

TORN LACE

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Torn Lace by Charlotte Mansfield

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CHARLOTTE MANSFIELD

TORN LACE

*"To say what you have done is not always to say
what you are. And only what you are matters eternally."*
—ROBERT HICHENS, *"The Garden of Allah."*

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By
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CHAPTER I.

MIMI was certainly pretty, that was an indisputable fact; and although a child, the love-light of the South shone in her large, dark eyes, waiting to be called forth into flame—soft, gentle, when the sun set in the valley and all the world seemed to repose in yellow glory, yet flashing as did the mountain fires when the snow melted and the sun fired the undergrowth. Her body was lithe as the mountain ponies bred to climb, and her step had not yet lost its elasticity through wearing the wooden sabots of the peasantry; her petticoats were short, and her hair long, black, and somewhat rebellious,

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as her nature, refusing to be hidden under the little shawl, embroidered in many bright colours, and given to her long ago by her grandmother—a wrinkled old hussy, who, having forgotten the joy of life, yet lived on, robbing death of a just victim. They dwelt together these two in a dilapidated tenement at San Mamette, a tiny village on the edge of the Lake Lugano, and all the summer through Mimi sold picture-postcards at the small landing-stage to the many tourists. Donna Natalie stayed at home and played with the cat, gossiping between whiles with the neighbours, and cooking an occasional meal of macaroni or dried fish. She was, so she said, too old for work, and would not have done it had her years been less. Certainly the two rooms did not bear evidence of much industry; the dirt of ages had toned down the originally bright tints of the painted walls and ceilings, and the sun-curtains of the little balcony were

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dropping to pieces bit by bit. Filth and age within, barter and bribery without, such was Mimi's first knowledge of life. Time had been when Donna Natalie had traded in a small way between the little villages; but preferring thieving to thrift, she had combined smuggling with commerce.

The Lake Lugano covers both Swiss and Italian territory, but the Customs men visiting the steamers had been as sharp as Natalie, and only the bright eyes and saucy smile of Mimi had saved her from gaol. However, she grew tired of being searched, and was too selfish to bribe; so, providing Mimi brought home the necessary money, was contented to do nothing.

Mimi was thirteen when she had the first glimpse of human love. The amours of animal life had always fascinated her—she knew not why; and her curiosity was piqued into greater intensity when her grandmother would tell her

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to go about her business and keep her bold eyes for the tourists.

"Always sell to the men, Mimi," she would say; "and if you smile, maybe you will get a few extra centimes."

So Mimi smiled for love of centimes, not for love of man—as yet.

On her thirteenth birthday, Pierre, who claimed a distant cousinship, asked leave to take Mimi the whole trip of the lake—not a long journey, but holidays were rare with Mimi, and a few hours on the water, instead of by its side, meant indeed a birthday treat. At first Natalie demurred, but Pierre, who waited on the tourists with meat and drink when they preferred to sit in the stuffy saloon instead of enjoying the air off the mountains, was firm, and finally Natalie gave in, only Mimi must not go alone; she, Natalie, would accompany her. Pierre had not bargained for this, and Natalie grinned when she saw his

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expression of disappointment, and observed, with a shrug of her bent shoulders: "The wench is pretty, and you, Pierre, are a man."

"Mimi will soon be a woman," Pierre replied; "then I shall marry her."

Natalie laughed as she said: "No, no, boy; keep to your dirty dishes and centimes. Mimi shall wear silk and gamble with gold; she is not for you. Still, you are a nice boy, and we will be your guests to-day."

Pierre, with his native politeness, bowed at the honour and cursed in his heart at that which was withheld.

So on the momentous morning, Mimi, knowing nothing of the heartburning her bright eyes had caused, was full of merriment, like a squirrel in spring. Not having been taught that cleanliness is the chief of Nature's free luxuries, she lost no time by washing her white bodice; instead, she let her hair hang wild, and in place of the accustomed shawl,