

THE MARK OF THE BEAST

By

Sydney Watson

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CHAPTER FIVE

CRUEL AS THE GRAVE!

LUCIEN Apleon's eyes held the cold, cruel malignity of a snake. His brows were cold, straight, unruffled. His smile held the polished brutality of the most Mephistophelian Mephistopheles.

Judith Apleon knelt at his feet, her beautiful face working painfully. A smile as cruel as his mouth crept into his eyes as he noted her groveling, as he watched the anguish in her face.

She shuddered as she saw that smile creep into his eyes. She had seen it before - more than once.

The first time had been among the glorious mountains of her beautiful Hungarian home. An old peasant woman, with the reputation of a witch, had scowled upon him, and had uttered a curse on him. The spot where the three had met was in a lonely pass. At the utterance of the curse he had cut the poor old hag down, with one fierce slash of his heavy riding whip. She had howled for mercy, and for reply he flogged the poor frail old prostrate form until life had fled, then, with a lifting spurn of his foot, he had hurled the body over the edge of that mountain pass, into the unknown depths of the ravine beyond. And all the time his eyes had smiled, as they smiled now - and Judith shuddered, for the smile was as cruel as the grave, and was a reflection of Hell.

She knew the diabolical cruelty which lay hidden behind that smile, and remembering the fate of those upon whom he had bent that smile, she sickened with a shuddering fear of her own life.

They had quarreled, that is to say she had tried to thwart him in a trifling thing. She hardly, herself, realized what he was, or the power he possessed.

"Lucien," and her voice shook with the agony which filled her, with the fear that had her in its shuddering grip. "Lucien, don't look like that at me."

With an affrighted scream she cried: "Don't! Don't! Lucien! No one on whom I ever saw you look, as you look now, ever lived an hour, and-."

His gaze of diabolical hate hypnotized her. She wanted to take her eyes from his, but could not.

He made her no audible reply. He only smiled on. A faint cry, like the low scream of a terrified coney, escaped her. Her face paled until it was like the grey-white of a corpse.

"Spare me, Lucien, spare me-."

She would have said more, but the chill of his hellish smile froze the words upon her lips.

He never once changed his attitude. His left elbow rested on the corner of the mantel, the fingers of his right hand played with the gold watch-guard he wore.

A full minute elapsed, then with a cry of passionate, painful entreaty, she lifted her beautiful clasped hands, and wringing them in agony, cried:

"Lucien - Lucien-." Then a sob choked her.

For another long minute there was a tomb-like silence. He never moved a muscle of his face. The chill of the smile in his eyes deepened, and seemed, as it was bent upon her, to numb her faculties.

Her whole frame seemed to wilt under the ice of his smile. She shivered with the concentrated hate his eyes expressed.

Lower and lower she crouched at his feet. And as he saw her wilt and shiver the smile of Hell deepened in his cruel eyes.

Suddenly he spoke. The words were uttered in dulcet tones. But their meaning had, to her, the sentence of death, as softly, calmly, there fell from his lips:

"I have no further need of you! You are in my way!"

For one instant her eyes remained fixed upon his face. Then slowly her limbs relaxed, her body swayed lightly forward, and sank rather than fell upon the thick pile of the carpet.

With a low, mocking laugh Lucien Apleon turned away from the dead form. But before he passed out of the room he did a curious thing. A Bible rested on one of the shelves of the room, he took the volume from its place, opened it at the 13th of Revelation and taking a pen, he dipped it into the red ink, and ran a red line around the 15th verse of the chapter.

A moment later he had passed from the room.

The verse he had red-scored, read: **"He had power to give life unto the image of the Beast, that the image of the Beast should both speak, and cause that as many as would not worship the image of the beast should be killed."**

No wonder that Lucien Apleon smiled. For if presently, he was going to cause the image of the Beast to cause death to those who defied him, how much more could he himself strike dead by the power of the Satanic energy given to him.

Judith Apleon's body was conveyed to the crematorium and consumed. A doctor had certified heart-disease; there was no inquest. Lucien did not attend the funeral. The whole affair was carried through by the undertaker. There were no mourners.

The Antichrist spirit is marked by "**Without natural affection**," one could not therefore expect Antichrist himself to possess any affection.

~ end of chapter 5 ~

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