BLACK IS WHITE

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SYNOPSIS.

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In the New York home of James Brood, his son, Frederic, receives a wireless from him. Frederic tells Lydia Desmond, his fiancee, that the message announces his father's marriage, and orders Mrs. Desmond, the housekeeper and Lydia's mother, to prepare the house for an immediate home-coming. Brood and his bride arrive. She wins Frederic's liking at first meeting. Brood shows dislike and veiled hostility to his son. Lydia and Mrs. Brood met in the jade-room, where Lydia works as Brood's secretary. Mrs. Brood is startled by the appearance of Ranjab, Brood's Hindu servant. She makes changes in the household and gains her husband's consent to send Mrs. Desmond and Lydia away. She fascinates Frederic. She begins to fear Ranjab in his uncanny appearances and disappearances, and Frederic, remembering his father's East Indian stories and firm belief in magic, fears unknown evil. Ranjab performs feats of magic for Dawes and Riggs. Frederic's father, jealous, unjustly orders his son from the dinner table as drunk. Brood tells the story of Ranjab's life to his guests. "He killed a woman" who was unfaithful to him. Yvonne plays with Frederic's infatuation for her. Her husband warns her that the thing must not go on. She tells him that he still loves his dead wife, whom he drove from his home, through her, Yvonne. Yvonne plays with Brood, Frederic and Lydia as with figures on a chess board. Brood, madly jealous, tells Lydia that Frederic is not his son.

CHAPTER X—Continued.

"And now, Mr. Brood, may I ask why you have always intended to tell me this dreadful thing?" she demanded, her eyes gleaming with a fierce, accusing light.

He stared. "Doesn't—doesn't it put a different light on your estimate of him? Doesn't it convince you that he is not worthy of—"

"No! A thousand times no!" she cried. "I love him. If he were to ask me to be his wife tonight I would rejoice—oh, I would rejoice! Someone is coming. Let me say this to you, Mr. Brood: You have brought Frederic up as a butcher fattens the calves and swine he prepares for slaughter. You are waiting for the hour to come when you can kill his very soul with the weapon you have held over him for so long, waiting, waiting, waiting! In God's name, what has he done that you should want to strike him down after all these years? It is in my heart to curse you, but somehow I feel that you are a curse to yourself. I will not say that I cannot understand how you feel about everything. You have suffered. I know you have, and I—I am sorry for you. And knowing how bitter life has been for you, I implore you to be merciful to him who is innocent."

The man listened without the slightest change of expression. The lines seemed deeper about his eyes, that was all. But the eyes were bright and as hard as the steel they resembled.

"You would marry him?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Knowing that he is a scoundrel?"

"How dare you say that, Mr. Brood?"

"Because," said he levelly, "he thinks he is my son." Voices were heard on the stairs, Frederic's and Yvonne's. "He is coming now, my dear," he went on and then, after a pause fraught with significance, "and my wife is with him."

Lydia closed her eyes as if in dire pain. A dry sob was in her throat.

A strange thing happened to Brood, the man of iron. Tears suddenly rushed to his eyes.

CHAPTER XI.

A Tempest Rages.

Yvonne stopped in the doorway. Ranjab was holding the curtains aside for her to enter. The tall figure of Frederic loomed up behind her, his dark face glowing in the warm light that came from the room. She had changed her dress for an exquisite orchid colored tea-gown of chiffon under the rarest and most delicate of lace. For an instant her gaze rested on Lydia and then went questioningly to Brood's face. The girl's confusion had not escaped her notice. Her husband's manner was but little less convicting. Her eyes narrowed.

"Ranjab said you were expecting us," she said slowly. She came forward haltingly, as if in doubt as to her welcome. "Are we interrupting?"

"Of course not," said Brood, a flush of annoyance on his cheek. "Lydia is tired. I sent Ranjab down to ask Frederic to—"

Frederic interrupted, a trifle too eagerly. "I'll walk around with you, Lydia. It's raining, however. Shall I get the car out, father?"

"No, no!" cried Lydia, painfully conscious of the rather awkward situation. "And please don't bother, Freddy. I can go home alone. It's only a step." She moved toward the door, eager to be away.

"I'll go with you," said Frederic decisively. He stood between her and the door, an embarrassed smile on his lips. "I've got something to say to you, Lydia," he went on, lowering his voice.

"James, dear," said Mrs. Brood, shaking her finger at her husband and with an exasperating smile on her lips, "you are working the poor girl too hard. See how late it is! And how nervous she is. Why, you are trembling, Lydia! For shame, James."

"I am a little tired," stammered Lydia. "We are working so hard, you know, in order to finish the—"

Brood interrupted, his tone sharp and incisive. "The end is in sight. We're a bit feverish over it, I suppose. You see, my dear, we have just escaped captivity in Lhasa. It was a bit thrilling, I fancy. But we've stopped for the night."

"So I perceive," said Yvonne, a touch of insolence in her voice. "You stopped, I dare say, when you heard the vulgar world approaching the inner temple. That is what you broke into and desecrated, wasn't it?"

"The inner temple at Lhasa," he said, coldly.

"Certainly. The place you were escaping from when we came in."

It was clear to all of them that Yvonne was piqued, even angry. She deliberately crossed the room and threw herself upon the couch, an act so childish, so disdainful that for a full minute no one spoke, but stared at her, each with a different emotion.

Lydia's eyes were flashing. Her lips parted, but she withheld the angry words that rose to them. Brood's expression changed slowly from dull anger to one of incredulity, which swiftly gave way to positive joy. His wife was jealous!

Frederic was biting his lips nervously. He allowed Lydia to pass him on her way out, scarcely noticing her so intently was his gaze fixed upon Yvonne. When Brood followed Lydia into the hall to remonstrate, the young man sprang eagerly to his stepmother's side.

"Good Lord, Yvonne," he whispered, "that was a nasty thing to say. What will Lydia think? By gad, is it possible that you are jealous? Of Lydia?"

"Jealous?" cried she, struggling with her fury. "Jealous of that girl! Poof! Why should I be jealous of her? She hasn't the blood of a potato."

"I can't understand you," he said in great perplexity. "You—you told me

Listened Without the Slightest Change of Expression.

tonight that you are not sure that you really love him. You—"

She stopped him with a quick gesture. Her eyes were smoldering. "Where is he? Gone away with her? Go and look, do."

"They're in the hall. I shall take her home, never fear. I fancy he's trying to explain your insinuating—"

She turned on him furiously. "Are you lecturing me? What a tempest in a teapot."

"Lydia's as good as gold. She—"

"Then take her home at once," sneered Yvonne. "This is no place for her."

Frederic paled. "You're not trying to say that my father would—Good Lord, Yvonne, you must be crazy! Why, that is impossible! If—if I thought—" He clinched his fists and glared over his shoulder, missing the queer little smile that flitted across her face.

"You do love her, then," she said, her voice suddenly soft and caressing. He stared at her in complete bewilderment.

"I—I—Lord, you gave me a shock!" He passed his hand across his moist forehead. "It can't be so. Why, the very thought of it—"

"I suppose I shall have to apologize to Lydia," said she, calmly. "Your father will exact it of me, and I shall obey. Well, I am sorry. How does it sound, coming from me? 'I am sorry, Lydia.' Do I say it prettily?"

"I don't understand you at all, Yvonne. I adore you, and yet, by heaven, I—I actually believe I hated you just now. Listen to me: I've been treating Lydia vilely for a long, long time, but—she's the finest, best, dearest girl in the world. You—even you, Yvonne—shall not utter a word against—"

"Ai—e! What heroics!" she cried ironically. "You are splendid when you are angry, my son. Yes, you are almost as splendid as your father. He, too, has been angry with me. He, too, has made me shudder. But he, too, has forgiven me, as you shall this instant. Say it, Freddie. You do forgive me? I was mean, nasty, ugly, vile—oh, everything that's horrid. I take it all back. Now, be nice to me!"

She laid her hand on his arm, an appealing little caress that conquered him in a flash. He clasped her fingers in his and mumbled incoherently as he leaned forward, drawn resistlessly nearer by a strange magic that was hers.

"You—you are wonderful," he murmured. "I knew that you'd regret what you said. You couldn't have meant it."

She smiled, patted his hand gently, and allowed her swimming eyes to rest on his for an instant to complete the conquest. Then she motioned him away. Brood's voice was heard in the doorway. She had, however, planted an insidious thing in Frederic's mind, and it would grow.

Her husband re-entered the room, his arm linked in Lydia's. Frederic was lighting a cigarette at the table.

"You did not mean all that you said a moment ago, Yvonne," said Brood levelly. "Lydia misinterpreted your jest. You meant nothing unkind, I am sure." He was looking straight into her rebellious eyes; the last gleam of defiance died out of them as he spoke.

"I am sorry, Lydia, darling," she said, and reached out her hand to the girl, who approached reluctantly, uncertainly. "I confess that I was jealous. Why shouldn't I be jealous? You are so beautiful, so splendid." She drew the girl down beside her. "Forgive me, dear." And Lydia, whose honest heart had been so full of resentment the moment before, could not withstand the humble appeal in the voice of the penitent. She smiled, first at Yvonne then at Brood, and never quite understood the impulse that ordered her to kiss the warm, red lips that so recently had offended.

"James, dear," fell softly, alluringly from Yvonne's now tremulous lips. He sprang to her side. She kissed him passionately. "Now, we are all ourselves once more," she gasped a moment later, her eyes still fixed inquiringly on those of the man beside her. "Let us be gay! Let us forget! Come, Frederic! Sit here at my feet. Lydia is not going home yet. Ranjab, the cigarettes!"

Frederic, white-faced and scowling, remained at the window, glaring out into the rain-swept night. A steady sheet of raindrops thrashed against the window panes.

"Hear the wind!" cried Yvonne, after a single sharp glance at his tall, motionless figure. "One can almost imagine that ghosts from every graveyard in the world are whistling past our windows. Should we not rejoice? We have them safely locked outside—ai—e! There are no ghosts in here to make us shiver—and—shake."

The sentence that began so glibly trailed off in a slow crescendo, ending abruptly. Ranjab was holding the lighted taper for her cigarette. As she spoke her eyes were lifted to his dark, saturnine face. She was saying there were no ghosts, when his eyes suddenly fastened on hers. In spite of herself her voice rose in response to the curious dread that chilled her heart as she looked into the shining mirrors above her. She shivered as if in the presence of death! For an incalculably brief period their gaze remained fixed and steady, each reading a mystery. Then the Hindu lowered his heavy lashes and moved away. The little by-scene did not go unnoticed by the others, although its meaning was lost.

"There's nothing to be afraid of, Yvonne," said Brood, pressing the hand, which trembled in his. "Your imagination carries you a long way. Are you really afraid of ghosts?"

She answered in a deep, solemn voice that carried conviction. "I believe in ghosts. I believe the dead come back to us, not to flit about, as we are told by superstition, but to lodge—actually to dwell—inside these warm, living bodies of ours. They come and go at will. Sometimes we feel that they are there, but—ah, who knows? Their souls may conquer ours and go on inhabiting—"

"Never!" he exclaimed quickly, but his eyes were full of the wonder that he felt.

"Frederic!" she called imperatively. "Come away from that window."

The young man joined the group. The sullen look in his face had given way to one of acute inquiry. The new note in her voice produced a strange effect upon him. It seemed like a call for help, a cry out of the darkness.

They were all playing for time. Not one of them but who realized that something sinister was attending their little conclave, unseen but vital. Each one knew that united they were safe, each against the other! Lydia was afraid because of Brood's revelations. Yvonne had sensed peril with the message delivered by Ranjab to Frederic. Frederic had come upstairs prepared for rebellion against the caustic remarks that were almost certain to come from his father. Brood was afraid of—himself! He was holding himself in check with the greatest difficulty. He knew that the smallest spark would create the explosion he dreaded and yet courted. Restraint lay heavily yet shiftingly upon all of them.

A long, reverberating roll of thunder ending in an ear-splitting crash that seemed no farther away than the window casement behind them brought sharp exclamations of terror from the lips of the two women. The men, appalled, started to their feet.

"Good Lord, that was close," cried Frederic. "There was no sign of a storm when we came in—just a steady, gentle spring rain."

"I am frightened," shuddered Yvonne, wide-eyed with fear. "Do you think—"

There came another deafening crash. The glare filled the room with a brilliant, greenish hue. Ranjab was standing at the window, holding the curtains apart while he peered upward across the space that separated them from the apartment building beyond the court.

"Take me home, Frederic!" cried Lydia, frantically. She ran toward the door

"I will come," he exclaimed, as they raced down the stairs. "Don't be

Frederic, White Faced and Scowling, Remained at the Window.

frightened, darling. It's all right. Listen to me! Mrs. Desmond is as safe as—"

"Oh, Freddy, Freddy," she wailed, breaking under a strain that he was not by way of comprehending. "Oh, Freddy, dear!" Her nerves gave way. She was sobbing convulsively when they came to the lower hall.

In great distress, he clasped her in his arms, mumbling incoherent words of love, encouragement—even ridicule for the fear she betrayed. Far from his mind was the real cause of her unhappy plight.

He held her close to his breast and there she sobbed and trembled as with a mighty, racking chill. Her fingers clutched his arm with the grip of one who clings to the edge of a precipice with death below. Her face was buried against his shoulder.

"You will come with me, Freddy?" she was whispering, clinging to him as one in panic.

"Yes, yes. Don't be frightened, Lyddy. I—I know everything is all right now. I'm sure of it."

"Oh, I'm sure too, dear. I have always been sure." she cried, and he understood, as she had understood.

Despite the protests of Jones, they dashed out into the blighting thunderstorm. The rain beat down in torrents, the din was infernal. As the door closed behind them Lydia, in the ecstasy of freedom from restraint bitterly imposed, gave vent to a shrill cry of relief. Words, the meaning of which he could not grasp, babbled from her lips as they descended the steps. One sentence fell vaguely clear from the others, and it puzzled him. He was sure that she said: "Oh, I am so glad, so happy we are out of that house—you and I together."

Close together, holding tightly to each other, they breasted the whirling sheets of rain. The big umbrella was of little protection to them, although held manfully to break the force of the cold flood of waters. They bent their strong young bodies against the wind, and a sort of wild, impish hilarity took possession of them. It was freedom, after all. They were fighting a force in nature that they understood and the sharp, staccato cries that came from their lips were born of an exultant glee which neither of them could have suppressed nor controlled. Their hearts were as wild as the tempest about them.

Mrs. Desmond threw open the door as their wet, soggy feet came sloshing down the hall. Frederic's arm was about Lydia as they approached, and both of their drenched faces were wreathed in smiles—gay, exalted smiles. The mother, white-faced and fearful, stared for a second at the amazing pair, and then held out her arms to them.

She was drenched in their embrace. No one thought of the havoc that was being created in that swift, impulsive contact. . . .

"I must run back home," exclaimed Frederic. Lydia placed herself between him and the door.

"No! I want you to stay," she cried.

He stared. "What a funny idea!"

"Wait until the rain is over," added Mrs. Desmond.

"No, no," cried Lydia. "I mean for him to stay here the rest of the night. We can put you up, Freddy. I—I don't want you to go back there until—until tomorrow."

A glad light broke in his face. "By jove, I—do you know, I'd like to stay. I—I really would, Mrs. Desmond. Can you find a place for me?" His voice was eager, his eyes sparkling.

"Yes," said the mother, quietly, almost serenely. "You shall have Lydia's bed, Frederic. She can come in with me. Yes, you must stay. Are you not our Frederic?"

"Thank you," he stammered, and his eyes fell.

"I will telephone to Jones when the storm abates," said Mrs. Desmond. "Now get out of those coats, and—oh, dear, how wet you are! A hot drink for both of you."

"Would you mind asking Jones to send over something for me to wear in the morning?" said Frederic, grinning as he stood forth in his evening clothes.

Ten minutes later, as he sat with them before an open fire and sipped the toddy Mrs. Desmond had brewed, he cried: "I say, this is great!"

Lydia was suddenly shy and embarrassed.

"Good night," she whispered. Her fingers brushed his cheek lightly. He drew her down to him and kissed her passionately.

"Good-night, my Lyddy!" he said, softly, his cheek flushing.

She went quickly from the room.

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Later he stood in her sweet, dainty little bedroom and looked about him with a feeling of mingled awe and wonder. All of her intimate, exquisite belongings, the sanctified treasures of her most secret domain were about him. He wandered. He fingered the articles on her dressing table; smelled of the perfume bottles and smiled as he recognized the sweet odors as being a part of her, and not a thing unto themselves; grinned delightedly at his own photograph in its silver frame that stood where she could see it the last thing at night and the first thing in the morning; caressed—ay, caressed—the little hand mirror that had reflected her gay or troubled face so many times since the dear Christmas day when he had given it to her with his love. He stood beside her bed where she had stood, and the soft rug seemed to respond to the delightful tingling that ran through his bare feet. Her room! Her bed! Her domain!

Suddenly he dropped to his knees and buried his hot face in the cool, white sheets, and kissed them over and over again. Here was sanctuary! His eyes were wet with tears when he arose to his feet, and his arms went out to the closed door.

"My Lyddy!" he whispered chokingly.

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Back there in the rose-hued light of James Brood's study, Yvonne cringed and shook in the strong arms of her husband all through that savage storm. She was no longer the defiant, self-possessed creature he had come to know so well, but a shrinking, trembling child, stripped of all her bravado, all her arrogance, all her seeming guile. A pathetic whimper crooned from her lips in response to his gentle words of reassurance. She was afraid—desperately afraid—and she crept close to him in her fear.

And he? He was looking backward to another who had nestled close to him and whimpered as she was doing now—another who had lived in terror when it stormed.

CHAPTER XII.

The Day Between.

Frederic opened his eyes at the sound of a gentle, persistent tapping on the bedroom door. Resting on his elbow, he looked blankly, wonderingly about the room and—remembered. It was broad daylight. The knocking continued. He dreamed on, his blinking eyes still seeking out the dainty, Lydialike treasures in the enchanted room.

"Frederic! Get up! It's nine o'clock. Or will you have your breakfast in bed, sir?" It was Lydia who spoke, assuming a fine Irish brogue in imitation of their little maid of all work.

"I'll have to, unless my clothes have come over?"

"They are here. Now, do hurry."

He sprang out of bed and bounded across the room. She passed the garments through the partly opened door.

He was artistic, temperamental. Such as he have not the capacity for haste when there is the slightest opportunity to dream and dawdle. He was a full quarter of an hour taking his tub and another was consumed in getting into his clothes. He sallied forth in great haste at nine-thirty-five and was extremely proud of himself, although unshaved.

His first act, after warmly greeting Mrs. Desmond, was to sit down at the piano. Hurriedly he played a few jerky, broken snatches of the haunting air he had heard the night before.

"I've been wondering if I could remember it," he apologized as he followed them into the dining-room. "What's the matter, Lydia? Didn't you sleep well? Poor old girl, I was a beast to deprive you of your bed—"

"I have a mean headache, that's all," said the girl, quickly. He noticed the dark circles under her eyes, and the queer expression, as of trouble, in their depths. "It will go as soon as I've had my coffee."

Night with its wonderful sensations was behind them. Day revealed the shadow that had fallen. They unconsciously shrank from it and drew back into the shelter of their own misgivings. The joyous abandon of the night before was dead. Over its grave stood the specter of unrest, leering.

When he took her in his arms later on, and kissed her, there was not the shadow of a doubt in the mind of either that the restraining influence of a condition over which they had no control was there to mock their endeavor to be natural. They kissed as through a veil. They were awake once more, and they were wary, unconvinced. The answer to their questions came in the kiss itself, and constraint fell upon them.

Drawn by an impulse that had been struggling within him for some time, Frederic found himself standing at the dining-room window. It was a covert though intensely eager look that he directed at another window below. If he hoped for some sign of life in his father's study he was disappointed. The curtains hung straight and motionless. He would have denied the charge that he longed to see Yvonne sitting in the casement waiting to waft a sign of greeting to him, and yet he was conscious of a feeling of disappointment, even annoyance.

With considerable adroitness Lydia engaged his attention at the piano. Keyed up as she was, his every emotion was plain to her perceptions. She had anticipated the motive that led him to the window. She knew that it would assert itself in spite of all that he could do to prevent. She prayed humbly for the thing to happen, pain in her heart, and when her reading proved true, she was prepared to combat its effect. Music was her ally.

"How does it go, Freddy—the thing you were playing before breakfast?" She was trying to pick up the elusive air. "It is such a fascinating, adorable thing. Is this right?"

He came over and stood beside her. His long, slim fingers joined hers on the keyboard, and the sensuous strain of the waltz responded to his touch. He smiled patiently as she struggled to repeat what he had played. The fever of the thing took hold of him at last, as she had known it would. Leaning over her shoulder, his cheek quite close to hers, he played. The hands dropped into her lap. Finally she moved over on the bench and he sat down beside her. He was absorbed in the undertaking. His brow cleared. His smile was a happy, eager one.

"It's a tricky thing, Lyddy," he said enthusiastically, "but you'll get it. Now, listen."

For an hour they sat there, master and pupil, sweetheart and lover, and the fear was less in the heart of each when, tiring at last, the other contentedly abandoned the role of taskmaster and threw himself upon the couch, remarking as he stretched himself in luxurious ease:

"I like this, Lyddy. I wish you didn't have to go over there and slave away at that confounded journal. I like this so well that, 'pon my soul, I'd enjoy loafing here with you the whole day long."

Her heart leaped. "You shall have your wish, Freddy," she said, quite unable to conceal the note of eagerness

Played a Few Jerky, Broken Snatches of the Haunting Air.

in her voice. "I am not going to work today. I—my head, you know. Mother telephoned to Mr. Brood this morning before you were up. Stay here with me. Don't go home, Freddy. I—"

"Oh, I've got to have it out with father sometime," he said, bitterly. "It may as well be now as later on. We've got to come to an understanding."

Her heart was cold. She was afraid of what would come out of that "understanding." All night long she had lain with wide-staring eyes, thinking of the horrid thing James Brood had said to her. Far in the night she aroused her mother from a sound sleep to put the question that had been torturing her for hours. Mrs. Desmond confessed that her husband had told her that Brood had never considered Frederic to be his son, and then the two lay side by side for the remainder of the night without uttering a word and yet keenly awake. They were thinking of the hour when Brood would serve notice on the intruder!

Lydia now realized that the hour was near. "Have it out with father," he had said in his ignorance. He was preparing to rush headlong to his doom. To prevent that catastrophe was the single, all-absorbing thought in Lydia's mind. Her only hope lay in keeping the men apart until she could extract from Brood a promise to be merciful, and this she intended to accomplish if she had to go down on her knees and grovel before the man.

"Oh, Freddy," she cried, earnestly, "why take the chance of making a bad matter worse?" Even as she uttered the words she realized how stupid, how ineffectual they were.

"It can't be much worse," he said gloomily. "I am inclined to think he'll relish a straight-out, fair and square talk, anyhow. Moreover, I mean to take Yvonne to task for the thing she said—or implied last night. About you, I mean. She—"

(TO BE CONTINUED)