trust her with the task of making bargains, or with the care of the shop. She acquired a knowledge of pictures, gems, silverware, china—in fact, all the information about such things necessary to an expert. Without knowing it, the untaught gipsy girl became a connoisseur.

It required all Hagar's patience to bear cheerfully the lot which she had chosen voluntarily.

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Her bed was hard, her food meager ; and the old man's sharp tongue was perpetually goading her by its bitterness. Jacob, indeed,—sure of his slave, since she had no other roof save his to cover her,—exercised all the petty arts of a tyrant. He vented on her all the rage he felt against the son who had deserted him. Once he went so far as to attempt a blow ; but a single glance from the fierce eyes of Hagar made him change his intention ; and, cowed for once in his tyranny, Jacob never lifted his hand again against her. He saw plainly enough that if he once raised the devil in this child of the free gipsy race, there would be no laying it again. But, actual violence apart, Hagar's life was as miserable as a human being's well could be.

Stifled in the narrow shop in the crowded neighborhood, she longed at times for the free life of the road. Her thoughts recalled the green woods, so cool and shady in summer ; they dwelt on the brown heath lonely in the starlight, with the red flare of the gipsy fire casting fantastic shadows on caravan and tent. In the darkness of night she would murmur the strange words of the " calo jib," like some incantation to compel memory. To herself, while arranging the curiosities in the shop window, she would sing fragments of Romany songs set in minor keys. The nostalgia of the wilds, of the encampment and the open road, tortured her in the heats of summer ; and when winter descended she longed for the chill breath of country winds sweeping across moors laden with snow, over pools rigid in

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the cold embrace of smooth and glassy ice. In the pawn-shop she was an exile from her dream paradise of roaming liberty.

To make bad worse, Vark fell in love with her. For the first time in his narrow, selfish life, a divine passion touched the gross soul of the thieves' lawyer. Ravished by the dark loveliness of the girl, dominated by her untamed spirit, astonished by her clear mind and unerring judgment, Vark wished to possess this treasure. There was also another reason for the offer of marriage which he made, and this reason he put into words when he asked Hagar to become his wife. It took Vark twelve months to make up his mind to this course ; and his wrath may be guessed when Hagar refused him promptly. The miserable wretch could not believe that she was in earnest.

"Oh, dear, sweet Hagar!" he whined, trying to clasp her hand, "you cannot have heard what your slave said!"

Hagar, who was mending some lace and minding the shop in the absence of Jacob, looked up with a scornful smile. "What you call yourself in jest," said she quietly, "I am in reality ; I sold myself into bondage for bare existence a year ago. Do you want to marry a slave, Mr. Vark?"

"Yes, yes! Then you will no longer need to work like a servant."

"I would rather be a servant than your wife, Mr. Vark."

"The girl's mad! Why?"

"Because you are a scoundrel."

Vark grinned amiably, in no wise disturbed by

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this plain-speaking. "My Cleopatra, we are all scoundrels in these parts. Jacob Dix is——"

"Is my master!" interrupted Hagar, sharply. "So leave him alone. But this offer of yours, my friend. What benefit do you propose to gain if I accept it? You're not asking me to be your wife without some motive."

"Why, that's true enough, my beauty!" chuckled Vark. "Lord, how cunning you are to guess! The motive is double: one part love——"

"We'll say nothing about that, man! You don't know what love is! The other motive?"

"Money!" said Vark, curtly, and without wasting words.

"H'm!" replied Hagar, with irony. "Mr. Dix's money?"

"What penetration!" said the lawyer, slapping his knee. "My word, here's intelligence!"

"We'll pass over the usual compliments, Mr. Vark. Well, how is Mr. Dix's money to benefit you through me?"

"Why," said Vark, blinking his green eyes, "the old man's got a fancy for you, my dear; and all the liking he had for me he's given to you. Before you came, he made a will in favor of his lost son, and appointed me executor. Now that he sees what a sharp one you are, he has made a new will——"

"Leaving all the money to me, I suppose? That's a lie!"

"It is a lie," retorted Vark, "but one I wasn't going to tell you. No; the money is still left to

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the son; but you are the executor under the new will. Now d'ye see?"

"No," said Hagar, folding up her work, "I don't."

"Well, if I marry you, I'll administer the estate in your name——"

"For the benefit of the lost heir? Well?"

"That's just it," said Vark, laying a lean finger on her knee—"the lost heir. Don't you understand? We needn't look for him, so we can keep the moneys in our own hands, and have some fine pickings out of the estate."

Hagar rose, and smiled darkly. "A nice little scheme, and worthy of you," said she, contemptuously; "but there are two obstacles. I'm not your wife, and I am an honest girl. Try some of your lady clients, Mr. Vark. I'm not for sale!"

When she walked away Vark scowled. A scoundrel himself, he could not understand this honesty which stood in the way of its own advancement. Biting his fingers, he stared after Hagar, and wondered how he could catch her in his net.

"If that old miser would only leave her his heiress!" he thought; "she'd have no scruples about taking the money then; and if she had the money, I'd force her to be my wife. But Jacob is set on giving all his wealth to that infernal son of his, who so often wished his father to die. Aha!" sighed Vark, rubbing his hands, "I wish I could prove that he tried to kill the old man. Jacob wouldn't leave him a penny then, and Hagar would have the money, and I would have

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her. What a lovely dream ! Why can't it come true ? "

It was such a lovely dream, and offered such opportunities for scoundrelly dealings, that Vark set to work at once to translate it into actual facts. He had many of the letters and bills of the absent Jimmy, who had been accustomed to come to him for the money refused by the paternal Dix. Counting on the old man's death, Vark had lent the son money for his profligacy at a heavy percentage, and intended to repay himself out of the estate. Now that Hagar was to handle the money instead of himself, he thought that there might be some difficulty over his usury, owing to the girl's absurd honesty. He therefore determined to give proofs to Jacob that the absent son had designed to rid himself of a troublesome father by secret murder. Once Dix got such an idea into his head, he might leave his wealth to Hagar. The heiress would then be wooed and won by skilful, scheming Mr. Vark. It was a beautiful idea, and quite simple.

Among his many shady clients Vark possessed one who was a clever forger, and who occasionally retired to one of Her Majesty's prisons for too frequently exercising his talents in that direction. At the present moment he was at large. Vark gave him a bundle of Jimmy's letters, and the draft of a memorandum which he wished to be imitated in the handwriting of the absent heir. When this was ready, Vark watched his opportunity and slipped it into a Chinese jar in the back parlor, in which he knew Jimmy had

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been accustomed to keep tobacco. This receptacle stood on a high shelf, and had not been touched by Jacob since his son's departure. Vark, like the clever scoundrel he was, ascertained this fact by the thick and undisturbed dust which coated jar and shelf. The trap being thus prepared, it only remained to lead Jacob into it ; and this Mr. Vark arranged to do in the most skilful manner. He quite counted on success, but one necessary element thereto he overlooked, and that was the aid of Hagar. But as he had designed the whole scheme primarily for her benefit, he never thought she would refuse to forward its aim. Which blindness showed that he was incapable of appreciating or even understanding the honesty of the girl's character.

According to his custom, he came one evening to converse with Jacob. The room with its solitary candle, the starved fire, and the foggy atmosphere, were the same as on the night when Hagar had arrived, save that now Hagar herself sat sewing by the table. She frowned when Vark came cringing into the room, but beyond greeting him with a slight nod she took no notice of the smiling scoundrel. Vark produced his bottle of gin, and sat down near the fire, opposite to Jacob, who on this night looked very old and feeble. The old man was breaking up fast, and was more querulous and crabbed than ever. As usual, he asked Vark if Jimmy had answered the advertisement, and as usual he received a negative reply. Jacob groaned.

"I'll die this winter," said he, with moody

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face, "and no one will be by to close my eyes."

"What is this I hear Mr. Dix say!" cried Vark, smilingly. "He forgets our beautiful Hagar."

"Hagar is all very well, but she is not Jimmy."

"Perhaps, if our dear friend knew all, he would be pleased that she isn't."

Hagar looked up in surprise at the significant tones of Vark, and Jacob scowled. "What d'ye mean, you shark?" he demanded, a light coming into his faded eyes.

"Why," replied the lawyer, luring on the old pawnbroker, "Jimmy was a scoundrel."

"I know that, man!" snapped Jacob.

"He wanted your money."

"I know that also."

"He wished for your death."

"It's probable he did," retorted Jacob, nodding; "but he was content to let me take my own time to die."

"H'm! I'm not so sure of that!"

Guessing that Vark had some scheme in his head which he was striving to bring to fulfilment, Hagar dropped her sewing, and looked sharply at him. As Vark spoke she saw him glance at the Chinese jar, and mentally wondered what possible connection that could have with the subject of conversation. On this point she was soon enlightened.

"Vark," said Dix, seriously, "are you going to tell me that Jimmy wished to kill me?"

The lawyer held up his hands in horror,

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"Oh, dear, that I should be so misunderstood!" he said in a piteous tone. "Jimmy was not so bad as that, my venerable friend. But if some one else had put you out of the way, he would not have been sorry."

"Do you mean Hagar?"

"Let him dare to say so!" cried the girl, leaping to her feet with flaming eyes. "I do not know your son, Mr. Dix."

"What!" said Vark, softly; "not red-haired Jimmy!"

Hagar sat down with a pale face. "Red-haired!" she muttered. "Goliath! No, it is impossible!"

Vark looked at Hagar, and she stared back at him again. With the approaching senility of old age, Jacob had ceased to take part in the conversation, and was moodily staring at the miserable fire, a trembling and palsied creature. The idea hinted at by Vark—that Hagar had been employed by Jimmy to destroy him—so stupefied his brain that he was incapable of even expressing an opinion. Seeing this, the lawyer glided away from the dangerous topic, to carry out the second part of his scheme.

"Oh, dear, dear!" he said, hunting in his pockets. "My pipe is empty, and I have no tobacco with me."

"Then go without it, Mr. Vark!" said Hagar, sharply. "There's no tobacco here."

"Oh, yes; I think in that jar," said the lawyer, pointing one lean finger at the high shelf—"Jimmy's jar."

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"Leave Jimmy's jar alone!" mumbled Jacob, savagely.

"What! will not Mr. Dix spare one tiny pipe of tobacco for his old friend?" whined Vark, going towards the shelf. "Oh, I think so; I am certain," and with this one of his long arms shot upwards to seize the jar. Jacob rose unsteadily as Vark took down the article, and he scowled fiercely at the daring of his visitor. Indifferent to what was going on, Hagar continued her sewing.

"Leave that jar of Jimmy's alone, I tell you!" snarled Dix, seizing the poker. "I'll break your fox's head if you don't!"

"Violence—and from gentle Mr. Dix!" cried Vark, still gripping the jar. "Oh, no, no, not at all! If he——"

At this moment Jacob lost patience, and delivered a swinging blow at the lawyer's head.

Ever watchful, Vark threw himself to one side, and the poker crashed down on the jar, which he held in his hands. In a moment it lay in fragments on the floor. A pile of broken china, a loose bit of dried tobacco, and a carelessly folded paper.

"See what your angry passion has done!" said Vark, pointing reproachfully to the *débris*. "You have broken poor Jimmy's jar!"

Jacob threw the poker inside the fender, and bent to pick up the folded paper, which he opened in a mechanical manner. Always methodical, Hagar went out of the room to fetch a dust-pan and broom. Before she could return with them she was recalled by a cry from Vark;

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and on rushing back she saw Jacob prone on the floor among the broken china. He had fainted, and the paper was still clutched in his hand.

"Bring water—salts!" cried Vark, his eyes filled with a triumphant light at the success of his plot. "My venerable friend is ill!"

"What have you been doing to him?" demanded Hagar, as she loosened the scarf round the old man's neck.

"I? Nothing! He read that paper which fell out of the jar—Jimmy's jar," added Vark, pointedly—"and went down like a ninepin!"

There was a jug of water on the table, used by Vark for diluting his gin, so Hagar sprinkled the wrinkled face of her master with this fluid, and slapped his hands. Vark looked on rather anxiously. He did not wish the old man to die yet; and Jacob was a long time coming out of his swoon.

"This paper made him faint," said Vark, removing it from Jacob's feeble grasp. "Let us see what it says." He knew the contents quite well, but nevertheless he read it aloud in a distinct voice for the benefit of Hagar. Thus ran the words: "Memo.: To extract the juice of foxglove—a poison difficult to trace—nothing can be proved after death. Small doses daily in old man's tea or gruel. He would die in a few weeks without suspicion. Will trust nobody, but will prepare drug myself."

Hagar looked steadily at Vark. "Who wrote that," she said in a low voice—"the old man's son or—you?"

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"I?" cried Vark, with well-simulated indignation, "why should I write it?—or how could I write it? The penmanship is that of James Dix; it was concealed in his tobacco-jar; the jar was broken by accident; you saw it yourself. Do you dare to——"

"Be silent!" interrupted Hagar, raising Jacob's head; "he is reviving."

The old pawnbroker opened his eyes and looked wildly around. Little by little his senses returned to him, and he sat up. Then, with the aid of Hagar, he climbed into his chair, and began to talk and sigh.

"Little Jimmy wants me to die," he moaned, feebly. "Hagar's son wants to kill me. Foxglove poison—I know it! Not a trace does it leave after death. Hagar's son! Hagar's boy! Parricide! Parricide!" he cried, shaking his two fists in the air.

"He wanted the money, you know," hinted Vark, softly.

"He shall not have the money!" said Jacob with unnatural energy. "I'll make a new will—I'll disinherit him! Parricide! Hagar shall have all!"

"I, Mr. Dix? No, no!"

"I say yes, you jade! Don't cross a dying man. I am dying; this is my death-blow. O Jimmy, Jimmy! Wolf's cub! My will! my will!"

Pushing back Hagar, who strove to keep him in his chair, he snatched up the candle and staggered towards the safe to get his will. While

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he was looking within, Vark hastily fumbled in his capacious pockets. When Jacob replaced the candle on the table, Hagar saw thereon a sheet of paper covered with writing; also pen and ink. Jacob, clutching the will, beheld these things also, and anticipated the question on Hagar's lips.

"What's all this?"

"Your new will, Mr. Dix," explained Vark, smoothly. "I never did trust your son, and I knew some day that you would find him out. I therefore prepared a will by which you left everything to Hagar. Or," added the lawyer, taking another document from his pocket, "if you chose to make me your heir——"

"You? You? Never!" shrieked Jacob, shaking his fist. "All shall go to Hagar, the namesake of my dead wife. I'm glad you had the sense to see, that failing Jimmy, I'd leave her my money."

"Mr. Dix," interrupted Hagar, firmly, "I do not want your money; and you have no right to rob your son of——"

"No right! No right, you jade! The money is mine! mine! It shall be yours. I could have forgiven anything to Jimmy save his wish to poison me."

"I don't believe he did wish it," said Hagar, bluntly.

"But the paper—his own handwriting!" cried Vark.

"Yes, yes; I know Jimmy's handwriting," said Jacob, the veins in his forehead swelling

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with rage. "He is a devil—a par—par——!" The violence of his temper was such that Hagar stepped forward to soothe him. Even Vark felt alarmed.

"Keep quiet, you old fool!" said he, roughly; "you'll break a blood-vessel! Here, sign this will. I'll witness it; and——" He stopped, and whistled shrilly. A man appeared. "Here is another witness," said Vark. "Sign!"

"It's a plot! a plot!" cried Hagar. "Don't sign, Mr. Dix. I don't want the money."

"I'll make you take it, hussy!" snarled Jacob, crushing the will up in his hand. "I shall leave it to you—not to Jimmy, the parricide. First I'll destroy this." With the old will he approached the fire, and threw it in. With the swiftness of a swallow Hagar darted past him and snatched the document away from the flames before it was even scorched. Jacob staggered back, mad with rage. Vark ground his teeth at her opposition. The stranger witness looked stolidly on.

"No!" cried Hagar, slipping the will into her pocket. "You shall not disinherit your son for me!"

"Give--give—will!" panted Jacob, and, almost inarticulate with rage, he stretched out his hand. Before he could draw it back he reeled and fell; a torrent of blood poured from his mouth. He was dead.

"You fool!" shrieked Vark, stamping. "You've lost a fortune!"

"I've saved my honesty!" retorted Hagar,

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aghast at the sudden death. "Jimmy shall have the money."

"Jimmy! Jimmy!" sneered Vark, wrathfully. "Do you know who Jimmy is?"

"Yes—the rightful heir!"

"Quite so, you jade—and the red-haired Goliath who drove you to this pawn-shop!"

"It is a lie!"

"It is the truth! You have robbed yourself to enrich your enemy!"

Hagar looked at the sneering face of Vark; at the dead man lying at her feet; at the frightened countenance of the witness. She felt inclined to faint, but, afraid lest Vark should steal the will which she had in her pocket, she controlled herself with a violent effort. Before Vark could stop her, she rushed out of the room, and into her bedroom. The lawyer heard the key turn in the lock.

"I've lost the game," he said, moodily. "Go and get assistance, you fool!" this to the witness; then, when the man had fled away, he continued: "To give up all that money to the red-haired man whom she hated! The girl's mad!"

But she was only honest; therefore her conduct was unintelligible to Vark. So this was how Hagar Stanley came to take charge of the pawn-shop in Carby's Crescent, Lambeth. Her adventures therein may be read hereafter.

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CHAPTER II.

THE FIRST CUSTOMER AND THE FLORENTINE DANTE.

It has been explained otherwhere how Hagar Stanley, against her own interests, took charge of the pawn-shop and property of Jacob Dix during the absence of the rightful heir. She had full control of everything by the terms of the will. Jacob had made many good bargains in his life, but none better than that which had brought him Hagar for a slave—Hagar, with her strict sense of duty, her upright nature, and her determination to act honestly, even when her own interests were at stake. Such a character was almost unknown amongst the denizens of Carby's Crescent.

Vark, the lawyer, thought her a fool. Firstly, because she refused to make a nest-egg for herself out of the estate; secondly, because she had surrendered a fine fortune to benefit a man she hated; thirdly, because she declined to become Mrs. Vark. Otherwise she was sharp enough—too sharp, the lawyer thought; for with her keen business instinct, and her faculty for organizing and administering and understanding, he found it impossible to trick her in any way. Out of

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the Dix estate Vark received his due fees and no more, which position was humiliating to a man of his intelligence.

Hagar, however, minded neither Vark nor any one else. She advertised for the absent heir, she administered the estate, and carried on the business of the pawn-shop ; living in the back-parlor meanwhile, after the penurious fashion of her late master. It had been a shock to her to learn that the heir of the old pawnbroker was none other than Goliath, the red-haired suitor who had forced her to leave the gipsy camp. Still, her honesty would not permit her to rob him of his heritage ; and she attended to his interests as though they were those of the man she loved best in the world. When Jimmy Dix, alias Goliath, appeared to claim the property, Hagar intended to deliver up all to him, and to leave the shop as poor as when she entered it. In the mean time, as the months went by and brought not the claimant, Hagar minded the shop, transacted business, and drove bargains. Also, she became the heroine of several adventures, such as the following :

During a June twilight she was summoned to the shop by a sharp rapping, and on entering she found a young man waiting to pawn a book which he held in his hand. He was tall, slim, fair-haired and blue-eyed, with a clever and intellectual face, lighted by rather dreamy eyes. Quick at reading physiognomies, Hagar liked his appearance at the first glance, and, moreover, admired his good looks.

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"I—I wish to get some money on this book," said the stranger in a hesitating manner, a flush invading his fair complexion ; "could you—that is, will you——" He paused in confusion, and held out the book, which Hagar took in silence.

It was an old and costly book, over which a bibliomaniac would have gloated.

The date was that of the fourteenth century, the printer a famous Florentine publisher of that epoch ; and the author was none other than one Dante Alighieri, a poet not unknown to fame. In short, the volume was a second edition of "La Divina Commedia," extremely rare, and worth much money. Hagar, who had learnt many things under the able tuition of Jacob, at once recognized the value of the book ; but with keen business instinct—notwithstanding her prepossession concerning the young man—she began promptly to disparage it.

"I don't care for old books," she said, offering it back to him. "Why not take it to a second-hand bookseller ?"

"Because I don't want to part with it. At the present moment I need money, as you can see from my appearance. Let me have five pounds on the book until I can redeem it."

Hagar, who already had noted the haggard looks of this customer, and the threadbare quality of his apparel, laid down the Dante with a bang. "I can't give five pounds," she said, bluntly. "The book isn't worth it !"

"Shows how much you know of such things,

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my girl ! It is a rare edition of a celebrated Italian poet, and it is worth over a hundred pounds."

"Really ?" said Hagar, dryly. "In that case, why not sell ?"

"Because I don't want to. Give me five pounds."

"No ; four is all that I can advance."

"Four ten," pleaded the customer.

"Four," retorted the inexorable Hagar. "Or else——"

She pushed the book towards him with one finger. Seeing that he could get nothing more out of her, the young man sighed and relented. "Give me the four pounds," he said, gloomily. "I might have guessed that a Jewess would grind me down to the lowest."

"I am not a Jew, but a gipsy," replied Hagar, making out the ticket.

"A gipsy !" said the other, peering into her face. "And what is a Romany lass doing in this Levitical tabernacle ?"

"That's my business !" retorted Hagar, curtly. "Name and address ?"

"Eustace Lorn, 42 Castle Road," said the young man, giving an address near at hand. "But I say—if you are true Romany, you can talk the calo jib."

"I talk it with my kind, young man ; not with the Gentiles."

"But I am a Romany Rye."

"I'm not a fool, young man ! Romany Ryes don't live in cities for choice."

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"Nor do gipsy girls dwell in pawn-shops, my lass!"

"Four pounds," said Hagar, taking no notice of this remark; "there it is, in gold; your ticket also—number eight hundred and twenty. You can redeem the book whenever you like, on paying six per cent. interest. Good night."

"But I say," cried Lorn, as he slipped money and ticket into his pocket, "I want to speak to you, and——"

"Good night, sir," said Hagar, sharply, and vanished into the darkness of the shop. Lorn was annoyed by her curt manner and his sudden dismissal; but as there was no help for it, he walked out into the street.

"What a handsome girl!" was his first thought; and "What a spitfire!" was his second.

After his departure, Hagar put away the Dante, and, as it was late, shut up the shop. Then she retired to the back-parlor to eat her supper—dry bread-and-cheese with cold water—and to think over the young man. As a rule, Hagar was far too self-possessed to be impressionable; but there was something about Eustace Lorn—she had the name pat—which attracted her not a little. From the short interview she had not learnt much of his personality. He was poor, proud, rather absent-minded; and—from the fact of his yielding to her on the question of price—rather weak in character. Yet she liked his face, the kindly expression of his eyes, and the sweetness of his mouth. But after all he was only a chance customer; and—unless he returned

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to redeem the Dante—she might not see him again. On this thought occurring to her, Hagar called common-sense to her aid, and strove to banish the young man's image from her mind. The task was more difficult than she thought.

A week later, Lorn and his pawning of the book were recalled to her mind by a stranger who entered the shop shortly after midday. This man was short, stout, elderly and vulgar. He was much excited, and spoke badly, as Hagar noted when he laid a pawn-ticket number eight hundred and twenty on the counter.

"'Ere, girl," said he in rough tones, "gimme the book this ticket's for."

"You come from Mr. Lorn?" asked Hagar, remembering the Dante.

"Yes; he wants that book. There's the brass. Sharp, now, young woman!"

Hagar made no move to get the volume, or even to take the money. Instead of doing either, she asked a question. "Is Mr. Lorn ill, that he could not come himself?" she demanded, looking keenly at the man's coarse face.

"No; but I've bought the pawn-ticket off him. 'Ere, gimme the book!"

"I cannot at present," replied Hagar, who did not trust the looks of this man, and who wished, moreover, to see Eustace again.

"Dash yer imperance! Why not?"

"Because you did not pawn the Dante; and as it is a valuable book, I might get into trouble if I gave it into other hands than Mr. Lorn's."

"Well, I'm blest! There's the ticket!"

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"So I see; but how do I know the way you became possessed of it?"

"Lorn gave it me," said the man, sulkily, "and I want the Dante!"

"I'm sorry for that," retorted Hagar, certain that all was not right, "for no one but Mr. Lorn shall get it. If he isn't ill, let him come and receive it from me."

The man swore and completely lost his temper—a fact which did not disturb Hagar in the least. "You may as well clear out," she said, coldly. "I have said that you sha'n't have the book, so that closes the question."

"I'll call in the police!"

"Do so; there's a station five minutes' walk from here."

Confounded by her coolness, the man snatched up the pawn-ticket, and stamped out of the shop in a rage. Hagar took down the Dante, looked at it carefully, and considered the position. Clearly there was something wrong, and Eustace was in trouble, else why should he send a stranger to redeem the book upon which he set such store? In an ordinary case, Hagar might have received the ticket and money without a qualm, so long as she was acting rightly in a legal sense; but Eustace Lorn interested her strangely—why, she could not guess—and she was anxious to guard his interests. Moreover, the emissary possessed an untrustworthy face, and looked a man capable, if not of crime, at least of treachery. How he had obtained the ticket could only be explained by its owner; so, after some cogitation,

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Hagar sent a message to Lorn. The gist of this was, that he should come to the pawn-shop after closing time.

All the evening Hagar anxiously waited for her visitor, and—such is the inconsequence of maids—she was angered with herself for this very anxiety. She tried to think that it was sheer curiosity to know the truth of the matter that made her impatient for the arrival of Lorn ; but deep in her heart there lurked a perception of the actual state of things. It was not curiosity so much as a wish to see the young man's face again, to hear him speak, and feel that he was beside her. Though without a chaperon, though not brought up under parental government, Hagar had her own social code, and that a strict one. In this instance, she thought that her mental attitude was unmaidenly and unworthy of an unmarried girl. Hence, when Eustace made his appearance at nine o'clock, she was brusque to the verge of rudeness.

"Who was that man you sent for your book ?" she demanded, abruptly, when Lorn was seated in the back-parlor.

"Jabez Treadle. I could not come myself, so I sent him with the ticket. Why did you not give him the Dante ?"

"Because I did not like his face, and I thought he might have stolen the ticket from you. Besides, I"—here Hagar hesitated, for she was not anxious to admit that her real reason had been a desire to see him again—"besides, I don't think he is your friend," she finished, lamely.

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"Very probably he is not," replied Lorn, shrugging his shoulders. "I have no friends."

"That is a pity," said Hagar, casting a searching glance at his irresolute face. "I think you need friends—or, at all events, one staunch one."

"May that staunch one be of your own sex," said Lorn, rather surprised at the interest this strange girl displayed in his welfare—"yourself, for instance?"

"If that could be so, I might give you unpalatable advice, Mr. Lorn."

"Such as—what?"

"Don't trust the man you sent here—Mr. Treadle. See, here is your Dante, young man. Pay me the money, and take it away."

"I can't pay you the money, as I have none. I am as poor as Job, but hardly so patient."

"But you offered the money through that Treadle creature."

"Indeed no!" explained Eustace, frankly. "I gave him the ticket, and he wished to redeem the book with his own money."

"Did he really?" said Hagar, thoughtfully. "He does not look like a student—as you do. Why did he want this book?"

"To find out a secret."

"A secret, young man—contained in the Dante?"

"Yes. There is a secret in the book which means money."

"To you or Mr. Treadle?" demanded Hagar.

Eustace shrugged his shoulders. "To either

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one of us who finds out the secret," he said, carelessly. "But indeed I don't think it will ever be discovered—at all events by me. Treadle may be more fortunate."

"If crafty ways can bring fortune, your man will succeed," said Hagar, calmly. "He is a dangerous friend for you, that Treadle. There is evidently some story about this Dante of yours which he knows, and which he desires to turn to his own advantage. If the story means money, tell it to me, and I may be able to help you to the wealth. I am only a young girl, it is true, Mr. Lorn; still, I am old in experience, and I may succeed where you fail."

"I doubt it," replied Lorn, gloomily; "still, it is kind of you to take this interest in a stranger. I am much obliged to you, Miss ——"

"Call me Hagar," she interrupted, hastily. "I am not used to fine titles."

"Well, then, Hagar," said he, with a kindly glance, "I'll tell you the story of my Uncle Ben and his strange will."

Hagar smiled to herself. It seemed to be her fate to have dealings with wills—first that of Jacob; now this of Lorn's uncle. However, she knew when to hold her tongue, and saying nothing, she waited for Eustace to explain. This he did at once.

"My uncle, Benjamin Gurth, died six months ago at the age of fifty-eight," said he, slowly. "In his early days he had lived a roving life, and ten years ago he came home with a fortune from the West Indies."

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"How much fortune?" demanded Hagar, always interested in financial matters.

"That is the odd part about it," continued Eustace; "nobody ever knew the amount of his wealth, for he was a grumpy old curmudgeon, who confided in no one. He bought a little house and garden at Woking, and there lived for the ten years he was in England. His great luxury was books, and as he knew many languages—Italian among others—he collected quite a polyglot library."

"Where is it now?"

"It was sold after his death along with the house and land. A man in the city claimed the money and obtained it."

"A creditor. What about the fortune?"

"I'm telling you, Hagar, if you'll only listen," said Eustace, impatiently. "Well, Uncle Ben, as I have said, was a miser. He hoarded up all his moneys and kept them in the house, trusting neither to banks nor investments. My mother was his sister, and very poor; but he never gave her a penny, and to me nothing but the Dante, which he presented in an unusual fit of generosity."

"But from what you said before," remarked Hagar, shrewdly, "it seemed to me that he had some motive in giving you the Dante."

"No doubt," assented Eustace, admiring her sharpness.

"The secret of where his money is hidden is contained in that Dante."

"Then you may be sure, Mr. Lorn, that he

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intended to make you his heir. But what has your friend Treadle to do with the matter?"

"Oh, Treadle is a grocer in Woking," responded Lorn. "He is greedy for money, and knowing that Uncle Ben was rich, he tried to get the cash left to him. He wheedled and flattered the old man; he made him presents, and always tried to set him against me as his only relative."

"Didn't I say the man was your enemy? Well, go on."

"There is little more to tell, Hagar. Uncle Ben hid his money away, and left a will which gave it all to the person who should find out where it was concealed. The testament said the secret was contained in the Dante. You may be sure that Treadle visited me at once and asked to see the book. I showed it to him, but neither of us could find any sign in its pages likely to lead us to discover the hidden treasure. The other day Treadle came to see the Dante again. I told him that I had pawned it, so he volunteered to redeem it if I gave him the ticket. I did so, and he called on you. The result you know."

"Yes; I refused to give it to him," said Hagar, "and I see now that I was quite right to do so, as the man is your enemy. Well, Mr. Lorn, it seems from your story that a fortune is waiting for you, if you can find it."

"Very true; but I can't find it. There isn't a single sign in the Dante by which I can trace the hiding-place."

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"Do you know Italian?"

"Very well. Uncle Ben taught it to me."

"That's one point gained," said Hagar, placing the Dante on the table and lighting another candle. "The secret may be contained in the poem itself. However, we shall see. Is there any mark in the book—a marginal mark, I mean?"

"Not one. Look for yourself."

The two comely young heads, one so fair, the other so dark, were bent over the book in that dismal and tenebrous atmosphere. Eustace, the weaker character of the twain, yielded in all things to Hagar. She turned over page after page of the old Florentine edition, but not one pencil or pen-mark marred its pure white surface from beginning to end. From "L'Inferno" to "Il Paradiso" no hint betrayed the secret of the hidden money. At the last page, Eustace, with a sigh, threw himself back in his chair.

"You see, Hagar, there is nothing. What are you frowning at?"

"I am not frowning, but thinking, young man," was her reply. "If the secret is in this book, there must be some trace of it. Now, nothing appears at present, but later on——"

"Well," said Eustace, impatiently, "later on?"

"Invisible ink."

"Invisible ink!" he repeated, vaguely. "I don't quite understand."

"My late master," said Hagar, without emotion, "was accustomed to deal with thieves, rogues, and vagabonds. Naturally, he had many secrets, and sometimes, by force of circumstances, he

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had to trust these secrets to the post. Naturally, also, he did not wish to risk discovery, so when he sent a letter, about stolen goods for instance, he always wrote it in lemon-juice."

"In lemon-juice! And what good was that?"

"It was good for invisible writing. When the letter was written, it looked like a blank page. No one, you understand, could read what was set out, for to the ordinary eye there was no writing at all."

"And to the cultured eye?" asked Eustace, in ironical tones.

"It appeared the same—a blank sheet," retorted Hagar. "But then the cultured mind came in, young man. The person to whom the letter was sent warmed the seeming blank page over the fire, when at once the writing appeared, black and legible."

"The deuce!" Eustace jumped up in his excitement. "And you think——"

"I think that your late uncle may have adopted the same plan," interrupted Hagar, coolly, "but I am not sure. However, we shall soon see." She turned over a page or two of the Dante. "It is impossible to heat these over the fire," she added, "as the book is valuable, and we must not spoil it; but I know of a plan."

With a confident smile she left the room and returned with a flat iron, which she placed on the fire. While it was heating Eustace looked at this quick-witted woman with admiration. Not only had she brains, but beauty also; and,

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man-like, he was attracted by this last in no small degree. Shortly he began to think that this strange and unexpected friendship between himself and the pawnbroking gipsy beauty might develop into something stronger and warmer. But here he sighed; both of them were poor, so it would be impossible to——

"We will not begin at the beginning of the book," said Hagar, taking the iron off the fire, and thereby interrupting his thoughts, "but at the end."

"Why?" asked Eustace, who could see no good reason for this decision.

"Well," said Hagar, poising the heated iron over the book, "when I search for an article I find it always at the bottom of a heap of things I don't want. As we began with the first page of this book and found nothing, let us start this time from the end, and perhaps we shall learn your uncle's secret the sooner. It is only a whim of mine, but I should like to satisfy it by way of experiment."

Eustace nodded and laughed, while Hagar placed a sheet of brown paper over the last page of the Dante to preserve the book from being scorched. In a minute she lifted the iron and paper, but the page still showed no mark. With a cheerful air the girl shook her head, and repeated the operation on the second page from the end. This time, when she took away the brown paper, Eustace, who had been watching her actions with much interest, bent forward with an ejaculation of surprise. Hagar echoed

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it with one of delight ; for there was a mark and date on the page, half-way down, as thus :

> Oh, abbondante grazia ond' io presumi
> Ficcar lo viso per la luce eterna | 27.12. 38.
> Tanto, che la veduta vi consumi!

"There, Mr. Lorn!" cried Hagar, joyously—"there is the secret! My fancy for beginning at the end was right. I was right also about the invisible ink."

"You are a wonder!" said Eustace, with sincere admiration ; "but I am as much in the dark as ever. I see a marked line, and a date, the twenty-seventh of December, in the year, I presume, one thousand eight hundred and thirty-eight. We can't make any sense out of that simplicity."

"Don't be in a hurry," said Hagar, soothingly ; "we have found out so much, we may learn more. First of all, please to translate those three lines."

"Roughly," said Eustace, reading them, "they run thus : 'O abundant grace, with whom I tried to look through the eternal light so much that I lost my sight.'" He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't see how that transcendentalism can help us."

"What about the date?"

"One thousand eight hundred and thirty-eight," said Lorn, thoughtfully ; "and this is ninety-six. Take one from the other, it leaves fifty-eight, the age at which, as I told you before, my uncle died. Evidently this is the date of his birth."

"A date of birth—a line of Dante!" muttered

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Hagar. "I must say that it is difficult to make sense out of it. Yet, in figures and letters, I am sure the place where the money is concealed is told."

"Well," remarked Eustace, giving up the solution of this problem in despair, "if you can make out the riddle it is more than I can."

"Patience, patience!" replied Hagar, with a nod. "Sooner or later we shall find out the meaning. Could you take me to see your uncle's house at Woking?"

"Oh, yes; it is not yet let, so we can easily go over it. But will you trouble about coming all that way with me?"

"Certainly! I am anxious to know the meaning of this line and date. There may be something about your uncle's house likely to give a clue to its reading. I shall keep the Dante, and puzzle over the riddle; you can call for me on Sunday, when the shop is closed, and we shall go to Woking together."

"O Hagar! how can I ever thank——"

"Thank me when you get the money, and rid yourself of Mr. Treadle!" said Hagar, cutting him short. "Besides, I am only doing this to satisfy my own curiosity."

"You are an angel!"

"And you a fool, who talks nonsense!" said Hagar, sharply. "Here is your hat and cane. Come out this way by the back. I have an ill enough name already, without desiring a fresh scandal. Good night."

"But may I say——"

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"Nothing, nothing!" retorted Hagar, pushing him out of the door. "Good night."

The door snapped to sharply, and Lorn went out into the hot July night with his heart beating and his blood aflame. He had seen this girl only twice, yet, with the inconsiderate rashness of youth, he was already in love with her. The beauty and kindness and brilliant mind of Hagar attracted him strongly; and she had shown him such favor that he felt certain she loved him in return. But a girl out of a pawn-shop! He had neither birth nor money, yet he drew back from mating himself with such a one. True, his mother was dead, and he was quite alone in the world—alone and poor. Still, if he found his uncle's fortune, he would be rich enough to marry. Hagar, did she aid him to get the money, might expect reward in the shape of marriage. And she was so beautiful, so clever! By the time he reached his poor lodging Eustace had put all scruples out of his head, and had settled to marry the gipsy as soon as the lost treasure came into his possession. In no other way could he thank her for the interest she was taking in him. This may seem a hasty decision; but young blood is soon heated; young hearts are soon filled with love. Youth and beauty drawn together are as flint and tinder to light the torch of Hymen.

Punctual to the appointed hour, Eustace, as smart as he could make himself with the poor means at his command, appeared at the door of the pawn-shop. Hagar was already waiting for

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him, with the Dante in her hand. She wore a black dress, a black cloak, and a hat of the same somber hue—such clothes being the mourning she had worn, and was wearing, for Jacob. Averse as she was to using Goliath's money, she thought he would hardly grudge her these garments of wo for his father. Besides, as manageress of the shop, she deserved some salary.

"Why are you taking the Dante?" asked Eustace, when they set out for Waterloo Station.

"It may be useful to read the riddle," said Hagar.

"Have you solved it?"

"I don't know; I am not sure," she said, meditatively. "I tried by counting the lines on that page up and down. You understand—twenty-seven, twelve, thirty-eight; but the lines I lighted on gave me no clue."

"You didn't understand them?"

"Yes I did," replied Hagar, coolly. "I got a second-hand copy of a translation from the old bookseller in Carby's Crescent, and by counting the lines to correspond with those in the Florentine edition I arrived at the sense."

"And none of them point to the solution of the problem?"

"Not one. Then I tried by pages. I counted twenty-seven pages, but could find no clue; I reckoned twelve pages; also thirty-eight; still the same result. Then I took the twelfth, the twenty-seventh, and the thirty-eighth page by numbers, but found nothing. The riddle is hard to read."

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"Impossible, I should say," said Eustace, in despair.

"No; I think I have found out the meaning."

"How? how? Tell me quick!"

"Not now. I found a word, but it seems nonsense, as I could not find it in the Italian dictionary which I borrowed."

"What is the word?"

"I'll tell you when I have seen the house."

In vain Eustace tried to move her from this determination. Hagar was stubborn when she took an idea into her strong brain; so she simply declined to explain until she arrived at Woking—at the house of Uncle Ben. Weak himself, Eustace could not understand how she could hold out so long against his persuasions. Finally he decided in his own mind that she did not care about him. In this he was wrong. Hagar liked him—loved him; but she deemed it her duty to teach him patience—a quality he lacked sadly. Hence her closed mouth.

When they arrived at Woking, Eustace led the way towards his late uncle's house, which was some distance out of the town. He addressed Hagar, after a long silence, when they were crossing a piece of waste land and saw the cottage in the distance.

"If you find this money for me," he said, abruptly, "what service am I to do for you in return?"

"I have thought of that," replied Hagar, promptly. "Find Goliath—otherwise James Dix."

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