

Doctor Dorn's Revenge

Louisa May Alcott

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They stood together by the sea, and it was evident the old, old story was being told, for the man's face was full of pale excitement, the girl's half averted from the ardent eyes that strove to read the fateful answer in her own.

"It may be folly to speak when I have so little to offer," he said, with an accent of strong and tender emotion in his voice that went straight to the girl's heart. "It may be folly, and yet if you love as I love we can wait or work together happy in the affection which wealth cannot buy nor poverty destroy. Tell me truly, Evelyn, may I hope?"

She longed to say "yes," for in her heart she knew she loved this man, so rich in youth, comeliness, talent, and ardor, but, alas! so poor in fortune and friends, power and place. He possessed all that wins a woman's eye and heart, nothing that gratifies worldly ambition or the vanity that is satisfied with luxury regardless of love. She was young, proud, and poor, her beauty was her only gift, and she saw in it her only means of attaining the place she coveted. She had no hope but in a wealthy marriage; for this end she lived and wrought, and had almost won it, when Max Dorn appeared, and for the first time her heart rebelled. Something in the manful courage, the patient endurance with which he met and bore, and would in time conquer misfortune, woke her admiration and respect. He was different from those about her, and carried with him the unconscious but sovereign charm of integrity. The love she saw in his eloquent eyes seemed a different passion from the shallow, selfish sentimentality of other men. It seemed to ennoble by its sincerity, to bless by its tenderness, and she found it hard to put it by.

As she listened to his brief appeal, made impressive by the intensity of repressed feeling that trembled in it, she wavered, hesitated, and tried to silence conscience by a false plea of duty.

Half turning with the shy glance, the soft flush of maiden love and shame, she said slowly:

"If I answered yes I should wrong both of us, for while you work and I wait that this may be made possible, our youth and strength will be passing away, and when the end is won we shall be old and tired, and even love itself worn out."

"If it be true love it never can wear out," he cried, impetuously; but she shook her delicate head, and a shadow passed across her charming face, paling its bloom and saddening its beauty.

"I know that poets say so, but I have no faith in the belief. Hearts grow gray as well as heads, and love cannot defy time any more than youth can. I've seen it tried and it always fails."

"So young, yet so worldly-wise, so lovely, yet so doubtful of love's dominion," murmured Max, on whom her words fell with a foreboding chill.

"I have felt the bitterness of poverty, and it has made me old before my time," she answered, with the shadow deepening on her face. "I could love you, but I will not." And the red lips closed resolutely as the hard words left them.

"Because I am poor?"

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"Because we are poor."

For an instant something like contempt shone in his eyes, then pity softened their dark brilliance, and a passionate pain thrilled his voice as he said, with a despairing glance:

"Then I may not hope!".She could not utter the cruel word "No" that rose to her lips; a sudden impulse ruled her; the better nature she had tried to kill prompted a truer answer, and love, half against her will, replied:

"You may hope a little longer."

"How long?" he questioned, almost sternly, for even with the joy of hope came a vague disquiet and distrust.

"Till to-morrow."

The tell-tale color flushed into her cheeks as the words escaped her, and she could not meet the keen yet tender eyes that searched her downcast face.

"To-morrow!" he echoed; "that is a short probation, but none the less hard for its brevity if I read your face aright. John Meredith has spoken, and you find money more tempting than love."

Her head dropped on her hands, and for an instant she struggled with an almost irresistible impulse to put her hand in his and show him she was nobler than he believed. But she had been taught to control natural impulses, to bend her will, to yield her freedom to the one aim of her life, and calling it necessity, to become its slave. Something in his look and tone stung her pride and gave her strength to fight against her heart. In one thing he was mistaken; John Meredith had not spoken, but she knew a glance from her would unlock his tongue, for the prize was almost won, and nothing but this sudden secret love had withheld her from seizing the fruit of her long labor and desire. She meant to assure herself of this beyond all doubt, and then, when both fates were possible, to weigh and decide as calmly as she might. To this purpose she clung, and lifting her head with a proud gesture, she said, in the cold, hard tone that jarred upon his ear and made discord in the music of her voice:

"You need not wait until to-morrow. Will you receive your answer now?"

"No; I will be patient, for I know something of temptations like this, and I have faith in the nobility of a woman's heart. Love or leave me as you will, but, Evelyn, if you value your own peace, if you care for the reverence of one who loves you utterly, do not sell yourself, for wealth so bought is worse than the sharpest poverty. A word will put me out of pain; think of this to-day; wear these to remind you of me, as that jewel recalls Meredith; and to-night return my dead roses or give me one yourself."

He put the ruddy cluster in the hand that wore his rival's gift, looked into her face with a world of love and longing in his proud eyes, and left her there alone.

If he had seen her crush the roses on her lips and drench them in passionate tears, if he had heard her breathe his name in tones of tenderest grief and call him back to save her from temptation, he would have turned and spared himself a lifelong loss, and saved her from a sacrifice that doomed her to remorse. She crept into a shadowy nook among the rocks, and searched her self as she had never done before. The desire to be found worthy of him swayed her strongly, and almost conquered the beliefs and purposes of her whole life. An hour passed, and with an expression more beautiful than any ever seen upon her face till now, Evelyn rose to seek and tell her lover that she could not give his flowers back.

As she stood a moment smiling down upon the emblems of love, a voice marred the happiest instant of her life, a single sentence undid the work of that thoughtful hour.

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"Meredith will never marry pretty Evelyn."

"And why not?" returned another voice, as careless as that sarcastic one that spoke first.

"He is too wise, and she lacks skill. My faith! with half her beauty I would have conquered a dozen such as he."

"You have a more potent charm than beauty, for wealth will buy any man.."Not all." And the girl's keen ear detected an undertone of bitterness in the light laugh that followed the words. A woman spoke, and as she listened, Dorn's words, "I know something of such temptations," returned to her with a sudden significance which the next words confirmed.

"Ah, Max will not thaw under your smiles nor be dazzled by the golden baits you offer. Well, my dear, you can find your revenge in watching Evelyn's folly and its dreary consequences, for she will marry him and ruin herself for ever."

"No doubt of that; she hasn't wit enough to see what a splendid career is open to her if she marries Meredith, and she will let a girlish romance rob her of success. That knowledge is an immense comfort to me."

The speakers passed on, leaving Evelyn pale with anger, her eyes keen and hard, her lips smiling scornfully, and her heart full of bitterness. The roses lay at her feet, and the hand that wore the ring was clinched as she watched mother and daughter stroll away, little dreaming that their worldly gossip had roused the girl's worst passions and given her temptation double force.

"She loves Max and pities me good! I'll let her know that I refused him, and teach her to fear as well as envy me. 'A splendid career' and she thinks I'll lose it. Wait a day and see if I have not wit enough to know it, and skill enough to secure it. 'Girlish romance' shall not ruin my future; I see its folly, and I thank that woman for showing me how to avoid it. Take comfort while you may, false friend; to-morrow your punishment will begin."

Snatching up the roses, Evelyn returned to the hotel, congratulating herself that she had not spoken hastily and pledged her word to Dorn. Everything seemed to foster the purpose that had wavered for an hour, and even trifles lent their weight to turn the scale in favor of the mercenary choice. As if conscious of the struggle going on within her, Meredith forgot the temporary jealousy of Dorn, that had held him aloof for a time, and was more devoted than before. She drove with him, and leaning in his luxurious barouche, passed Dorn walking through the dust. A momentary pang smote her as his face kindled when he saw her, but she conquered it by whispering to herself, "That woman would rejoice to see me walking there beside him; now I can eclipse her even in so small a thing as this."

As the thought came, her haughty little head rose erect, her eye wandered, well pleased, from splendid horses, liveried servants and emblazoned carriage, to the man who could make them hers, and she smiled on him with a glance that touched the cold heart which she alone had ever warmed.

Later, as she sat among a group of summer friends, listening to their gossip, she covertly watched her two lovers while she stored up the hints, opinions, and criticisms of those about her.

Max Dorn had youth, manly beauty and native dignity, but lacked that indescribable something which marks the polished man of fashion, and by dress, manner, speech and attitude betrayed that he was outside the charmed circle as plainly as if a visible barrier rose between him and his rival.

John Meredith, a cold, grave man of forty, bore the mark of patrician birth and breeding in every feature, tone, and act. Not handsome, graceful, or gifted, but simply an aristocrat in pride and position as in purse. Men envied, imitated, and feared him; women courted, flattered, and sighed for him; and whomsoever he married would be, in

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spite of herself, a queen of society.

As she watched him the girl's purpose strengthened, for on no one did his eye linger as on herself; every mark of his preference raised her in the estimation of her mates, and already was she beginning to feel the intoxicating power which would be wholly hers if she accepted him.

"I will!" she said, within herself. "To-night he will speak and to-morrow brilliant future shall begin." As she dressed for the ball that night an exquisite bouquet of exotics was brought her. She knew who sent them, and a glance of gratified vanity went from the flowers to the lovely head they would adorn. In a glass on her toilet bloomed the wild roses, fresh and fragrant as ever. A regretful sigh escaped her as she took them up, saving softly, "I must return them, but he'll soon forget and so shall I."

A thorn pierced her hand as she spoke, and as if daunted by the omen, she paused an instant while tears of mental, not physical pain, filled her eyes. She wiped the tiny drop of blood from her white palm, and as she did so the flash of the diamond caught her eye. A quick change passed over her, and dashing away the tears, she hid the wound and followed her chaperon, looking blithe and beautiful as ever.

John Meredith did speak that night, and Max Dorn knew it, for his eye never left the little figure with the wild roses half hidden in the lace that stirred with the beating of the girlish heart he coveted. He saw them pass into the moonlit garden, and stood like a sentinel at the gate till a glimmer of white foretold their return. Evelyn's face he could not see, for she averted it, and turned from the crowd as if to seek her room unseen. Meredith's pale features were slightly flushed, and his cold eye shone with unwonted fire, but whether anger or joy wrought the change Dorn could not tell.

Hurrying after Evelyn, he saw her half way up the wide staircase, and softly called her name.

No one was near, and pausing, she turned to look down on him. Never had she seemed more lovely, yet never had he found it hard to watch that beloved face before. Without a word he looked up, and stretched his hands to her, as if unconscious of the distance between them. Her rich color faded, her lips trembled, but her eyes did not fall before his own, and her hand went steadily to her breast as in silence, more bitterly significant than words, she dropped the dead roses at his feet.

"Is Doctor Dorn at home?"

The servant glanced from the pale, eager speaker to the elegant carriage he had left, and, though past the hour, admitted him.

A room, perfect in the taste and fitness of its furnishing, and betraying many evidences, not only of the wealth, but the cultivation of its owner, received the new comer, who glanced hastily about him as he advanced toward its occupant, who bent over a desk writing rapidly.

"Doctor Dorn, can you spare me a few moments on a case of life and death?" said the gentleman, in an imploring tone, for the sight of a line of carriages outside, and a crowded anteroom inside, had impressed him with the skill and success of this doctor more deeply than all the tales he had heard of his marvelous powers.

Doctor Dorn glanced at his watch.

"I can give you exactly five minutes."

"Thanks. Then let me as briefly as possible tell you the case. My wife is dying with a tumor in the side. I have tried everything, every physician, and all in vain. I should have applied to you long ago, had not Evelyn positively

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forbid it."

As the words left his lips both men looked at one another, with the memory of that summer night ten years ago rising freshly before them. John Meredith's cold face flushed with emotion in speaking of his suffering wife to the man who had been his rival. But Max Dorn's pale, impassive countenance never changed a muscle, though a close observer might have seen a momentary gleam of something like satisfaction in his dark eye as he answered in a perfectly business-like tone: "I have heard of Mrs. Meredith's case from Doctor Savant, and know the particulars. Will you name your wish?"

He knew it already, but he would not spare this man the pang of asking his wife's life at his hands. Meredith moistened his dry lips, and answered slowly:

"They tell me an operation may save her, and she consents. Doctor Savant dares not undertake it, and says no one but you can do it. Can you? Will you?"

"But Mrs. Meredith forbids it."

"She is to be deceived; your name is not to be mentioned; and she is to think Doctor Savant is the man."

A bitter smile touched Dorn's lips, as he replied with significant emphasis:

"I decline to undertake the case at this late stage. Savant will do his best faithfully, and I hope will succeed. Good morning, sir."

Meredith turned proudly away, and Dorn bent over his writing. But at the door the husband paused, for the thought of his lovely young wife dying for want of this man's skill rent his heart and bowed his spirit. With an impulsive gesture he retraced his steps, saying brokenly:

"Doctor Dorn, I beseech you to revoke that answer. Forgive the past, save my Evelyn, and make me your debtor for life. All the honor shall be yours; she will bless you, and I I will thank you, serve you, love you to my dying day."

Hard and cold as stone was Dorn's face as the other spoke, and for a moment no answer came.

Meredith's imploring eyes saw no relenting sign, his outstretched hands fell at his side, and grief, resentment and despair trembled in his voice as he said, solemnly:

"For her sake I humbled myself to plead with you, believing you a nobler man than you have proved yourself. She took your heart, you take her life, for no hand but yours can save her. You might have won our gratitude forever, but you refused."

"I consent." And with a look that went straight to the other's heart, Dorn held out his hand.

Meredith wrung it silently, and the first tears that had wet his eyes for years fell on the generous hand that gave him back his idol's life.

The affair was rapidly arranged, and as no time was to be lost, the following day was fixed.

Evelyn was to be kept in ignorance of Dorn's part in the matter, and Doctor Savant was to prepare everything as if he were to be the operator. Dorn was not to appear till she was unconscious, and she was not to be told to whom she owed her life till she was out of danger.

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The hour came, and Dorn was shown into the chamber, where on the narrow table Evelyn lay, white and unconscious, as if dead. Savant, and two other physicians, anxious to see the great surgeon at work, stood near; and Meredith hung over the beautiful woman as if it was impossible to yield her up to them. As he entered the room Dorn snatched one hungry glance at the beloved face, and tore his eyes away, saying to the nurse who came to him, "Cover her face."

The woman began to question him, but Meredith understood, and with his own hands laid a delicate handkerchief over the pallid face. Then he withdrew to an alcove, and behind the curtain prayed with heart and soul for the salvation of the one creature whom he loved.

The examination and consultation over, Dorn turned to take up his knife. As he did so one of the physicians whispered to the other, with a sneer:

"See his hand tremble; mine is steadier than that."

"He is as pale as the sheet; it's my opinion that his success is owing to luck's accidents more than to skill or science," returned the other. In the dead silence of the room, the least whisper was audible. Dorn flushed to the forehead, he set his teeth, nerved his arm, and with a clear, calm eye, and unfaltering hand made the first incision in the white flesh, dearer to him than his own.

It was a strange, nay, an almost awful sight, that luxurious room, and in the full glow of the noonday light that beautiful white figure, with four pale men bending over it, watching with breathless interest the movements of one skillful pair of hands moving among the glittering instruments or delicately tying arteries, severing nerves, and gliding heedfully among vital organs, where a hairs-breadth slip might be death. And looking from behind the curtains, a haggard countenance full of anguish, hope and suspense.

With speechless wonder and admiration the three followed Dorn through the intricacies of this complicated operation, envying the steadiness of his hand, firm as iron, yet delicate as a breath; watching the precision of his strokes, the success of his treatment, and most of all, admiring his entire absorption in the work; his utter forgetfulness of the subject, whose youth and beauty might well unnerve the most skillful hand. No sign of what he suffered during that brief time escaped him; but when all was safely over, and Evelyn lay again in her bed, great drops stood upon his forehead, and as Meredith grasped his hand he found it cold as stone. To the praises of his rivals in science, and the fervent thanks of his rival in love, he returned scarce any answer, and with careful directions to the nurse went away to fall faint and exhausted on his bed, crying with the tearless love and longing of a man, "Oh, my darling, I have saved you only to lose you again! only to give you up to a fate harder for me to bear than death."

Evelyn lived, and when she learned to whom she owed her life, she covered her face, saying to her hungry heart, "If he had known how utterly weary I was, how empty my life, how remorseful my conscience, he would have let me die."

She had learned long ago the folly of her choice, and pined in her splendid home for Max, and love and poverty again. He had prospered wonderfully, for the energy that was as native to him as his fidelity, led him to labor for ambition's sake when love was denied him. Devoted to his profession he lived on that alone, and in ten years won a brilliant success. Honor, wealth, position were his now, and any woman might have been proud to share his lot. But none were wooed; and in his distant home he watched over Evelyn unseen, unknown and loved her still.

She had tasted the full bitterness of her fate, had repented and striven to atone by devoting herself to Meredith, who was unalterable in his passion for her. But his love and her devotion could not bring happiness, and when he died his parting words were, "Now you are free."

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She reproached herself for the thrill of joy that came as she listened, and whispered penitently, "Forgive me, I was not worthy of such love." For a year she mourned for him sincerely; but she was young, she loved with a woman's fervor now, and hope would paint a happy future with Max.

He never wrote nor came, and wearying at last, she sent a letter to a friend in that distant city, asking news of Doctor Dorn. The answer brought small comfort, for it told her that an epidemic had broken out, and that the first to volunteer for the most dangerous post was Max Dorn.

In a moment her decision was taken. "I must be near him; I must save him if it is not too late.

He must not sacrifice himself; he would not be so reckless if he knew that any one cared for him."

Telling no one of her purpose, she left her solitary home and went to find her lover, regardless of danger. The city was deserted by all but the wretched poor and the busy middle class, who live by daily labor. She heard from many lips praises, blessings and prayers when she uttered Doctor Dorn's name, but it was not so easy to find him. He was never at home, but lived in hospitals, and the haunts of suffering day and night. She wrote and sent to him. No answer came. She visited his house to find it empty. She grew desperate, and went to seek for him where few dared venture, and here she learned that he had been missing for three days. Her heart stood still, for many dropped, died, and were buried hastily, leaving no name behind them.

Regardless of everything but the desire to find him, dead or living, she plunged into the most infected quarter of the town, and after hours of sights and sounds that haunted her for years, she found him.

In a poor woman's room, nursed as tenderly by her and the child he had saved as if he had been her son, lay Max, dying. He was past help now, unconscious, and out of pain, and as she sat beside him, heart-stricken and despairing, Evelyn received her punishment for the act which wrecked her own life and led his to an end like that.

As if her presence dimly impressed his failing senses, a smile broke over his pallid lips, his hand feebly groped for hers, and those magnificent eyes of his shone unclouded for a moment, as she whispered remorsefully:

"I loved you best; forgive me, Max, and tell me you remember Evelyn."

"You said I might hope a little longer; I'll be patient, dear, and wait."

And with the words he was gone, leaving her twice widowed.