



#### CHAPTER XV.

Obedient to his instructions, old Carl Crum had taken his departure from the venerable roof that had sheltered his head so long, and for which he felt an almost romantic attachment, and domiciled himself in a tenant house on the Roloff place near the ferry that had for so many years been the scene of his labors. What the old fellow thought on the subject of his disgrace from the confidence he had enjoyed in Roloff House for so many years, nobody had an opportunity to know precisely, for he maintained a dignified silence, and went about his duties with his usual taciturn industry.

But if old Carl viewed his displacement by the vagabond Leeb Sackett with seeming indifference, his faithful companion in the service of Roloff House, old Margaret, did not. The advent of Mr. Sackett, which took place the very day of Carl's departure, aroused the spirit of the worthy dame in quite an unexpected manner, and led to a volubility of indignant expression of her feelings rather surprising to that individual.

Leb, affected to treat it all with easy indifference, however, and at once made himself at home in his new position. "It is quite needless for you to rail at me, fair and amiable Margaret," he replied, to one of the old woman's outbursts; "the powers that be have put me here, and here I mean to stay. You will like my company better after you get better acquainted with me"—and his lips parted in a satirical smile that showed his yellow fangs in a not very agreeable manner.

"Like a wolf," snapped old Margaret, her faded blue eyes fairly blazing her hatred and indignation. "A pretty new you are for Roloff House, indeed, you thief and vagabond, as your father and mother were before you. What have you come here to steal? Oh, I'll watch you—I'll watch you!"

And watch him she did. Leb soon found that it would have been impossible to have put a more vigilant and unrelenting detective on his actions than this faithful old domestic. She would steal around the house after him in the most tireless and noiseless way, and the constant fear of being under her observation rather interrupted the pleasure he had promised himself in exploring the nooks and crannies of the strange old mansion. Whenever he betook himself to a new field of investigation, he was pretty sure soon to be greeted with the picture of old Margaret's grey head and wrinkled features framed in the shadow of a doorway or window, with all-observing eyes fixed fearlessly and suspiciously upon him.

But Leb was not the kind of a man to be easily discouraged. He resolved mentally "to fix the old lady," and, pending his reflections on the matter, he took occasion to report her attitude to his employer.

"It wouldn't be a bad idea to get rid of her in some way," suggested the amiable Mr. Sackett.

"I might drop her in the old well, or look her up in one of the old cellars and leave her there," responded Mr. Sackett.

"Whoever would ever take the trouble to inquire about her, I reckon."

"No; no; that wouldn't do," answered the lawyer.

"You must think of some other plan. I don't want her hurt. I might make trouble."

"Well," continued Leb, "I'll try and fix it in some way. I feel a big interest in having her out of the way, but I have a good deal bigger interest in keeping myself out of trouble. So I ain't likely to do anything very wicked. Hang her, though, I'd enjoy the little job of wringing her weakened old neck. But I suppose I will have to put up with her awhile yet. I'll see what can be done."

No further reference was made to the subject, and two or three weeks slipped by without any change of affairs in Roloff House. Old Margaret, in the meantime, did not become a bit reconciled to the presence of Leeb Sackett, and that worthy found her watchfulness and vigorous enmity to be anything but agreeable to him in his new position.

#### CHAPTER XVI.

Ralph Sackett was not a young man to take leave of his characteristic shrewdness even in such a delicate matter as love-making. Having resolved to win Rosa Bryn, he knew the best plan to lead to ultimate success was to boldly and persistently lay siege to her heart. He was well aware that he would require great address and persistence for him to achieve ultimate success, and all his plans were laid for conducting a long and difficult suit with as much precision and method as if it were a law case instead of a matrimonial matter that her natural goodness

of heart and modesty of nature precluded her repelling his advances until he had gained the advantage of actually declaring his love for her. She took every possible precaution to avoid his society. It was true, but as he was not at all backward in obtruding himself upon her company, and was a frequent and welcome guest of her father at his house, it was impossible for her to avoid his company entirely. Thus Ralph was offered his own opportunity to declare himself, and the occasion was well chosen. It was a beautiful early spring day, and Rosa had been to the village on some errand, when, on her way home, she was joined by the young lawyer. He proceeded home with her, entering himself to get the gate, and managed shrewdly to engage her in an animated conversation on the appropriate subject of flora culture, which, being a topic she took a deep interest in, she was unconsciously led out of her usual mood of studied reticence in his company, and even awakened into some life and enthusiasm in expressing her views on a subject in which she took such a deep interest. Ralph was a young man of quite general reading, and, as is sometimes the case with those of the coldest and most selfish nature, had quite a passion for flowers, and was well informed on their cultivation, and capable of displaying enthusiasm and erudition in discussing the subject.

So he managed to lead the guileless girl from one point to another, until at last they were holding an animated conversation on the general subject of flowers, and it was not long before he had gained the advantage of a favorable turn of the conversation to introduce a subject of love and declare his attachment for her.

"Yes, dear Rosa," he said, in his most beguiling tones, as she stood surprised and confused in consequence of his unexpected declaration. "I love you with my whole heart. You are, to my eyes, the chiefest flower in all Nature's garden of beauty, which, to win and wear on this faithful heart, I may well desire to make the ruling ambition of my life."

In reply to this ardent language, Rosa could only stammer.

"Really Mr. Sackett, I cannot listen to you. You do wrong to yourself to address me so. It is my error if I have given you the slightest reason to indulge a hope that I could look favorably on your addresses. I most truly cannot. I would wrong you to leave you under the slightest delusion. Believe me, it is impossible."

Ralph was quick to catch the implied admission of the generous-hearted girl that she might have unconsciously led him to hope for her favor.

"But why?" he made haste to urge. "Most truly, I have seen no reason to incline me to believe that your attitude toward me was such as to shut out hope. And even if it were, I could not be less amiable and loving, and cherish the fond hope to win you. But why not, I cannot, indulge so terrible a belief as that you will deliberately decline to listen to my suit, and at least not give yourself time and opportunity to ascertain whether my attentions may not in time become more agreeable to you?"

"It is needless, believe me, Mr. Sackett," she replied, "do not wrong yourself with such a hope."

"Ah, but Rosa, I cannot help it. The thought of love may be new to you, but my dear girl, you are now of an age to excite admiration and attract suitors, and why should I not seek to be among the number of your faithful worshippers? I could not expect to be without rivals, but, knowing my own heart, I can well indulge the hope of being able to surpass all in faithfulness and devotion."

Tears sprang to the eyes of the young girl. The situation was becoming very embarrassing for her, and she determined to cut it short by a candid explanation.

"Let me be frank with you, Mr. Sackett," she said. "My faith is already pledged to another, and I cannot break it."

"Unwelcome as the news is to me," replied Ralph, showing no sign of discouragement, "I do not see how it entirely shuts me out from hope. I had reason, perhaps, to suspect such a fact, but I also had reason to believe that it was not an objection that would prove in any way insuperable. Indeed, I do not know but that your relations in that direction had been broken off. Of course, you allude to Claude Roloff. Much as I respect and admire him as a friend, I cannot believe that he has lacked the sincerity and earnestness of a true manly character in his attentions to you. In fact without breaking confidence, I think I may say that an objection of that nature would be a practical surrender of all ties that bound him to his native land, and that he confessed as much, and I have also reason to believe that he has since formed new ties in the place of his present residence which would preclude the idea that he regarded any pledges he might lightly have made to you as binding. No, no; I cannot shut out mine. Let me speak to you, Rosa, kindly but earnestly, that all others save only yourself, perhaps, have regarded his attentions to you as lacking in real sincerity. I know that such is your father's opinion. I did not presume to indulge a hope of becoming your suitor without first declaring my intentions to him, and learning that he did not regard my character and hopes unfavorably; and I was given to understand by him that not only was your hand free so far as he knew, but that, even if an engagement did exist with Mr. Roloff, it could never receive his consent. He regards, as I assure you others regard, the ambition of that young man as of a kind that will never admit itself to the circumstances of our quiet little community and peaceful life, and that it is calculated to excite him, even if it had been witnessed under less terrifying circumstances. The stone was across his breast, as he lay stretched upon his back; his face was twisted back and turned toward them; his glassy eyes protruded; and blood had flowed from his mouth and nostrils. It was evident that his life had been crushed out at once."

little lapse of time will settle clearly. All I ask, my dear girl, is that you will not forbid me to indulge a hope that your hand will yet be free for me to sue for with all the ardor and deep love that is in my heart."

This request was humble enough, but Rosa was scarce listening. She was deeply agitated, and felt a hasty impulse to break away from the disagreeable interview.

"You must excuse me now, Mr. Sackett," she said hurriedly. "I cannot listen to you longer. I have duties awaiting me in the house. Good day."

Turning almost abruptly, she proceeded with hasty steps toward the house.

The young man watched her disappear, and then turned to retrace his steps toward the village. He whistled to himself lightly as he walked along, for his object was not disappointed at the reception his declaration had received. His only object had been to establish himself as a declared suitor for the maiden's hand, and in that object he had been perfectly successful. He was resolved that not one rebuff nor a hundred, should discourage him. He meant to win by persistence, address and opportunity, and time and fortune, he well knew, were in his favor.

#### CHAPTER XVII.

The excitement caused by the disappearance of Leeb Sackett, and the public opinion in regard to the reason therefor, naturally came to the ears of lawyer Sackett and his son.

"Leb seems to have managed that little job of getting old Margaret out of the house very neatly," remarked Ralph, as they were discussing the matter.

"Yes," responded the other. "He said he'd try to fix it, and he has succeeded very finely. But I am puzzled to know why he keeps himself so quiet since the old lady left. Perhaps he is only trying to keep up the mystery, but I have my suspicions somewhat aroused. To tell the truth, I haven't any too much confidence in Leb. He's just a trifle too smart to be trustworthy. It is now four days since he has reported. Suppose after dinner we walk over and see what is up."

Ralph assented, and, dinner being over, they proceeded to visit Roloff House.

As they drew near the old place, it looked as silent and deserted as if it had not had an inhabitant in years. They approached the great front door and the elder Sackett placed his hand on the heavy iron knocker and sounded an alarm vigorous enough to have waked the soundest sleeper. It was some seconds before the echoes ceased reverberating through the vacant halls and rooms.

"Well, perhaps so," responded the other. "But I hate terribly to be taken in by any one in such a manner. Still, as you say, it is good luck that the old house is safe, but what it contains I don't know. There is something valuable in it. This affair will make a big talk, but of course it will be seen at once that Leb was the cause of his own destruction, or if some superstitious enough to attribute it to supernatural means, as many no doubt will, it can make no difference to us. I suspect we will have difficulty now to get some one to put in Leb's place, but even if we have to look the old house up, this event will inspire such dread that I do not believe any one will be so bold as to molest it hereafter."

Thus discussing the matter, they soon reached home, and, after a short rest and consultation, the proper authorities were notified of the tragic accident that had happened in Roloff House.

The officers of the law and a few assistants soon made ready to proceed to the scene of the strange occurrence. They were well provided with lights, and, on investigation, the hurried surmises of Anthony Sackett in regard to the cause of Leb's death were fully confirmed. He had evidently made an attempt to break in the old vault, but, failing in his first efforts, had drilled holes in the massive door and attempted to blow it out with a blast of powder. The only result had been to jar the heavy masonry and loosen a huge stone that rested as a sort of projecting cap above the door of the vault, and, as he had approached and was probably occupied in observing the effects of the blast, the stone had given way from its position and fallen upon him, forcing him backward and crushing him beneath its weight.

The corpse was carried away, an inquest held upon it, resulting in the usual verdict of accidental death. So the would-be robber had been caught in his own trap.

To the general public, however, Leb's tragic ending was proof positive that Roloff House was "possessed" by evil spirits, and that the tradition that the old vault was protected by the Evil One was the sober truth. His recklessness in risking himself in such a foolhardy contest with the powers of evil was commented on with many sober shakes of the head, and all the old, well-known stories in regard to strange occurrences at the old mansion were revived and retailed with impressive earnestness to groups of interested listeners.

As he had surmised, Anthony Sackett could secure no one to take the place made vacant by the death of Leb Sackett. He would not have old Carl Crum so, trusting in the protection which the popular belief that the house was the abode of evil spirits would afford, he had it carefully closed up and left to only such occasional inspection as he and Ralph should together make.

drilled, and fired his powder blast, only to loosen the stones above, however, and one has fallen upon him as he approached to see the effect of his operations, and crushed him to death. Strange and fatal reward of his knavery! What a spectacle! It leads one to think of the stories they tell of the Evil One keeping guard over the vault. I'm not superstitious, Ralph, but this thing unmans me. Let us get out of this. We can learn nothing further now. We must touch nothing (I'll notify the proper legal authorities) it's a strange tragedy. It sickens me. Let us get out."

They turned to go, when the feeble flame of the candle grew suddenly faint and then expired, leaving them in total darkness. The situation was one that might well inspire terror in the hearts of braver men. Already horrified as they were, the sudden quenching of the light threw them into a panic of fear. They scrambled for the cellar door, as though the Evil One himself were ready to seize them, tumbling over each other and falling sprawling on the cellar bottom. Fear added to their confusion, and they were some time in finding the door. But they at last succeeded in doing so, and hastened up the narrow stairs into the dark hall above. Here again they were in trouble, and some moments of fearful suspense were passed ere they discovered the stairway that led to the upper hall. They finally succeeded in gaining the door by which they had entered, and drew easier breaths.

"When," exclaimed Anthony Sackett, "that is the worst scrape that I ever got into, I wouldn't be done there again for a thousand dollars."

"No, nor for ten thousand," added Ralph. "I never was so scared in my life—I'll own to that. I'm all in a tremble, and it's lucky I did not break my neck. I've got some good bruises as it is."

"And I, too," added the elder, with rueful countenance. "Curse the old house; I'm afraid it is bound to bring us all luck. I suspect it is the devil's property after all. But let us get home. We must have this matter attended to. Of course, this event will arouse tenfold more gossip in regard to the old place. The superstitious will be more assured than ever that it is haunted by evil spirits. I confess that Leb's strange death staggers me for the moment. I must have time to get over my fright before I can think clearly about it."

"One thing is certain," interposed Ralph, who had somewhat recovered his coolness by this time, the gate of the yard being passed. "Leb has been filled in his game of robbery, and the old vault is safe. It is good luck, after all."

"Well, perhaps so," responded the other. "But I hate terribly to be taken in by any one in such a manner. Still, as you say, it is good luck that the old house is safe, but what it contains I don't know. There is something valuable in it. This affair will make a big talk, but of course it will be seen at once that Leb was the cause of his own destruction, or if some superstitious enough to attribute it to supernatural means, as many no doubt will, it can make no difference to us. I suspect we will have difficulty now to get some one to put in Leb's place, but even if we have to look the old house up, this event will inspire such dread that I do not believe any one will be so bold as to molest it hereafter."

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CHAPTER XVIII.

Events drifted along a few weeks without any event to startle the community in regard to Roloff House.

The old place remained locked up and deserted, but it was better protected by the superstitious dread in which it was held than if it had a score of guards. Mr. Sackett had sent off letters to Claude explaining and smoothing over the late events, and also taking occasion to drop him certain hints that would lead him to infer that old Mr. Bryn's dislike to him continued and that he had used his influence to prevent Rosa marrying him. He did not say this directly; in fact, he was careful not to let Claude suspect that he took any interest whatever in his love affairs; but he deftly managed to weave certain facts and hints in his letter, as if by the mere inadvertence, which the young man could not well help interpreting so as to arouse his suspicions that Rosa's love for him was all

[To be continued.]  
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