

BLACK IS WHITE

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SYNOPSIS.

—10—

In the New York home of James Brood, his son, Frederic, receives a wireless from him. Frederic tells Lydia, Desmond, his fiancée, 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 wife arrive. She wins Frederic's liking at first meeting. Brood shows dislike and veiled hostility to his son. Lydia and Mrs. Brood meet 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 appearance and disappearance, and Frederic, remembering his father's East Indian stories and firm belief in magic, feels a strong aversion to the man. Brood 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, and that he has brought him up to kill his happiness at the proper time with this knowledge. Frederic takes Lydia home through a heavy storm and spends the night at her mother's house. His wavering allegiance to her is strengthened by a day spent with her. Yvonne, over the phone, rouses Frederic's infatuation for her again. Lydia goes to beg Brood not to tell Frederic of his unhappy parentage, but is turned from her purpose. Frederic, at dinner with Dawes and Riggs, is seized with an impulse of filial duty, and under a queer impression that he is influenced by Ranjab's will, hunts up his father, who gives him the cut direct.

CHAPTER XV.

A Mother Intervenes.

Long past midnight the telephone in the Desmond apartment rang sharply, insistently. Lydia, who had just fallen asleep, awoke with a start and sat bolt upright in her bed. A clammy perspiration broke out all over her body. She knew there had been a catastrophe.

She sat there chattering until she heard her mother's door open and then the click of the receiver as it was lifted from the hook. Then she put her fingers to her ears and closed her eyes. The very worst had happened, she was sure of it. The blow had fallen. The only thought that seared her brain was that she had failed him, failed him miserably in the crisis. Oh, if she could only reclaim that lost hour of indecision and cowardice!

The light in the hallway suddenly smote her in the face and she realized for the first time that her eyes were tightly closed as if to shut out some abhorrent sight.

"Lydia!" Her mother was standing in the open door. "Oh, you are awake?" Mrs. Desmond stared in amazement at the girl's figure.

"What is it, mother? Tell me what has happened? Is he—"

"He wants to speak to you. He is on the wire. I—I— His voice sounds very queer—"

The girl sprang out of bed and hurried to the telephone.

"Don't go away, mother—stay here," she cried as she sped past the white-clad figure in the doorway. Mrs. Desmond flattened herself against the wall and remained there as motionless as a statue, her somber gaze fixed on her daughter's face.

"Yes, Frederic—it is I—Lydia. What is it, dear?" Her voice was high and thin.

His voice came jerking over the wire, sharp and querulous. She closed her eyes in anticipation of the blow, her body rigid.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," he was saying, "but I just had to call you up." The words were disjointed, as if he forced them from his lips one by one in a supreme effort at coherency.

"Yes, yes—it's all right. I don't mind. You did right. What is it?"

"I want you to release me from my promise."

"You mean—the promise—but, Freddy, I can't release you. I love you. I will be your wife, no matter what has happened, no matter—"

"Oh, Lord, Lyddy—it isn't that! It's the other—the promise to say nothing to my father—"

"Oh—oh!" she sighed weakly, a vast wave of relief almost suffocating her.

"He has made it impossible for me to go on without—"

"Where are you, Frederic?" she cried, in sudden alarm.

"Oh, I'm all right. I shan't go home, you may be sure of that. Tomorrow will be time enough."

"Where are you? I must know. How can I reach you by telephone—"

There was little comfort for her in the hope held out by her mother as they sat far into the night and discussed the possibilities of the day so near at hand. She could see nothing but disaster, and she could think of nothing but her own lamentable weakness in shrinking from the encounter that might have made the present situation impossible. She tried to make light of the situation, however, prophesying a calmer attitude for Frederic after he had slept over his grievance, which, after all, she argued, was doubtless exaggerated. She promised to go with Lydia to see James Brood in the morning, and to plead with him to be merciful to the boy she was to marry, no matter what transpired. The girl at first insisted on going over to see him that night, notwithstanding the hour, and was dissuaded only after the most earnest opposition.

It was four o'clock before they went back to bed and long after five before either closed her eyes.

Mrs. Desmond, utterly exhausted, was the first to awake. She glanced at the little clock on her dressing-table and gave a great start of consternation. It was long past nine o'clock. While she was dressing, the little maid servant brought in her coffee and toast and received instructions not to awaken Miss Lydia but to let her have her sleep out. A few minutes later she left the apartment and walked briskly around the corner to Brood's home.

Fearing that she might be too late, she walked so rapidly that she was quite out of breath when she entered the house. Mr. Riggs and Mr. Dawes were putting on their coats in the hall preparatory to their short morning constitutional. They greeted her effusively, and with one accord proceeded to divest themselves of the coats, announcing in one voice their intention to remain for a good, old-fashioned chat.

"It's dear of you," she said, hurriedly, "but I must see Mr. Brood at once. Why not come over to my apartment this afternoon for a cup of tea and—"

Mrs. Brood's voice interrupted her. "What do you want, Mrs. Desmond?" came from the landing above. The visitor looked up with a start, not so much of surprise as uneasiness. There was something sharp, unfriendly in the low, level tones.

Yvonne, fully dressed—a most unusual circumstance at that hour of the day—was leaning over the banister rail.

"I came to see Mr. Brood on a very important—"

"Have you been sent over here by someone else?" demanded Mrs. Brood.

"I have not seen Frederic," fell from her lips before she thought.

"I dare say you haven't," said the other with ominous clearness. "He has been here since seven this morning, waiting for a chance to speak to his father in private."

She was descending the stairs slowly, almost lazily, as she uttered the remark.

"They are together now?" gasped Mrs. Desmond.

"Will you come into the library? Good morning, gentlemen. I trust you may enjoy your long walk."

Mrs. Desmond followed her into the library. Yvonne closed the door almost in the face of Mr. Riggs, who had opened his mouth to accept the invitation to tea, but who said he'd "be d—d" instead, so narrow was his escape from having his nose banded.

He emphasized the declaration by shaking his fist at the door.

The two women faced each other. For the first time since she had known Yvonne Brood Mrs. Desmond observed a high touch of color in her cheeks. Her beautiful eyes were alive with an excitement she could not conceal. Neither spoke for a moment.

"You are accountable for this, Mrs. Brood," said Lydia Desmond's mother, sternly, accusingly. She expected a storm of indignant protest. Instead, Yvonne smiled slightly.

"It will not hurt my husband to discover that Frederic is a man and not a milkop," she said, but despite her coolness there was a perceptible note of anxiety in her voice.

"You know, then, that they are—that they will quarrel?"

"I fancy it was in Frederic's mind to do so when he came here this morning. He was still in his evening clothes, Mrs. Desmond."

"Where are they now?"

"I think he has them on," said Yvonne, lightly.

Mrs. Desmond regarded her for a moment in perplexity. Then her eyes flashed dangerously. "I do not think you misunderstood me, Mrs. Brood. Where are Frederic and his father?"

"I am not accustomed to that tone of voice, Mrs. Desmond."

"I am no longer your housekeeper," said the other, succinctly. "You do not realize what this quarrel may mean. I insist on going up to them before it has gone too far."

"Will you be so good, Mrs. Desmond, as to leave this house instantly?" cried Yvonne, angrily.

"No," said the other quietly. "I suppose I am too late to prevent trouble

between those two men, but I shall at least remain here to assure Frederic of my sympathy, to help him if I can, to offer him the shelter of my home."

A spasm of alarm crossed Yvonne's face. "Do you really believe it will come to that?" she demanded, nervously.

"If what I fear should come to pass, he will not stay in this house another hour. He will go forth from it, cursing James Brood with all the hatred that his soul can possess. And now, Mrs. Brood, shall I tell you what I think of you?"

"No, it isn't at all necessary. Besides, I've changed my mind. I'd like you to remain. I do not want to mystify you any further, Mrs. Desmond, but I now confess to you that I am losing my courage. Don't ask me to tell you why, but—"

"I suppose it is the custom with those who play with fire. They shrink when it burns them."

Mrs. Brood looked at her steadily for a long time without speaking. The rebellious, sullen expression died out of her eyes. She sighed deeply, almost despairingly.

"I am sorry you think ill of me, yet I cannot blame you for considering me to be a—a—I'll not say it. Mrs. Desmond, I—I wish I had never come to this house."

"Permit me to echo your words."

"You will never be able to understand me. And, after all, why should I care? You are nothing to me. You are merely a good woman who has no real object in life. You—"

"No real object in life?"

"Precisely. Sit down. We will wait here together, if you please. I—I am worried. I think I rather like to feel that you are here with me. You see, the crisis has come."

"You know, of course, that he turned one wife out of this house, Mrs. Brood," said Mrs. Desmond, deliberately.

Something like terror leaped into the other's eyes. The watcher experienced an incomprehensible feeling of pity for her—she who had been despising her so fiercely the instant before.

"He—he will not turn me out," murmured Yvonne, and suddenly began pacing the floor, her hands clinched.



"I'd Like You to Remain."

Stopping abruptly in front of the other woman, she exclaimed: "He made a great mistake in driving that other woman out. He is not likely to repeat it, Mrs. Desmond."

"Yes—I think he did make a mistake," said Mrs. Desmond, calmly. "But he does not think so. He is a man of iron. He is unbending."

"He is a wonderful man—a great, splendid man," cried Yvonne, fiercely. "It is I—Yvonne LeStrange—who proclaim it to the world. I cannot bear to see him suffer. I—"

"Then why do you—"

Mrs. Brood flushed to the roots of her hair. "I do not want to appear unfair to my husband, but I declare to you, Mrs. Desmond, that Frederic is fully justified in the attitude he has taken this morning. His father humiliated him last night in a manner that made forbearance impossible. That much I must say for Frederic. And permit me to add, from my soul, that he is vastly more sinned against than sinning."

"I can readily believe that, Mrs. Brood."

"This morning Frederic came into the breakfast room while we were having coffee. You look surprised. Yes, I was having breakfast with my husband. I knew that Frederic would come. That was my reason. When I heard him in the hall I sent the servants out of the dining-room. He had spent the night with a friend. His first words on entering the room were these—I shall never forget them: 'Last night I thought I loved you, father, but I have come home just to tell you that I hate you. I can't stay in this house another day. I'm going to get out. But I just wanted you to know that I thought I loved you last night, as a son should love a father. I just wanted you to know.' He did not even look at me, Mrs. Desmond. I don't believe he knew I was there. I shall never forget the look in James Brood's face. It was as if he saw a ghost or some horrible thing that fascinated him. He did not utter a word, but stared at Frederic in that terrible, awestruck way. 'I'm going to get out,' said Frederic, his voice rising. 'You've treated me like a dog all my life and I'm through. I shan't even say good-bye to you. You don't deserve any more consideration from me than I've

received from you. I hope I'll never see you again. If I ever have a son I'll not treat him as you've treated your son. By God, you don't deserve the honor of being called father. You don't deserve to have a son. I wish to God I had never been obliged to call you father. I don't know what you did to my mother, but if you treated her as— Just then my husband found his voice. He sprang to his feet, and I've never seen such a look of rage. I thought he was going to strike Frederic and I think I screamed—just a little scream, of course. I was so terrified. But he only said—and it was horrible the way he said it—'You fool—you bastard!' And Frederic laughed in his face and cried out, unafraid, 'I'm glad you call me a bastard! By God, I'd rather be one than to be your son. It would at least give me something to be proud of—a real father.'"

"Good heaven!" fell from Mrs. Desmond's white lips.

Yvonne seemed to have paused to catch her breath. Her breast heaved convulsively, the grip of her hands tightened on the arms of the chair. Suddenly she resumed her recital, but her voice was hoarse and tremulous.

"I was terribly frightened. I thought of calling out to Jones, but I—I had no voice! Ah, you have never seen two angry men waiting to spring at each other's throats, Mrs. Desmond. My husband suddenly regained control of himself. He was very calm. 'Come with me,' he said to Frederic. 'This is not the place to wash our filthy family linen. You say you want something to be proud of. Well, you shall have your wish. Come to my study.' And they went away together, neither speaking a word to me—they did not even glance in my direction. They went up the stairs. I heard the door close behind them—away up there. That was half an hour ago. I have been waiting, too—waiting as you are waiting now—to comfort Frederic when he comes out of that room a wreck."

Mrs. Desmond started up, an incredulous look in her eyes.

"You are taking his side? You are against your husband? Oh, now I know the kind of woman you are. I know—"

"Peace! You do not know the kind of woman I am. You never will know. Yes, I shall take sides with Frederic."

"You do not love your husband!"

A strange, unfathomable smile came into Yvonne's face and stayed there. Mrs. Desmond experienced the same odd feeling she had had years ago on first seeing the Sphinx. She was suddenly confronted by an unsolvable mystery.

"He shall not drive me out of his house, Mrs. Desmond," was her answer to the challenge.

A door slammed in the upper regions of the house. Both women started to their feet.

"It is over," breathed Yvonne, with a tremulous sigh.

"We shall see how well they were able to take care of themselves, Mrs. Brood," said Mrs. Desmond in a low voice.

"We shall see—yes," said the other, mechanically. Suddenly she turned on the tall, accusing figure beside her.

"Go away! Go now! I command you to go. This is our affair, Mrs. Desmond. You are not needed here. You were too late, as you say. I beg of you, go!" She strode swiftly toward the door. As she was about to place her hand on the knob it was opened from the other side, and Ranjab stood before them.

"Sahib begs to be excused, Mrs. Desmond. He is just going out."

"Going out?" cried Yvonne, who had shrunk back into the room.

"Yes, sahibah. You will please excuse, Mrs. Desmond. He regret very much."

Mrs. Desmond passed slowly through the door, which he held open for her. As she passed by the Hindu she looked full into his dark, expressive eyes, and there was a question in hers. He did not speak, but she read the answer as if it were on a printed page. Her shoulders drooped.

She went back to Lydia.

CHAPTER XVI.

"To My Own Sweetheart."

When James Brood and Frederic left the dining-room nearly an hour prior to the departure of Mrs. Desmond, there was in the mind of each the resolution to make short work of the coming interview. Each knew that the time had arrived for the parting of the ways, and neither had the least desire to prolong the suspense.

The study door was closed. James Brood put his hand on the knob, but, before turning it, faced the young man with an odd mixture of anger and pity in his eyes.

"Perhaps it would be better if we had nothing more to say to each other," he said, with an effort. "I have changed my mind. I cannot say the thing to you that I—"

"Has it got anything to do with Yvonne and me?" demanded Frederic ruthlessly, jumping at conclusions in his new-found arrogance.

Brood threw open the door. "Step inside," he said in a voice that should have warned the younger man, it was so prophetic of disaster. Frederic had touched the open sore with that unhappy question. Not until this instant had James Brood admitted to himself that there was a sore and that it had been festering all these weeks. Now it was laid bare and smarted with pain. Nothing could save Frederic after that reckless, deliberate thrust at the very core of the malignant growth that lay so near the surface.

It had been in James Brood's heart to spare the boy.

Hot words were on Frederic's lips.

They were alone in his room. He squared his shoulders.

"I suppose you think I am in love with her," he said defiantly. He waited a moment for the response that did not come. Brood was regarding him with eyes from which every spark of compassion had disappeared. "Well, it may interest you to know that I intend to marry Lydia this very day."

Brood advanced a few steps toward him. In the subdued light of the room his features were not clearly distinguishable. His face was gray and shadowy; only the eyes were sharply defined. They glowed like points of light, unflinching.

"I shall be sorry for Lydia," he said levelly.

"You needn't be," said Frederic hotly. "She understands everything."

"Have you told her that you love her and no one else?"

"Certainly!"

"Then you have lied to her."

There was silence—tense silence. "Do you expect me to strike you for that?" came at last from Frederic's lips, low and menacing.

"You have always considered yourself to be my son, haven't you?" pursued Brood deliberately. "Can you say to me that you have behaved of late as a son should—"

"Wait! We'll settle that point right now. I did lose my head. Head, I say, not heart. I shan't attempt to explain—I can't, for that matter. As for Yvonne—well, she's as good as gold. She understands me better than I understand myself. She knows that even honest men lose their heads sometimes. I can say to you now that I would sooner have cut my own throat than to do more than envy you the possession of one you do not deserve. I have considered myself your son. I have no apology to make for my—we'll call it infatuation. I shall only admit that it has existed and that I have despaired. As God is my witness, I have never loved any one but Lydia. I have given her pain, and the amazing part of it is that I can't help myself. Naturally, you can't understand what it all means. You are not a young man any longer. You cannot understand."

"Good God!" burst from Brood's lips. Then he laughed aloud—grotesquely.

"Yvonne is the most wonderful thing that has ever come into my life. I adored her the instant I saw her. I have felt sometimes that I knew her a thousand years ago. I have felt that I loved her a thousand years ago." A calm seriousness now attended his speech, in direct contrast to the violent mood that had gone before. "I have thought of little else but her. I confess it to you. But through it all there has never been an instant in which I did not worship Lydia Desmond. I—I do not pretend to account for it. It is beyond me."

Brood waited patiently to the end. "Your mother before you had a somewhat similar affliction," he said, still in the steady, repressed voice. "Perhaps it is a gift—a convenient gift—this ability to worship without effort."

"Better leave my mother out of it," said Frederic sarcastically. A look of wonder leaped to his eyes. "That's the first time you've condescended to acknowledge that I ever had a mother."

Brood's smile was deadly. "If you have anything more to say to me, you would better get it over with. Purge your soul of all the gall that embitters it. I grant you that privilege. Take your innings."

A spasm of pain crossed Frederic's face. "Yes, I am entitled to my innings. I'll go back to what I said downstairs. I thought I loved and honored you last night. I would have forgiven everything if you had granted me a friendly—friendly, that's all—just a friendly word. You denied—"

"I suppose you want me to believe that it was love for me that brought you slinking to the theater," said the other ironically.

"I don't expect you to believe anything. I was lonely. I wanted to be with you and Yvonne. Can't you understand how lonely I've been all my life? Can't you understand how hungry I am for the affection that every other boy I've known has had from his parents? I've never asked you about my mother. I used to wonder a good deal. Every other boy had a mother. I never had one. I couldn't understand. I no longer wonder. I know now that she must have hated you with all the strength of her soul. God, how she must have hated to feel the touch of your hands upon her body! Something tells me she left you, and if she did, I hope she afterwards found someone who—but no, I won't say it. Even now I haven't the heart to hurt you by saying that." He stopped, choking up with the rush of bitter words. "Well, why don't you say something?"

"I'm giving you your innings. Go on," said Brood, softly.

"She must have loved you once—or she wouldn't have married you. She must have loved you or I wouldn't be here in this world. She—"

"Ha!" came sharply from Brood's stiff lips.

"—didn't find you out until it was too late. She was lovely, I know. She was sweet and gentle and she loved happiness. I can see that in her face, in her big, wistful eyes. You—"

"What's this?" demanded Brood, started. "What are you saying?"

"Oh, I've got her portrait—an old photograph. For a month I've carried it here in this pocket-case, over my heart. I wouldn't part with it for all the money in the world. When I look at the dear, sweet, girlish face and her eyes look back into mine, I know that she loved me."

"Her portrait?" said Brood, unbelieving.

"Yes—and I have only to look at it to know that she couldn't have hurt

you—so it must have been the other way round. She's dead now, I know, but she didn't die for years after I was born. Why was it that I never saw her? Why was I kept up there in that damnable village—"

"Where did you get that photograph?" demanded Brood, hoarse with anger. "Where, I say! What damned interfering fool—"

"I wouldn't be too hasty, if I were you," said Frederic, a note of triumph in his voice. "Yvonne gave it to me. She made her promise to say nothing about it to you."

"Yvonne found it? Yvonne? She gave it to you? What trick of fate was this? But—ah, it may not be a portrait of your mother. Some of the photographs—"

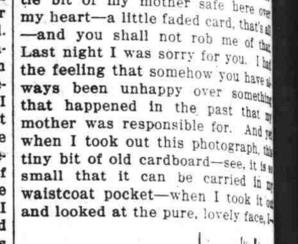
"No, it is my mother. Yvonne has the resemblance at once and brought it to me. And it may interest you to know that she advised me to treasure it all my life because it would always tell me how lovely and sweet my mother was—the mother I have never seen."

"I insist on seeing that photograph," said Brood, with deadly intensity.

"No," said Frederic, folding his arms tightly across his breast. "You didn't deserve her then and you—"

"You don't know what you are saying, boy!"

"Ah, don't! Well, I've got just a little bit of my mother safe here on my heart—a little faded card, that's all—and you shall not rob me of it. Last night I was sorry for you. I had the feeling that somehow you have always been unhappy over something that happened in the past that your mother was responsible for. And when I took out this photograph, that tiny bit of old cardboard—see, it is so small that it can be carried in my waistcoat pocket—when I took it out and looked at the pure, lovely face, I—"



"I Shall Be Sorry for Lydia," He Said Levelly.

by heaven, I knew she was not to blame."

"Have you finished?" asked Brood, wiping his brow. It was dripping with sweat.

"Except to repeat that I am through with you forever. I've had all that can endure and I'm through. My greatest regret is that I didn't get it over long ago. But like a fool—a weak fool—I kept on hoping that you'd change and that there were better days ahead for me. I kept on hoping that you'd be a real father to me. Good Lord, what a libel on the name!"

He laughed raucously. "I'm sick of calling you father. You did me a thousand wrongs by calling me 'bastard.' You had no right to call me that, but by heaven, if it were not for this bit of cardboard here over my heart, I'd shout from the housetops that I am no son of yours. But there's no such luck as that! I've only to look at my mother's innocent, soulful face to—"

"Stop!" shouted Brood in an awed voice. His clenched hands were raised above his head. "The time has come for me to tell you the truth about that innocent mother of yours. Luck was with you. I am not your father. You are—"

"Wait! If you are going to tell me that my mother was not a good woman, I want to go on record in advance of anything you may say, as being glad that I am her son no matter who my father was. I am glad that she loved me because I was her child, and if you are not my father then I still have the joy of knowing that she loved some one man well enough to—"

He broke off the bitter sentence and with nervous fingers drew a small leather case from his waistcoat pocket. "Look at her face. It will make you ashamed of yourself. Can you stand there and lie about her after looking into—"

He was holding the window curtains apart, and a stream of light fell upon the lovely face, so small that Brood was obliged to come quite close to be able to see it. His eyes were dazzled.

"It is not Matilde—it is like her, but—Yes, yes, it is Matilde! I was begging my mind to have thought—"

He wiped his brow. "But, good God, it was startling—positively uncanny—"