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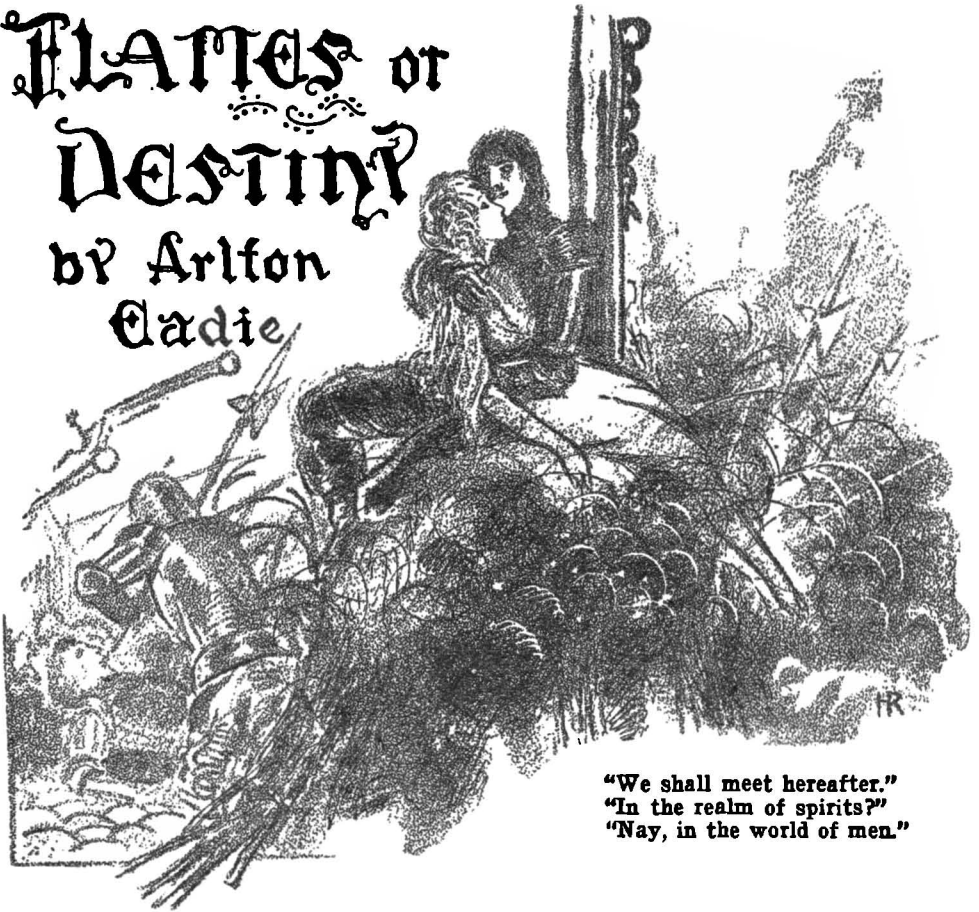
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FLAMES of DESTINY

by Arlton
Cadie



"We shall meet hereafter."
"In the realm of spirits?"
"Nay, in the world of men."

A GENTLEMAN to see you, sir," announced the man who combined the offices of waiter-boots-potman at the tiny inn where I had taken up my quarters for the night. At the same time he handed me a card.

"Adrian Dane."

For a full minute I stared at the name in surprize, racking my brain in an effort to remember where I had heard it last. Then, in a flash, remembrance came.

"Please show Mr. Dane up to this room," I told the man.

Left alone, I stood wondering what strange chance had brought my old fellow-student again across my path. Although he had not belonged to my immediate set at Ox-

ford, I had formed with him one of those haphazard friendships which one never seems to keep up later. I remembered that we had both gone down in the same year; afterward I heard he had entered the Indian civil service. After that we had just drifted apart. He had been a shy, retiring sort of fellow, studying erratically and keeping very much to himself. On the rare occasions when I had visited his rooms his talk had been mainly on hypnotism, telepathy, and similar occult subjects. A queer fellow, undoubtedly, yet somehow likable.

In appearance he had never been what one might call robust, but when I caught sight of his face as he entered the room I uttered an ex-

clamation of concern. He was deadly pale and there were large dark shadows around his eyes. Yet his movements were brisk enough, and the grip of his hand, though naturally cold (it was freezing hard outside), was firm and hearty.

Immediately our first commonplace greetings were over I asked how on earth he had discovered me in that out-of-the-way inn; for it was by the merest accident that I had visited Winchester at all. But he turned the matter off with what I thought at the time to be a somewhat feeble jest.

"My dear Hadleigh," he said with a slow, languid smile, "you forget I have to sustain my reputation as a dabbler in the Black Art! I simply projected my spirit into space—and here I am!"

Something of the irritation I felt at this piece of pointless foolery must have shown itself in my face, for he rose quickly and laid his thin white hand on my shoulder as he went on seriously: "Believe me, my friend, I did not come here without deep reason."

Both his action and tone of voice surprized me. He seemed like a man who wanted to speak frankly, yet dared not.

"Well," I returned with a forced laugh, "the Black Art, as you call it, does not seem to have improved your health. You look like a ghost! Have you been ill?"

Again that wan smile flitted across his features.

"Yes, I have been ill, very ill. But at present I am well. I have no pain or suffering—now."

I murmured the usual congratulations, and then ensued a rather embarrassing silence, during which he sat pensive and motionless, his eyes fixed on the glowing embers of the fire. For want of some better subject of conversation, I plunged into an account of my own doings since

quitting college. In the midst of my recital he rose abruptly to his feet.

"Yes, Hadleigh, I am quite aware of all that you're about to tell me," he said. "Don't ask me where I got my information, for I have no time to go into details. You can, if you like, attribute my knowledge to the Black Art. As a matter of fact I have a rather important engagement to fulfil."

He glanced toward the clock as he spoke. Following the direction of his eyes, I noted it was just seven minutes past 10.

"You're surely not returning to London tonight?" I exclaimed.

"I fear I must," he answered. "The appointment I have tonight is one that can not be put off. Therefore I must come to the point at once." He fixed his unnaturally bright eyes full upon mine as he asked, "Do you believe in the transmigration of souls?"

For a moment I was struck breathless by the unexpectedness of the question. Then I laughed. "I always imagined that the tenets of Pythagoras went out of fashion with trunk-hose and farthingales!" But, as I noted the strained gravity of his expression, I added: "Do you mean to say that you have sought me out just to ask me that?"

"Yes," came the answer in a tone of quiet intentness.

"Then I may as well set your mind at rest by telling you that I regard the whole theory as a parcel of utter rot!"

He nodded his head slowly.

"I thought that would be your answer, Hadleigh. But I wish to ask you another question. Are you willing to submit yourself to a"—he paused for a moment as though seeking a fitting word—"a demonstration that will cause you to change your opinion?"

"A demonstration?" I echoed. "Where?"

"Here in this room—at this moment!" he answered. Then, seeing that I hesitated, he went on with feverish eagerness: "I assure you that this is no idle whim on my part."

Now, I rather prided myself on possessing an open and unbiased mind. My attitude toward matters occult had been that of a self-confessed agnostic, unwilling to concede a point without proof, yet always open to examine such evidence as might be forthcoming. The suggestion of Adrian Dane roused my curiosity considerably; moreover, there was an indefinable something in his manner that told me some grave and vital purpose lay behind his seemingly fantastic proposal. I was not long in making up my mind.

"Go ahead," I said cheerfully.

OUR preparations for the séance were few and simple. In response to his request, I lay down on the couch facing the latticed window looking onto the street. He turned down the gas until the room was in semi-darkness; then took from his pocket a small disk of dull copper and held it before my eyes.

"Fix your attention on this, Hadleigh," he commanded rather than asked. "Banish from your mind all thoughts and surmises. Give your will—your soul—your self—unreservedly into my keeping!"

I endeavored to obey. Minutes passed, but except that the disk grew vague and indistinct before my vacant gaze, nothing happened. I was just on the point of telling him that I must be a bad subject, when with the suddenness of thought he snatched the disk away and substituted his own face. In a moment everything was changed. I seemed to feel my will being dragged from my possession like some tangible thing. His eyes seemed to dominate and command me, holding me in a vise from which there was no escape.

Then they began to grow larger, although this was probably merely the effect of his advancing his face toward my own. Larger and larger they grew, until at last they appeared like the double entrance to some vast cavern gaping wide, dark, unfathomable before me.

Presently a quaint fancy seemed to seize upon my confused brain. What if I were to enter and explore the labyrinth of his mind? No sooner was the thought conceived than I seemed (for I must have been unconscious by this time) to put it into execution. I stepped boldly through the gap. . . .

Darkness, opaque and impenetrable, encompassed me on every side as I stumbled onward. Whether I progressed yards or miles I cannot tell, but all at once the ground seemed to give way beneath my feet and I fell, not as an earthly body falls, but swaying from side to side lightly, as though I were composed of some ethereal substance as light as the air itself. Down, down, and ever down I rushed, until it seemed as though I had delved deep into the maw of Eternity, where a thousand years is as the ticking of a clock, and Time does not exist. Then upon my mental vision there burst a line of glowing writing, as though traced by a pencil of living fire:

The Eighth Day of October, 1645.

And I seemed to know that for me the ponderous gates of Time had rolled back, and that I, a phantom with the feelings of a man, was about to step forth into the world of long ago.

Then the writing faded, and I slept. . . .

* * * * *

THE sustained roll of drums in the Market Square outside roused me from my slumber. Instinctively I recognized it as the signal for the mustering of my troop of gallant

lads who trailed their pikes under the banner of Lord-General Cromwell.

After a few minutes of groping about in the dark, I found my high buff boots, still harsh with the mud of the trenches we had dug when we stormed the town, and drew them on. Then I adjusted the steel corselet which guarded back and breast, and tightened the buckles with deft, accustomed fingers. The wide belt which carried my straight, cup-hilted rapier was quickly slipped over my right shoulder and held in position by the silken sash which I knotted round my body, at the point where the armor gave place to the long-skirted doublet of stout buff leather. Then, swinging on the broad-brimmed plumed hat and snatching up a pair of leather gloves with high, protecting gauntlets, I made my way down the narrow stairs and out into the street.

Above the twin towers of the great cathedral the bleak night sky was just beginning to pale with the first gray streaks of dawn. Hoarfrost glittered on the uneven cobbles of the road and on the gables and cross-timbers of the ancient Market House. Twenty paces from the inn door my troop was drawn up in double rank, their sixteen-foot pikes—which had ere now brought to naught many a dashing charge of the Royalist horse—sloped at an angle before them. As I approached, a sharp command rang out, and five-score steel-shod butts smote the ground with a clang as they came to attention.

I gave the customary return; then, taking my place at the head, again raised my hilt to the level of my eyes, this time saluting the colors. This done, I lowered my point and waited for what was to happen next.

Anon the ruffle of drums and screaming of pipes sounded on the frosty air, and round the corner of the Square there swung three companies of Pride's Musketeers, there

colonel riding at their head. With colors flying and matches burning, they passed within half a pistol-shot of our ranks, and many a lowering scowl and muttered curse followed them as they marched by.

Although both were fighting under the same standard, the feud between those who tossed a pike and those who fired a musket was a long-standing and bitter one. The pikemen bitterly resented the higher pay and privileges granted to the wielders of the newer and more effective weapon. This was so at the best of times, but recent events had so fanned the smoldering hatred that every moment it threatened to burst forth into flame. When, two days since, the city of Winchester had fallen before our onslaught, a brawl had arisen between the two regiments over the sharing of the booty. Although according to the Articles of War the plundering of a besieged town or fortress was strictly forbidden on pain of death, the practise was in reality covertly winked at by those in command. For one thing, the prospect of spoil was calculated to give an added zest to the assault; for another, it afforded the soldiery an opportunity of making up those arrears of pay which were all too frequently long overdue. But this time the Lord-General had taken a firm hand in the matter (more, methinks, from rage at seeing his troops flying at each other's throats than from any over-nice scruples in the matter). He had proclaimed, by beat of drum, that all the burghers of the city should be left secure in their possessions, and in addition had hanged a round dozen of the plunderers, choosing the culprits only from the ranks of the pikemen, which fact so roused the feelings of their comrades that they were now on the brink of mutiny. It needed but a spark to light the blaze of open revolt, and that spark, though we

knew it not, was now on the point of being struck.

The music ceased and a sudden hush fell upon the Market Square, now lined on all four sides by troops of the various regiments. And as we waited the first pale beams of the wintry sun broke through the clouds, for the first time illuminating the Square and revealing the grim import of the objects which stood in the center—an iron stake set upright in the ground, with a heap of fagots piled about its base.

Then a trumpet blared out, and the cordons of soldiery, who had hitherto held back the eager town-folk, were withdrawn, allowing the mob to enter and occupy the space between the houses and the troops. Another trumpet-blast, and as if by magic the ribald jests of the crowd were stilled, and over each face there came a look of dreadful anticipation. From the mouth of the narrow street leading to the castle there emerged a sad procession. First walked two halberdiers of the Town Guard; then a dignitary clad in a furred gown and carrying in his hand a parchment scroll with many dangling seals; following him was a man in a close-fitting suit of stained crimson leather, whose features were completely hidden by a mask; two more halberdiers followed, then a great shout burst from the crowd as they caught sight of the white-robed figure of a girl.

"The White Witch! The White Witch! Burn the sorceress—to the stake with the accursed witch!"

Appalled by the sudden menacing roar, the girl shrank back, raising her chained hands and pressing them to her heart, but a blow from the halberd of one of the guards sent her staggering forward again. At the sight, a wave of hot blood seemed to surge to my head and a throbbing sounded in my ears like the hoofbeats of a troop of galloping horses.

Now, heaven be my witness that I make no pretensions to be regarded as a Paladin. A soldier's trade is at best a rough and brutal one. Life is liable to be short; death is ever grinning hungrily at his elbows; he must take his pleasures when and where he can—and women and wine were never far away from the baggage-train even of that self-styled Army of the Elect! Yet I can swear that every good impulse in me leaped to life as I looked into the pale, pure face of that witch condemned to die.

With firm and even tread she advanced toward the hideous apparatus of death. An involuntary murmur of admiration rose from our ranks as she passed. Men of iron courage themselves, they were not slow to recognize and admire the same virtue in another.

"Witch or no—the wench is a rare plucked 'un!" I heard my sergeant mutter into his grizzled beard.

AN OMINOUS and expectant silence fell upon the packed Market Place as the sheriff stepped forward, unrolled the parchment scroll, and began to read what was evidently the sentence of the court which had condemned her. The rigmarole was so bedecked with ponderous legal jargon and high-sounding Latin that it was well-nigh impossible to grasp its full meaning. But the frequent repetitions of the words "bewitching by diabolical arts the said Master Nicholas Rowe," "damnable sorceries," "contrary to the law and the Scriptures," together with such scraps of gossip as I had previously picked up, enabled me to make a shrewd guess of its general drift.

The reading finished, the sheriff stepped back and made a sign to the man in crimson. The next moment the girl was being bound to the stake by means of a long iron chain wound several times about her body. This done, one the halberdiers came forward and placed something in her

arms. It was a tiny black kitten—her familiar fiend according to the finding of the learned fools who had condemned her. She took it in her arms almost mechanically and gently stroked its soft, sleek fur. The doomed mite ceased its frightened mewling and nestled close to her, settling itself to sleep.

Now, three years of constant campaigning is likely to blunt the edge of a man's softer feelings. It was no new thing for me to see men slain in hot blood—aye, and in cold blood, too! I had seen Rupert's Horse ride among the broken ranks of fleeing, unarmed foot, cutting them down at their leisure until their arms grew weary with the slaughter. But the sight of that poor wench fondling the kitten so unconcernedly in the face of a lingering and agonizing death made me turn sick and faint. The feeling passed in a moment and in its place there came a hot and furious anger.

Scarcely realizing what I did, I strode forward and saluted the Lord-General with my drawn sword. In the hushed pause which followed I could feel the thousands of eyes bent upon me from all sides.

"Lord Cromwell," I cried aloud, "I crave a few minutes' speech with ye ere this maid dies!"

The man raised himself in his stirrups and turned upon me his cold gray eyes.

"How now?" he cried harshly. "Captain Hadleigh, what means it that ye break rank without leave? Back to your troop, sir, and consider yourself under arrest. Tomorrow I will hold speech with ye—over a drumhead!"

"Tomorrow will be too late. So, if it please your lordship, I'll e'en say my say now. It concerns this poor innocent maid."

Before Cromwell could make answer, a tall, thin man dressed in a suit of rusty black, with broad white cuffs and neckbands, interposed.

"Innocent maid, forsooth!" he drawled in a harsh nasal tone. "She is a witch! She hath been accused and condemned as by law required, and her wretched life is forfeit. Saith not the Scriptures, 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live'?"

I made him a low, ironical bow.

"Granted, most reverend sir," I answered. "But, unless my memory plays me false, they also contain another text, which runs, 'Let him who is without sin cast the first stone'!"

It was but a clumsy parry and I knew it; but it served its turn, for a loud guffaw of laughter rose from round about. Nothing is so fickle as a mob; its moods leap from murder to mirth in the twinkling of an eye. I had made them laugh—that was something in my favor. But I must arouse other emotions—pity and justice—if I were to save the girl.

"By what token dost thou presume to declare that she is a witch?" I demanded. "Upon whose evidence was she condemned? I will tell ye, men of Winchester! The only testimony against her comes from a man who is a liar, a trickster, and—in spite of his hoary locks—an abandoned profligate to boot!"

The man in black held up his skinny hands.

"A profligate? Godly Master Rowe—the richest man in Winchester—darest thou dub him profligate?"

"Rich he may be," I returned hotly, for the man's manner angered me. "But it is not from his ledgers and money-bags that I ask ye to seek the truth. Ask rather of those whom his lying, wheedling tongue has brought to ruin. Ask of the tavern idlers; ask of those poor wenches who follow the camp! Then shall ye know of what manner of man is this worthy, upright, wealthy Master Rowe!"

No longer was I the center of interest now; every eye was turned on Master Nicholas Rowe as he stood

shouting and gesticulating on the balcony whence he had intended to view that merry morning's work. He was angrily demanding my immediate arrest and punishment. To my mind, however, there was another emotion visible on his blotched, unhealthy features—it was fear that caused his tongue to stammer and his obese limbs to shake.

Still, he was a man of importance in the city; a man whom, at this hour, Cromwell could ill afford to thwart. I saw the Lord-General bend forward and whisper a few words in the ear of his Colonel of Musketeers, whereupon Pride strode straight toward me, rasping out his sword as he came. At the same moment I heard the clash of steel behind me as my troop came to the ready without word of command.

I smiled to myself as I saw Colonel Pride come to an irresolute halt. Hadleigh and his flaunting pikes were not wholly unknown in the New Army. My rascals loved me to a man, and I knew that, if the matter in hand came to be settled by push of pike, matters would not be all on one side. I ran toward the pile of fagots; then turned toward them.

"Pikes! Pikes!" I roared. "Rally round your captain! Are ye soldiers or wench-slayers? Pikes!"

Scarcely had the words left my lips before my daredevils had advanced and, with a clatter and a cheer, formed themselves about the fatal pile.

I felt my heart glow as I looked upon that steady ring of glittering points. Never did my rascals look so fine as on that wintry morn when making that forlorn stand to save an unknown, condemned wench. But there was little time to be spent in admiration. Cromwell, his face working like a tortured devil's, was spurring madly to the rear of the Musketeers, shouting orders and pointing his drawn blade toward our little band. But short shrift could we ex-

pect from him. The old feud between the pikes and muskets would soon be wiped out with running blood.

"Musketeers . . . make ready your pieces!" came the order. "Prime! . . . Blow your matches. . . ."

With one bound I had gained the summit of the pile; another moment, and my sword had proved its temper by severing the links of the chain. Then I caught up the girl and stood with her in my arms.

WHAT joyous madness seized upon me at that moment I know not. But as I clasped her slender body to my steel-clad breast a throb of defiant elation passed through me. The mob, Cromwell, the leveled muskets, were alike forgotten as I pressed my lips to hers.

For a breath her pallid features grew paler still; then a deep rosy flush overspread them. I feared I had affronted her, but in the same instant that I cursed myself beneath my breath for a graceless boor, she raised her face to mine and returned the kiss. No words passed—none were needed—but if ever soul flashed toward soul in a blaze of love, ours did at that moment.

But even in that moment of ecstatic joy I did not forget the tenets of my soldier's trade. I must wait for the volley which was sure to come; then, with the girl thrown across my shoulder, I must endeavor to escape under cover of the smoke of the discharge. It was a desperate plan; yet there could be no other. It might succeed; if not—

"Musketeers . . . give fire!"

As the thunder of the volley sent the echoes bounding from the four corners of the Square I endeavored to fling myself, with the girl, behind the shelter of the pile of fagots. But even as I leapt, my breastplate rang out like a gong, and a pang, like that of a red-hot iron passing through my body, told me that one of Pride's bul-

lets had found its mark. Aye, and more than one! For the figure in my arms had quivered pitifully, and now a large and ever-spreading crimson stain appeared on the bosom of her dress.

"I am hit!" she whispered weakly. "Hold me—everything is growing dark."

It did not need a second glance into the beautiful face to know that she had received her death-wound. I'd seen enough of warfare to recognize that ominous grayish hue. And I myself was in no better plight as I swayed limply against the tar-soaked pile. A dull roaring sounded in my ears, as dimly, as though through a blood-red mist, I saw the shadowy ranks of Pride's Musketeers fighting vainly with their clubbed muskets against the line of remorselessly advancing pikes. Then a crackling sound, nearer at hand, drew my attention. Gathering my strength, I raised myself on my elbows—and realized the terrible truth.

The pile, on which we both lay, had been fired!

Whether the mischief had been done deliberately, or by a flaming wad from one of the muskets, I can not say; but the fact remained that flames were now licking in and out among the straw at the base of the pile. I tried to raise her in my arms to bear her hence, but my strength was ebbing fast.

She must have guessed my intention, for her eyes opened and looked into mine as she said faintly, "Let be. What boots it whether we die here or later? At least we are together."

Together! Desperate though our strait was, the word thrilled me. Strange though our meeting and short the seconds before us, I knew full well that her love for me was deeper than the ocean—more enduring than the mountains. And as I looked upon her beauty, my heart rebelled against the irony of destiny.

"I have gained your love but to lose you forever!" I groaned.

She shook her head slightly and a strange smile hovered about her lips.

"The end is not yet," she whispered. "Though we die, and our ashes be mingled together on a felon's pyre, our love will not perish. We shall meet hereafter."

"In the realm of spirits?" I asked, amazed at her words.

"Nay, in the world of men."

Wild as her words seemed, I believed them.

"Give me a sign—a token," I cried, "that I may know it be thou, in very sooth, when again we meet."

She lifted her hand toward a slender silver chain around her neck and drew from her bosom a small silver cross.

"Break it in twain." Her voice was so weak that I could scarce catch the words. "Keep one half—until—until—"

Her voice ceased, and I knew that the end had come. Thank God that she had passed ere the flames had reached her!

I clasped her limp form closer to my breast, and on her cold lips imprinted one last kiss.

"Till we meet, my love!" I cried, as with a crackle and a roar the flames surged round about the living and the dead.

Then the shouts, the scattered shots and clash of steel died away as I sank forward—started—and awoke. . . .

I was lying on the sofa in my room in the old Winchester inn. The morning sunlight was streaming through the window. The fire was a heap of gray ashes. Adrian Dane had disappeared.

I arose shakily. So vivid had been the vision that my brow still felt clammy with the horror of it. But, after all, it had been but a dream, and I laughed aloud in my relief. Then the laugh froze on my lips as I looked down at the thing I still clutched in my right hand.

It was a broken silver cross, blackened by fire!

* * * * *

THE following day I transacted the business which had brought me to Winchester and then returned to town. Such was the impression left on my mind by my uncanny experience that I would have called on Adrian Dane at once; but, strangely enough, he had omitted to furnish me with his address. I had a feeling, however, that I should hear from him before long, and I was not mistaken.

One afternoon, on returning to my rooms, I was met at the door by my man, who informed me that a lady was waiting to see me.

"Who is she, Jophson?" I asked as I removed my hat and overcoat.

"I don't know, sir. She didn't give any name, only said her business was important."

The moment I opened the door I stood rooted to the spot with sheer astonishment. Before me, though now dressed in modern costume, was the living image of the witch-girl of Winchester! There were the same delicate features, the same oval face, the same passionate, far-seeing eyes that had last looked into mine through the glare of the blazing pyre.

Mastering my surprize as best I could, I came forward and uttered a commonplace greeting.

"Please forgive my intruding upon you without a previous introduction," she said, "but I came at the earnest request of my brother, Mr. Adrian Dane, who was, I think, an old friend of yours. I should have called some days since, but I have only just succeeded in discovering your address."

"Surely your brother could have furnished you with that?" I asked in mild surprize.

"My brother is dead," she said in a low voice; and for the first time I noticed that she was dressed in deep mourning.

Remembering how ill he had looked when I saw him last, I was hardly surprized at the news.

"Before he died he asked me to give these papers into your hands," she went on, taking a sealed packet from her hand-bag. "He said they would explain something you would wish to know."

She handed me the envelope and rose to go.

"Please do not go yet," I said quickly. "I think it just possible that the papers may be of interest to you, too."

"I already know their contents," she answered. "They are documents which have been handed down from generation to generation. They refer to the trial and execution of a member of our family, many years ago."

I broke the seal and rapidly scanned the documents. First came the records of the moot-court held at Winchester on September the twenty-fifth, 1645, setting forth the information, "laid by Master Nicholas Rowe, of this city, against one Althea Dane, who by divers supernatural and damnable arts hath"—I tossed this document, with its rigmarole of absurdities, to one side and took up the next. This was the warrant of execution, dated the eighth day of October. The third paper was a mere scrawl, penned in a trembling hand. It bore the super-scription of "The Confession of Master Nicholas Rowe, given under the persuasion of Hab Jenkins, Sergeant of the Pike Company of Captain Hadleigh, lately slain in the riot in the Market Square." If this sergeant was the same grim-visaged veteran of my dream, I could imagine that his "persuasion" was not-likely to have been over-tender!

As I read the shaky lines, the whole pitiful story became clear. The rejected advances of the old libertine; the simulated cramps and agonies of the "bewitchment"; the false accusation against the helpless girl; the

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Flames of Destiny

(Continued from page 335)

whole forming a dreadful story of ignorant superstition and cowardly revenge. When I had read the last word I looked across at my visitor.

"I knew that she was innocent—indeed, what sane person would believe otherwise?" I said. Then I rose to my feet, unlocked a drawer of the bureau and took out the broken cross. "By the way, I have a relic here which, I think, belonged to that poor, misjudged girl."

Wonderingly she took it from me. Then, raising her hand to the slender chain around her neck (how well I remembered that gesture!), she brought forth another broken cross, and placed them together.

The two halves fitted exactly.

* * * * *

LOOKING back over the events which I have here set down, I must confess that there are several points which are by no means clear. Can it be possible that, after all, my experience was nothing but a particularly vivid dream? Did Adrian Dane, suspecting his imminent death, himself induce the vision of the past by means of his hypnotic suggestion, in order to bring about a meeting between his sister and myself? But whether it was due to dream, trance, or merely my automatic mental reaction to the atmosphere of that old-world inn, I have never regretted the day it happened. For it was the direct cause of my meeting with the lady who is now my wife.

During our brief courtship we often discussed the tragic story of Althea Dane; but it was not until after our wedding that I told her how, clasped in each other's arms, our twin-souls had passed through the flames of destiny to the paradise of love and happiness which now is ours.