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Lady Elaine's martyrdom

Author: Bertha M. Clay

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A WOMAN'S TRUST

BY

BERTHA M. CLAY

STREET & SMITH CORPORATION, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK

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OR,

Lady Elaine's Martyrdom

A NOVEL

BY

BERTHA M. CLAY

Whose complete works will be published in this, the New Bertha Clay Library.

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A Woman's Trust

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CONTENTS

A WOMAN’S TRUST.

CHAPTER I.

“AT LAST I HAVE MET MY FATE.”

“How ridiculously provoking you can be, Harold!”

“I do not think my remarks are ridiculous, Elaine.”

“Your society is decidedly unpleasant when your conversation takes this morbid strain,” replied Lady Elaine Seabright.

“I only asked you a natural question, darling,” said Sir Harold Annesley, an anxious light in his blue eyes. “I am your accepted lover—your future husband.”

“And in consequence my life is to be made a burden to me!” the beautiful Elaine exclaimed, pettishly.

“Heaven forbid. Every moment of my waking thoughts shall be devoted to the happiness of my peerless darling!” He pressed her to him in sudden rapture.

“Harold, you foolish fellow, I wish that you were less demonstrative. The people on the lawn will see us. I am sure that papa is looking this way!”

“No, no! We are safe in this bower of beauty,” laughed Sir Harold.

He pressed another kiss upon her ripe lips, and thanked Heaven in his heart for the great gift of this girl’s love.

Two short months before, neither dreamt of the other's existence. Sir Harold had just returned from an exploring expedition, and his name was mentioned in the papers. He was eulogized for his bravery in forcing a[Pg 6] passage to some outlandish place in Africa, and at the risk of his life rescuing a well-meaning but foolish missionary. He had been away from home for five long years, and it was hoped that he would now stay in England for good. He represented a grand old line; he was young, handsome, and wealthy. With all these advantages, it is easy for a man to become popular anywhere.

Lady Elaine Seabright had read this item of news with languid interest, and immediately forgot it. A week later it again recurred to her, for at the county ball she found herself being introduced to Sir Harold Annesley.

She thought that she had never before seen so perfect a man, and he remarked to his companion, Colonel Greyson, an hour later, that she was the most beautiful woman in the whole world.

"Did I not tell you so, Mr. Skeptic?" laughed the colonel. "Lady Elaine has carried all hearts by storm from the hour she was launched upon society. She has had a score of lovers."

Sir Harold sighed and echoed: "A score of lovers!"

"Yes; all hearts that beat in manly bosoms pay homage to the most beautiful girl in England. But she has come scathless out of the ordeal, and is free as air after two seasons."

"I am glad of it," replied Sir Harold; and Colonel Greyson smiled, meaningly.

"Why should you be glad?" he said. "Why should you be glad? A confirmed woman-hater! Beware, Sir Harold!"

The young baronet blushed.

"I am not ashamed to tell you, old friend, that with me it is love at first sight. I have never loved before; I have never breathed words of love into any woman's ear. At last I have met my fate."

"Go in and win, my boy. You are worthy of any[Pg 7] woman," the colonel said; then he looked away, adding, "this pleasure is only tempered with one regret."

"One regret, colonel? I do not understand you. Be frank with me, as you have ever been, my more than father."

“Boy, are you not aware that your cousin Margaret loves you? I believe that she has worshiped you from her very childhood.”

A shade of annoyance passed over Sir Harold’s face, but it immediately brightened again.

“Of course, Margaret loves me in a cousinly—a sisterly way, but it is nothing more, colonel, I assure you. Besides, I could not marry Margaret Nugent if she were the only choice left to me. I believe that it is wrong for cousins to marry.”

Just then he caught sight of Lady Elaine, and he had eyes for none else.

“Come,” said Greyson, “we must not hide in this recess like a pair of conspirators. You are the lion of the evening, Sir Harold, and people will be inquiring for you.”

They left the conservatory, and a deep sigh, that was almost a sob, fluttered in the scented air. From behind a mass of sub-tropical plants emerged the figure of a woman—young and exquisitely beautiful—a woman with a face that would have sent Titian into ecstasies of delight. She was of medium height, and her form was outlined in graceful, rounded curves. There was not an angle or a movement to offend the eye of an artist. Her face was oval, her lips red and full, her eyes dark and luminous, her hair as black as the raven’s wing. Among the coils of these matchless tresses was a red rosebud; about her snowy throat a necklet of rubies, and her dress was of amber silk.

“He could not marry Margaret Nugent if she were the[Pg 8] only choice left to him!” she murmured, her white hands tightly clinching themselves. “And is it for this I have loved and waited all these weary years? Oh, Harold! how can you be so cruel? You have been my ideal—my king! More precious than my hopes of heaven! And now—oh, God, I cannot stand it!”

She sank into the lounge that the gentlemen had just left, and covered her eyes with her hands, while her lovely bosom rose and fell with the bitter pangs of her emotion.

The merry strains of the waltz were maddening, and the laughter of the happy people in the brilliantly illuminated ballroom made only more apparent her own misery.

“He has met his fate in Lady Elaine Seabright, and I had thought him all my own!” she continued, inaudibly. “I have never liked my proud and haughty friend, and I now hate her with an undying hatred! She shall not take from me the man I love! If she does, I swear to fill her life with bitterness equal to that which I suffer now!”

Her eyes had grown black, and flashed gleams of fire; her tiny hands were clinched, and her beautiful form swelled with fury. In that brief space Margaret Nugent had changed from a warm-tempered, imperious girl to a determined and revengeful woman.

Just then some one touched the keys of the piano, and sang the words of a song that haunted her forever:

“Alone in crowds to wander on

And feel that all the charm is gone,

While voices dear, and eyes beloved,

Shed round us once, where’er we roved—

This, this, the doom must be

Of all who’ve loved, and loved to see

The few bright things they thought would stay

For ever near them, die away.

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Though fairer forms around us throng,

Their smiles to others all belong,

And want that charm that dwells alone

Round those the fond heart calls its own.

Where, where the sunny brow?

The long-known voice—where are they now?

Thus ask I still, nor ask in vain—

The silence answers all too plain!

Oh! what is fancy’s magic worth,

If all her art cannot call forth

One bliss like those we felt of old

From lips now mute and eyes now cold?

No, no—her spell is vain—

As soon could she bring back again

Those eyes themselves from out the grave,

As ask again one bliss they gave."

Margaret Nugent clutched at her heart, gasping: "I will not lose him—I will never give up my hero-king!"

Again the voice of the singer rose:

"Alone in crowds to wander on,

And feel that all the charm is gone."

"I shall go mad!" murmured Margaret. "Can I get out into the moonlight unobserved? The cool air will soothe my throbbing brain."

She looked back into the ballroom, and saw Sir Harold Annesley talking to Lady Elaine Seabright. Lady Elaine's flower-like face was turned up to him laughingly, and Margaret Nugent shivered.

She turned, and gliding from the conservatory, almost reeled into the vine-wreathed piazza beyond, clutching at the wall for support.

Even here she could not be alone, for a recumbent figure started up from a low seat, saying, in anxious tones:

"Dear Miss Margaret, are you faint? I have just come out myself to escape the heat. Can I get you a glass of water?"

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"No, thank you, viscount," replied Margaret. "I am already better—much better. The heat is stifling."

"Would you prefer to be alone, Miss Margaret?" went on Viscount Rivington, "or will you stroll with me in the moonlight for a few minutes? It is lovely out here, and we shall not be missed now."

He spoke with a tinge of bitterness in his tones. Margaret looked at him sharply.

"I understand——" she said, gently, yet with a thrill of satisfaction in her heart, "I understand. Lady Elaine is as capricious as usual; Lady Elaine seeks new worlds to conquer!"

He laughed bitterly.

“Sir Harold is the social lion to-night. Every one bows to him,” he said, “but I will not have him come between me and the woman I worship, Miss Nugent!”

He turned suddenly upon her.

“You love your cousin—you love Sir Harold. Nay, how could I help but read your secret when my own heart is torn with jealous fears? I could curse the fate that brought him here to-night. Lady Elaine had promised to consider my suit; her father, the earl, was pleased to welcome me as a favored lover; but now I am extinguished!”

He glanced vengefully toward the gleaming windows just as two people in the room beyond paused to drink in the beauty of the moonlight. The brilliant lights behind them made every movement distinct.

“See!” Viscount Rivington whispered. “There they are, Miss Nugent—the woman I love and the man whom you covet. Are we to stand idly by while all that life holds dear drifts away?”

“No!” she said, and their eyes met. They understood each other.

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CHAPTER II.

A RIFT IN THE LUTE.

“She is the loveliest girl in all England,” the papers said, when the engagement of Sir Harold Annesley and Lady Elaine Seabright was announced. “And Sir Harold is the lion of the season. Both are extremely wealthy, and it is in every way a most suitable match.”

The wooing and winning had been short and decisive. It was love at first sight on both sides, and the Earl of Seabright was gratified that his beautiful but capricious daughter was at last conquered.

He was an easy-going nobleman of the old school, intensely proud of his ancient line, but indolent to a selfish degree where the best interests of his only child were concerned.

He wished to see her well married, but did not care whom to so long as there was no blemish on his prospective son-in-law's name. The man's private character was nothing to him if he could boast of wealth and an ancient pedigree.

"I congratulate you, my boy," he said, genially, to Sir Harold. "My willful beauty has been endless trouble to me. All the men at her feet, you know, and if you had not come upon the scene so opportunely, she would have struck her colors to Viscount Rivington, I verily believe. Poor fellow! It will be no end of an upset for him."

Sir Harold frowned.

"I do not think that Elaine ever dreamed of such a thing," he said.

"Well, well," laughed the earl; "if you are satisfied,[Pg 12] what does it matter? One word, my boy; deal gently with her. She is very young, and has never yet been thwarted. 'Happy's the wooing that's not long a-doing,' you know, but these sudden engagements are apt to be as quickly broken."

Sir Harold could not forget the words of the earl for some days. The impression left from them was far from pleasant. He was giving all to the woman he loved—the past, the present, and the future—and he expected an undivided return.

So rapid had been the wooing that the plans of Margaret Nugent and Viscount Rivington had not been permitted formation. It was as impossible to keep these two apart as to keep the needle from the magnet.

An early marriage had been suggested by the impatient lover, and Elaine was not averse to anything which would please Sir Harold. She worshiped him as a being far above her, though at times his jealous fears pained her bitterly.

This takes the reader back to the opening words of our story.

Sir Harold was an almost daily visitor at Seabright Hall. His own estate was but ten miles distant, and, mounted upon his favorite horse, his had become a familiar figure to the rustics of Seabright.

It was a warm July day, and the few visitors at the Hall were sunning themselves on the lawn, and listening to my lord's sporting reminiscences, while the lovers had wandered to a bower festooned with roses and fragrant clematis.

"But you have not answered my question, Elaine," Sir Harold went on, and there was an earnestness in his tones that surprised her.

She turned her eyes toward him—lustrous eyes, like[Pg 13] pansies wet with dew, saying, "Harold, I believe that you are jealous, and I dislike jealous people."

"Then I am to understand that you dislike me?" he smiled; but there was an undercurrent of sadness in his voice.

"Oh, my darling! how foolish you are! Why will you tease me so?"

Lady Elaine clung to him in a passion of love, and yet he was far from being satisfied.

"I believe that I am of a jealous nature," he said. "It is one of the misfortunes of my race."

"I am glad that you call it a misfortune," the girl observed, her lips trembling, "and I sincerely trust that you will never be jealous of me, Harold. Where there is jealousy there cannot be true love. You must trust me all in all, or not at all!"

He was silent for a few minutes, and gnawed his mustache impatiently.

"My darling," he said, at last, "I have laid bare my life to you. My notions of love and marriage may seem peculiar, but the thought that the woman I love had ever willingly accepted the attentions of another man would be torture to me. I have never had a sweetheart before, I have never pressed my lips to those of a girl, or written one line of nonsense to any woman living. I give you all—unreservedly—my first and my last love."

She waited for him to continue, her heart burning resentfully.

"I know that I am accounted the luckiest and most enviable mortal on earth because I have stepped in and taken the prize that so many sighed for in vain; but, Elaine, my darling, now that we are engaged, it maddens me to see such men as Viscount Rivington forever dancing attendance upon you."

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"Harold," she said, calmly, "what am I to do?"

"You must show by your manners that—that——"

"I cannot be rude to my father's friend," she replied, decidedly. "You are asking too much, Sir Harold. You insult me."

He had seized her hand in a moment, and was showering kisses upon it.

"No, no, Elaine, a thousand times no! It is only my great love for you that makes me so exacting. You will forgive me, darling, when I tell you that I have heard from several

people that you were all but engaged to Viscount Rivington, when I arrived in England, but two short months since. I want you to deny this, and I shall be eternally satisfied."

Lady Elaine had turned as pale as death.

"I do deny it, Sir Harold, unequivocally."

She looked at him fearlessly, and his heart smote him.

"My dear love," he whispered, remorsefully, "I am satisfied. I will never doubt you again. This has been a bitter torture to me. Your father hinted at it long ago, and—and——"

"Well?"

Her tones were cold and hard.

"You told me that it was not true."

"And you have listened to other falsehoods—to other childish tittle-tattle. Oh, Harold! what will my future life be if I wed a jealous man?"

"It shall never occur again, my darling. Do not punish me more, I beseech you!" cried Sir Harold.

"Why do you not question the viscount?" she demanded, scornfully.

Then she bowed her head and sobbed bitterly.

Sir Harold returned home that evening with a heavy heart. For the first time since their engagement he and Elaine had not exchanged a kiss at parting.

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She had persistently remained in her own apartments, and at a late hour he had ridden away to Annesley Park, his heart torn with conflicting doubts and fears.

And Viscount Henry Rivington saw through it all and smiled.

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CHAPTER III.

"MY GOD! ALL IS AT AN END."

Sir Harold Annesley was the most envied of men among his kind. He was young, wealthy and famous; possessed of a splendid physique, and the representative of an old and honorable line. There was no blot on the escutcheon of the Annesleys; the men had ever been noble and brave, and the women good and virtuous.

In addition to these splendid attributes and honors, Sir Harold had won the fairest and loveliest woman in all England. Dukes and princes had sighed vainly at her feet. She had been the beauty of two seasons, and had nearly turned the brains of a score of men, but to one and all was Lady Elaine the same. Kindly and gracious, but as cold as an icicle when there was the danger of an avowal.

Some of these disappointed lovers declared that she was a coquette; others that she had no human passions—no heart.

At last her father, my lord of Seabright, spoke to her seriously upon the subject of marriage.

"It must come some day, Elaine. Surely among all your acquaintances you must have some preference?"

"No," the girl replied. "All men are alike. It is dreadful that they must all pretend to fall in love with me." Her lips curled with scorn. "I do not think," she added, "that one man in a hundred knows anything of the professions he makes use of so glibly."

The earl stared at her in surprise. "Why should you think so, Elaine?"

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"They are passionately in love to-day, and speaking unkindly of me to-morrow. Is that love?"

The earl did not feel competent to argue the point, so he wisely evaded the question by saying:

"Well, let us hope that you will be able to return the affection of some one before many months are past—Viscount Rivington, for instance. He is young, handsome, and comes of a great family. He will be a duke some day, and is very much in love with you."

"So that these men are of ancient lineage, papa, it does not seem to concern you whether it is possible for me to love them or not," Lady Elaine replied.

"My dear, I sincerely hope that you could not bring yourself to care for what is termed a man of the people," the earl exclaimed, in alarm.

“And why not, if he were a gentleman?” laughed Elaine. “There, papa, why should we talk of these things? I like Viscount Rivington better than any one else, because he does not rave about broken hearts and suicide; but as for the love that poets sing about, I fear that I am incapable of experiencing it. In my early girlhood it was a beautiful dream that lay before me like an enchanted garden. Now I am becoming worldly and skeptical. I have not met my prince, and fear that my ideal lives only in my dreams.”

“What nonsense these poets put into the heads of girls!” my lord remarked. “Their trash does an incalculable amount of harm, and ought to be made a bonfire of. However, I am glad that you are beginning to see the value of it, my child. Try and think well of Rivington. He is a capital fellow.”

After that Lady Elaine treated the viscount kindly, and he at once fancied that he was her favored suitor. Then Sir Harold Annesley appeared, and the beautiful Elaine knew that her prince had come at last! With one glance[Pg 18] Sir Harold won this peerless creature, and to all his other honors was added this victory. And yet he was not happy!

No sooner was the prize assured than he began to make himself and Elaine miserable by his quixotic notions of the love of twin souls. The words of the Earl of Seabright haunted him when he spoke of Viscount Rivington in connection with Lady Elaine, and while congratulating him, his cousin Margaret had expressed astonishment that the earl’s daughter could so quickly transfer her affections from one to the other.

“But it is not true,” Sir Harold had said; “she never cared for the viscount.”

“Everybody thought that there was a tacit engagement at least,” Margaret said, “and, of course,” she added, brightly, “everybody may have been mistaken! People are always ready to take an interest in other people’s love affairs. Hundreds of engagements are made in this way, which really have no foundation in fact.”

“It is a great pity that such busybodies have nothing better with which to employ themselves.”

“It will always be the same,” his cousin replied, indifferently, “so long as unscrupulous society papers are permitted to print the items sent in to them by vicious-minded people who make money out of their news. Still, there is rarely smoke without fire, Harold, and I was certainly under the impression that Lady Elaine favored the viscount.”

Sir Harold felt vexed and irritable, and after this he was never weary of hearing Elaine declare that she had given him her first enduring love.

“Suppose that you had never seen me?” he would say; “what then?”

The bare possibility, even in imagination, of the woman he loved ever caring for another troubled him.

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His persistence became painful to Lady Elaine. It seemed that he had not implicit trust in her. She who had been so cold and haughty to others—the spoiled child of an indulgent father, the pet of society—became almost a slave to the caprices of her lover.

But my lady became indignant at last, and after their interview in the summer arbor she sent for Margaret Nugent—she sent for the cousin who knew Sir Harold’s moods, and would perhaps be able to advise her.

Miss Nugent listened, and there was a well-assumed sympathy in her eyes, in her voice—while her heart was throbbing with triumph.

“You must not let him have his way in all things, Lady Elaine,” she said. “Time enough for that after marriage. You will lose your self-respect, and he will not value you any the more for that!”

“I think that you are right, Margaret, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart. He shall not find me so childish in the future. In my great love for him I may have acted weakly. I am the daughter of an earl,” she added, proudly.

There was a resolute ring in her tones, and her head resumed its haughty pose.

So when Sir Harold came to the Hall next day, an expectant smile upon his lips, a resolve in his heart to beg Elaine’s pardon, and to promise never to offend her again, he was informed by a servant that my lady had gone for a ride, and that she was accompanied by Viscount Rivington.

His face turned so white that the man noticed it, and asked:

“Are you ill, Sir Harold?”

“No,” he returned, shortly. “Which way did her ladyship go?”

“In the direction of Ashbourne, Sir Harold.”

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The baronet rode away, and as he galloped through the park, he saw Viscount Rivington and Lady Elaine crossing a distant hill on their return home.

His brain was on fire. He dared not meet them now, and continued on his way—anywhere.

For three days he nursed his jealous wrath, and heard no word of Elaine. Then news came to him of a garden party at Seabright Hall, to be followed by a ball.

He could bear it no longer. He was consumed with love and wounded pride.

"I have given her all," he told himself; "and get but half a heart in return. She must be everything to me, or nothing!"

He rode over to the Hall, but it was not the happy lover; it was a man with a stern, white face.

He left his horse in charge of a groom, and asked for Lady Elaine.

"I will wait in the west drawing-room," he told the footman. "Let her ladyship know that I am here as soon as possible."

He paced the floor impatiently, until he saw a vision of loveliness crossing the lawn toward the house. It was Lady Elaine, attired in a diaphanous dress of snowy white. She wore a broad-brimmed straw hat, and in her hands were bunches of wild flowers.

"My darling!" he murmured. "Oh, what a brute I am. If she is weak and frail, then Heaven itself is false!"

In a little while she came into the room, and his words of welcome died on his lips, for in the eyes of Elaine there was no answering smile.

"Sweetheart," he whispered, hoarsely, "is this the best greeting you have for me?"

"Why have you absented yourself, Sir Harold, without one word of explanation?" she asked, with studied coldness.

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He instantly resented this by saying: "Absented myself? The last time I called you appeared to be enjoying more congenial society."

"It is a relief to be beyond range of your unreasonable temper sometimes," Lady Elaine said.

"Oh, my love, this is terrible for me to bear!"

"You think only of yourself, Sir Harold." Her lips quivered. "You think only of yourself. I have been too childish and yielding."

“It is the duty of woman to yield,” he retorted.

“I beg to differ with you. I do not propose to be your slave,” Lady Elaine responded, bitterly.

There was silence for a little while—a silence that neither ever forgot.

“We must have an understanding, Elaine,” Sir Harold said, at last. “Do not let false pride stand between us, my darling. I was angry when I heard that you were out with Rivington. I saw you together, and it maddened me. I do not think it right for an engaged woman to listen to the flattery of any man.”

She laughed musically.

“No? I suppose that you consider me your slave? I object to being any man’s slave, Sir Harold.”

“Listen to me, my dear love,” he pleaded. “Who speaks of slavery! Oh, why will you misunderstand me? Have I not lavished upon you the whole wealth of my affection? Are you not my ideal of all that is good and beautiful in woman?”

“And yet you do not trust me. I cannot understand such love as that,” Elaine said.

He held out his arms, and she was not proof against this, but her determination to maintain her independence remained unshaken. Had she not already scored a victory?

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For a few minutes he caressed her fondly, his face rapturously happy.

“There is only one thing now,” he told her, “that stands between us and heaven itself. Can you guess what it is, darling?”

“No,” she replied. “How should I know?”

“Then I will tell you, dear.” He held her away from him at arm’s length. “I want you to promise me that you will not ride out with Viscount Rivington again?”

She drew away from him, her head erect.

“It is impossible, Sir Harold; I am not your wife yet, remember!”

“Impossible!” he echoed. “Why, may I ask?”

“I decline to answer. If the Viscount desires my society I cannot very well refuse it. He is an old friend and neighbor. As your wife you may command me, but again I repeat I am not yet your wife.”

“And never will be,” Sir Harold replied, with terrible calmness, “unless you respect my wishes now.”

She endeavored to slip his ring from her finger, but was seized with an awful faintness.

“I believe that it will kill me if I lose you, Elaine,” he went on, “but I cannot marry a woman who accepts the attentions of other men. I will leave you to think it over, and to decide between me and Rivington. Bah! how I loathe his name! If you love me as I love you my happiness is safe. If you will not give me your promise, I swear that I will never willingly look upon your face again.”

He sprang toward her and pressed her passionately to his heart; he showered a hundred kisses on her face mingled with tears that seemed scalding hot.

“Good-by, Elaine! I can stand this no longer,” he groaned.

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He rushed from the room, and for a long time Lady Elaine Seabright was like one in a dark dream.

Her first impulse when she recovered her numbed senses was to cry:

“Oh, my darling, my darling, come back to me!”

Then Margaret Nugent was announced, and Lady Elaine told her all.

“You have nearly conquered him,” smiled Margaret. “He is merely trying to frighten you. How well I know him of old! He was always a wayward, headstrong, loving boy. As children we had our little quarrels through his overbearing temper, but he always acknowledged at last that he was in the wrong; I will say that for him, and it will be the same with you, Lady Elaine. He will come back to you and confess his faults; he will be so humble when he realizes that you refuse to encourage his caprices, and let us hope that the lesson will be a wholesome one.”

“But there was a strange look in his eyes that I have never seen there before,” Lady Elaine said, piteously. “Oh, Margaret, are you sure that your counsel is good? Are you sure that you understand this strange jealousy that has come between me and my lover?”

Miss Nugent replied confidently, and for a time her words carried consolation to the suffering heart.

“I know Sir Harold far better than I know myself,” she said. “I know the mood he is in exactly. Long, long ago, when we were children, he left one of his pet birds for me to feed and care for. Let me confess that I neglected it, and it died—poor, little thing. When my cousin came home his rage was terrible. I thought then that I should never be forgiven. He declared that he would never look upon me again—that he hated me. His passions are violent always. But he apologized a few[Pg 24] days later, Lady Elaine, and he will come back to you in the same way. I am sure of it.”

Miss Nugent went away thinking, “I shall win Harold yet—I, who have loved him for years, and have the greatest right to him!”

The next morning’s post brought a letter to Sir Harold—a letter bearing the Seabright crest.

At sight of it his haggard face lighted up with sudden hope, and he kissed the dear writing tenderly; then he broke the seal and read:

Dear Harold—Much as I love you, I cannot sacrifice my self-respect by making the foolish promise you requested.

Elaine.

“My God!” he gasped, a stony glare in his eyes. “And so it has come to this! All is at an end!”

He retired to his study, and his valet kept watch at the door. He feared that Sir Harold meant to end his life.

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CHAPTER IV.

COLONEL GREYSON’S MISSION.

“She is heartless, soulless!” groaned Sir Harold. “Oh, Elaine, why should you be so fair and fickle?”

He paced the floor like a man distraught. His eyes were bloodshot, his face ashy pale. This misery was more bitter than death.

He had given the one great love of his life; he had tasted the most ecstatic bliss that had ever fallen to mortal man. But, after all, he had only been reveling in a fool's paradise. He had believed that the earl's daughter loved him beyond all earthly things; that this was no idyllic dream, but the meeting of two sympathetic twin souls—a beautiful reality.

When the first storm of his misery had nearly subsided, he sank into a chair, and buried his face in his hands.

The Earl of Seabright had warned him to deal gently with Lady Elaine. She was so young, so willful, so utterly spoiled.

"These sudden engagements are apt to be as quickly broken," my lord had said, and now his words rang like the knell of doom in Sir Harold's ears. Was all at an end between them? Was their quarrel to be the subject of a nine days' wonder? The society papers would enlarge upon it. Innumerable five-o'clock teas would be enlivened by it, and then it would be forgotten by everybody but Sir Harold.

Thus he reasoned, and he felt that his heart would be broken, that it would be forever dead.

"Perhaps it will be better so. She does not love me—she[Pg 26] does not love as I love. I do not want half a heart. I will go away, and the sooner I am dead the better it will be for me. My life has ever been a bitter mistake. I am a visionary, and my last delusion will kill me!"

It was a relief to John Stimson, Sir Harold's valet, that he had a legitimate cause for knocking at the door of his master's study. A footman had appeared bearing the card of Colonel Greyson on a salver.

"He told me to see that he was not disturbed on any account," he muttered; "but I shall risk it. I didn't like the look in his face when he went into the study, and the awful silence within makes me uneasy."

He took the salver from the footman, saying:

"All right. I will attend to this. Sir Harold is engaged. Where is Colonel Greyson?"

"In the blue drawing-room," the footman replied.

"Thank you; that will do," said the valet, as he tapped gently on the door.

To his surprise it was opened at once, and his master took the card with an exclamation of impatience.

“I told you not to disturb me, Stimson,” he said, harshly.

“But you never refuse to see the colonel, Sir Harold, and I felt anxious about you.”

Stimson was a privileged servant. He had traveled over half the globe with his young master, and had nursed him through the yellow fever in an African swamp.

“You are ill, master, I am sure.”

“Ill?” echoed Sir Harold. “No, I am not ill. I wish to heaven that I were sick unto death!”

It was a strange speech, but Stimson pretended not to notice it. He merely said:

“You will see Colonel Greyson, Sir Harold?”

“Yes, I will see him here, in my study,” was the gloomy reply, and when Stimson had gone he added:

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“He it was who introduced us, and who more fitting to be the first to hear that we are parted forever?”

Then the colonel’s bluff tones fell upon his ears; and he felt his hand being shaken warmly.

“I have not seen much of you for weeks, my boy,” he was saying; “but suddenly determined to make an assault upon you. In your bower of bliss, presided over by I don’t know how many Cupids, you seem to forget that you are necessary, to a small extent at least, to your neighbors.”

Every word was like the stab of a knife, and Sir Harold, his heart too full for words, made a deprecatory gesture.

However, the colonel went on without noticing the agony of his young friend. The study was a dark room at any time, when no artificial light was used, and Colonel Greyson was notoriously short-sighted.

“Yes, my boy, we are organizing a steeplechase. Now, don’t tell me that you cannot ride, or that you have other engagements. You must have a little consideration for the county. I want you to become even more popular than you are already, and we may yet run you for a seat in the House.”

“Colonel,” broke in Sir Harold, “why will you torture me in this way?”

His voice was so harsh that the old soldier promptly pulled himself up, and began to search for his eyeglasses.

“Torture you, eh? Egad, what is wrong with the boy? Confound it, sir, what is the trouble? You, whom I account one of the most fortunate men of the century, talking of torture!

“Is it torture to be a rich man? Is it torture to be young, handsome, famous and engaged to the loveliest woman under the sun? I tell you what it is, my boy, you are one of Fortune’s spoiled darlings, and have been so[Pg 28] much surfeited with good things that you do not know what is best for you! Now, as you have hitherto professed to have implicit confidence in my common sense, I intend prescribing for you. My dear fellow, the county cannot possibly get on without you, and I am sure that you cannot get along without the county! It is my ambition to see you at the very top of the political tree, and if you take the thing in hand I am pretty certain as to the result, for your abilities are far beyond the average, and only want bringing out. Now, about this little scheme of mine—this steeplechase——”

“Sit down, colonel,” Sir Harold interrupted, closing the door. “I have something to tell you that will drive steeplechasing out of your head, so far as I am concerned. I did not intend speaking of my misery to any living soul, but my confidence is due to you, old friend, though I do not solicit advice. I know my own case only too well!”

Colonel Greyson listened like a man in a stupor, but he had no suspicion of the nature of Sir Harold’s trouble until it was revealed to him in words that seemed to quiver with agony.

“Only a lovers’ quarrel,” he interjected.

“No, colonel, it is no ordinary affair. Mine is no ordinary love; it is life or death to me. I have not shaped my life in any stereotyped pattern. I have always been afraid of linking my fate with another, because I am so intense in all that I profess. It is my misfortune. I believed that Lady Elaine was capable of loving after my fashion of loving, but I was wrong, and I wish you to understand that I do not blame her, though my disappointment will embitter my whole life.”

“You must see her again,” said the colonel, “and I’ll wager that it is nothing but a storm in a teacup.”

“No, I could not bear the agony of another interview. I have appealed to her in vain. The reply she has sent[Pg 29] to me is final. The engagement is at an end, and the world may judge as it pleases. I do not suppose that Lady Elaine will care one jot.”

“You wrong her,” Colonel Greyson retorted, a little angrily. “I have known Lady Elaine from childhood. She is as good as she is beautiful.”

“I admit that. But, oh, the agony of knowing that she is soulless!”

“I will not listen to such nonsense!” fumed the colonel. “I will see her myself. It is a duty I owe to both of you, for, in a measure, I brought you together. Curse Viscount Rivington! I say—though I have no doubt that your own insane jealousy is at the root of all the trouble. No young woman of spirit would put up with it. I am determined to hear both sides of the story.”

Sir Harold shook his head gloomily.

“I will not be content to have the matter patched up,” he said. “My wife must be all in all to me. My ideal is in my dreams, and to that alone will I be wedded.”

“Stuff!” interrupted the colonel, inelegantly. “All stuff, sir, depend upon it! Lady Elaine Seabright will be your wife, and a more perfect woman never breathed!”

To accentuate this Colonel Greyson brought his fist down upon the table with a bang.

“Heaven help me!” went on Sir Harold. “I loved her as I believed her to be, not as she is, and shall do so for evermore!”

“Once again,” pleaded the colonel, “I ask you to see her. You are acting like an insane man. Why will you wreck two lives when——”

“Don’t—don’t! It is impossible!” groaned the baronet. “If she will not grant me one reasonable request, with the full knowledge that she will lose me, it is proof positive that her love is a mere chimera, a passing fancy, undefinable and worthless! No, colonel, all is at an end,[Pg 30] and I shall leave Annesley Park to-night. My affairs shall be put into the hands of my men of business in London, and I pray to God that I may never set foot in the place again! My heart is broken! I have one request to make of you, old friend, and that is to correct any wrong impressions that get abroad. Spare Lady Elaine all that may be annoying, and if any one has to bear the blame, let it be me. We part now, probably never to meet again, and I wish you to take my farewell to my cousin, Margaret Nugent.”

The colonel jumped to his feet, tears in his eyes.

He held out his hand, replying huskily:

“I will do all that you ask of me, you foolish fellow, and probably a great deal more. I hope to see you again, though,” he added, energetically. “I will see you again! You must excuse my haste; I have several important matters needing my attention. Good-by!”

He scarcely gave Sir Harold time to reply, but dashed out of the room into the hall, seized his hat and commanded a servant to see that a horse was saddled for him at once.

In a few minutes the animal was brought to the door, and the colonel galloped at a mad pace toward Ashbourne, the seat of the Earl of Seabright.

“The boy is full of cranky, quixotic notions,” he thought, “and my lady is too high-spirited and proud to pander to all his follies. As a consequence, he would ruin two lives. The county cannot afford it. What does she care for that dandyfied ass of a Rivington? Not one iota! I consider that the girl has acted very properly. Does he want to shut her out of the world entirely? By Jove, I feel that I could give him a piece of my mind!”

When he arrived at Seabright Hall, his horse dripping with foam, the first person he encountered in the vestibule[Pg 31] was Viscount Rivington, who regarded him in wonderment.

“One of Annesley’s horses,” he observed. “Why, colonel, one would think that you were the bearer of important dispatches! You must be living over again the days when you were a military aide-de-camp on active service.”

“Where is the earl?” demanded the colonel, brusquely. Then he added fiercely, his gray eyes flashing under his bristling brows: “See here, Rivington, you are causing trouble between two young people who love each other dearly. If you are a gentleman, you must stop it. D’ye hear?”

“No man ever dared say that I am not a gentleman!” retorted the viscount, flushing hotly.

“Then prove that you are worthy of the name,” the colonel said, “or I may have to stigmatize you as a blackguard! We men of the old school are still ready to back our words at the sword’s point!”

So saying, Colonel Greyson stalked away in quest of Lady Elaine, while Viscount Rivington watched him with gathering fury in his black eyes.

CHAPTER V.

“IF HE HAD ONLY COME HIMSELF.”

“Show me into a room where I am not likely to be interrupted,” the old soldier said to the footman who stepped forward. “And tell Lady Elaine that I am here upon a matter of great urgency.”

The footman grasped the situation with alacrity. The colonel was a favorite with everybody. His liberality, if not his past record for deeds of valor, entitled him to respect, particularly in the servants’ hall.

Colonel Greyson was ushered into a small private library, and ten minutes later Lady Elaine entered the room, her eyes anxious, troubled and expectant.

“Good-morning, Elaine!” the old soldier said. He always addressed the earl’s daughter with easy familiarity.

Her ladyship faintly responded to his greeting.

“There, sit down, my dear, and compose yourself. Why, you are trembling as though with cold, while I am boiling with perspiration and bad temper!”

Lady Elaine obeyed, smiling in a wintry sort of way.

“Perhaps it was my duty to see your father first,” the old soldier began, “but as he is anything but a sympathetic man where young people’s love affairs are concerned, I have come direct to you, my dear.”

Lady Elaine paled, and her heart throbbed wildly.

“You have heard?” she hazarded.

“I have heard that two young people who passionately love each other are trying their utmost to drift into the shoals of misery,” he replied, kindly.

“Has Sir Harold told you anything?” she demanded, proudly.

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It seemed to her a strange thing to do. Why should he make their little differences public?

The colonel was quick to notice this.

“Elaine,” he said, “I called at Annesley Park to try and induce Sir Harold to interest himself in local affairs. To my utter astonishment I found him in the very depths of despair.”

The tears started to the girl’s eyes.

“Now, although I have been like a father to the lad, I had some difficulty in learning the cause of his misery. At last he told me, in a disjointed way, that his engagement—that your engagement, was at an end, and that he was upon the point of starting for some outlandish place, never to return. I told him that it was all stuff, but he assured me that you preferred some one else to him, and I have galloped over here to know what is really the matter. You are just sending the lad to his death!”

“Oh, colonel, why will you be so unkind to me?” Elaine whispered.

“Because he is a fool!” blurted out the old soldier, angrily. “My dear, you did a very silly thing in sending him some letter that he mentioned. Why not undo the mischief at once? What do you care about Viscount Rivington? Nothing!”

“I hate him,” said Lady Elaine, “but I cannot insult a guest whom my father honors. Why will Sir Harold be so unreasonably jealous? Why will he not trust me as I trust him?”

“You must pocket your pride, my dear. I don’t pretend to take sides with Harold, but you must admit that he never runs after any other girls. Indeed, he is barely civil to any other woman except yourself. He is a romantic sort of fellow, a modern knight-errant, full of poetry, chivalry and all that kind of thing. His friendship or his love nothing will alter when once given. He[Pg 34] is an idealist, and being so much out of the common run of simpering, deceitful dandies, merits a peculiar consideration. With all these super-excellent qualities, he is as stupid as a mule, and if you don’t want to lose him you must call him back to you—that’s the beginning and the end of it!”

For a little while Lady Elaine was silent. Then she paced the floor like an insulted queen. It was a struggle between love and pride.

“I will think it over, Colonel Greyson,” she said, tremulously. “I will think it over, and——”

“You will wait until it is too late, child. The mad-brained fellow will be gone past recall,” the old soldier said, vigorously.

“Oh, what am I to do?” was her piteous cry. “I have no one to advise me!”

“Am I not advising you? Let me go back to Annesley Park and tell him that you wish to see him.”

“But that would mean unconditional surrender,” Lady Elaine replied, with a flash of scorn. “I will not be treated like a willful child—no, not if my heart were rended to atoms! What wrong have I done? Sir Harold listens to every scrap of tittle-tattle and believes it. You have come to champion his cause, Colonel Greyson, and in your heart you think that I am all to blame.”

“No—no!” he protested. “You are both equally foolish. If you had seen him as I have seen him this morning, you would throw your pride to the winds. Do not let me go away feeling that my efforts have been in vain. My child, I am old enough to be your father. I am a man of the world, who has experienced the bitterness and misery of such folly as this.”

“If he had come himself!” murmured Elaine. “If he had only come himself!”

“Shall I give him that message?” was the eager question.[Pg 35] “Yes, I will tell him that you wish to see him—that you have relented.”

For a minute the girl was silent. Would it be fair to Margaret Nugent? Had she not kindly counseled her—counseled her with the best of intentions? And to ignore her would be ungrateful—cruel!

“No, you must take no message from me yet,” she said, imperiously. “You are probably exaggerating things, Colonel Greyson, in your anxiety to bring about a reconciliation. You must not forget that, as Sir Harold Annesley’s wife, I may have to live through many years of such jealous torture as this, unless I analyze his true character before marriage.”

“What nonsense—what arrant nonsense!” the colonel exclaimed, bitterly. “I had believed you until now to be possessed of sound reason. Lady Elaine, I must say that, however severe your punishment may be, you will well deserve it, and my words may recur to you again in your hour of grief—when it will be too late—too late!”

He had not intended to be so harsh, but he could not help it.

“You are presuming, sir!” she flashed, haughtily. “I have no desire for your censorship.”

“No, my lady; your own conscience will be quite enough to bear with!”

He jumped to his feet and turned toward the door.

“At least,” he said, “let us part friends. I have nothing but pity for you, Lady Elaine.”

His tender tones were more than she could bear, and for a little while she wept unrestrainedly.

“If you had cared for him as I believed,” he went on, but she interrupted him with a passionate cry.

“Love him! I worship my darling with all the strength of my being! Oh, colonel, my pride is broken—the[Pg 36] barrier is swept away! I will send a message to him to-day!”

“Can I tell him this?” he asked, joyously.

“No. You must grant me the favor of not doing so. You can say that you have seen me, but no more. Promise, colonel!”

“Very well; I will obey my lady’s behest,” he said, reluctantly. “When will you send this blessed relief to a tortured soul?”

“This afternoon—by one whom I can trust to deliver it with his own hands.”

“You have made a happy man of me, Elaine. On second thought, I will not go back to Annesley Park until I can meet Sir Harold, and see the light of hope and happiness once more in his face. My dear, he will be at your side within an hour of receiving your message, if horse-flesh can carry him. You will rescue a man from the brink of inferno—a man who loves you as woman was never loved before! Good-by! Every moment is precious, and I will not be the cause of one being lost.”

He pressed her trembling fingers tightly, warm tears springing into his eyes. Then with a whispered “Heaven bless both of you!” he left the library.

Lady Elaine heard him ride away, and with a happy resolve in her heart sought her own apartments.

In one of the passages she encountered Viscount Rivington, quite unconscious that he had purposely placed himself in her path.

“My dear Lady Elaine,” he said, “I have been in agonies lest the weather should be unpropitious and upset our plans for a ride to-day.”

“I do not think that I shall go out this morning, viscount,” Lady Elaine said, sweetly.

“But your promise of yesterday!” he exclaimed, biting his lips with vexation.

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“You are not unkind enough to hold me to it when I particularly wish to be released?” she asked.

“I am only disappointed,” he replied, bowing. “It is like a black cloud obscuring golden sunshine to be so suddenly deprived of the anticipation of so sweet a pleasure.”

She thanked him and passed on. But had she seen the scowl of rage and hate that distorted the viscount’s features, my lady would never have tolerated him even as an acquaintance again.

Elaine’s first step was to send a servant in quest of Margaret Nugent. The Nugents, mother and daughter, lived on the outskirts of Ashbourne, and within two miles of Seabright Hall. Mrs. Nugent was not a wealthy woman, but she and her handsome daughter were in comfortable circumstances.

“Nina,” Lady Elaine said to her maid, “I want you to go to The Ferns, Mrs. Nugent’s place, and to ask Miss Margaret to come to the Hall at once.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“You will be sure to impress upon Miss Nugent the urgency of losing no time, Nina. And, Nina, you may use the pony carriage if you do not care for the walk.”

“Yes, my lady. Thank you.”

The maid withdrew, and secure in the privacy of her own apartments, Lady Elaine prepared to write one of the sweetest letters she had ever written to the man she loved.

“My dear love!” she murmured. “I feel that I have misjudged you. I will never bother you again with my silly caprices. Oh, how bright and beautiful the world seems, now that my king will soon be with me again!”

She drew before her a pearl-enameled writing desk, and, having opened it, penned the following:

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My Darling Harold—Can you ever forgive me for being so cruel to you? I have myself suffered agonies that words cannot paint. Come back to me, my love! I will confess that I detest Viscount Rivington, and promise you that in future your wishes shall be my law. My pride is humbled to the dust, and you will never be jealous of me again. I can write no more; only come to me! Forever your own.

Elaine.

She wrote the loving words with glowing cheeks and eyes beaming with happiness. Then she sealed up the letter, and kissed it again and again.

“Nina, my trusty maid, shall take this to my lover,” she thought, “and while she is gone I will tell Margaret that my troubles are ended.”

She was awakened from a blissful reverie by the return of her maid, with Margaret Nugent following close behind.

“I declare,” exclaimed Miss Nugent, “it is a positive relief to find that there is nothing seriously wrong. Nina was so urgent, so mysterious, that I began to anticipate all sorts of awful possibilities; and here you are looking perfectly happy, Lady Elaine.”

Margaret’s dark eyes promptly took in the situation, as she swept into my lady’s boudoir, while Nina retired to another room.

“You are right, Margaret; I am happier than I have been for days and days,” Lady Elaine said. “And it is really very kind of you to bother with my foolish troubles. I can never forget your sympathy and kindness.” Then she told Miss Nugent all, concluding:

“You advised me for the best, but my pride is broken. I can live no longer without my lover.”

Margaret was almost bewildered by the shock.

“You have astonished me,” she said, at last. “I can scarcely realize that the proud daughter of a hundred earls can possibly become so meek. But, then, we are all[Pg 39] forced to acknowledge that man is lord of creation, while we poor women are crushed into obedience.”

She tried to laugh, but it was a dismal failure.

“Oh, Elaine,” she added, a pang of bitterness at her heart, “I pity your future!”

“I am not afraid,” the earl’s daughter replied, softly. “My faith, my love is too strong.”

Even now she did not for one moment suspect Margaret Nugent hated her as only a jealous woman can hate.

“I have written to my lover to come back and forgive me,” Lady Elaine went on, “and now that I have seen you, Margaret, my maid shall take my letter to him.”

For a moment Miss Nugent turned away her face to hide the flash of malevolence that sprang to her eyes. Then she spoke quickly, eagerly:

“Oh, Lady Elaine, since my advice has not ended happily, it would be a pleasure, indeed, for me to be the bearer of the flag of truce to my willful cousin. His ultimate happiness is one of my dearest wishes, and, though I have no patience with his moods and freaks, no one cares more for Sir Harold in a sisterly way than I do. You will grant me this one favor, please, because I am beginning to feel that in some way I have been acting disloyally toward him. Mamma and I have to drive to Annesley Park after lunch, and I will place your letter into Sir Harold’s own hands.”

“How can I refuse so kind an offer?” Elaine replied. “Who so reliable a messenger as you, Margaret? Here is my letter—-here are the words which will recall my lover.”

Miss Nugent almost snatched it from her. Then she laughed a forced laugh, and promised that it should be given to Sir Harold within two hours.

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She gave Lady Elaine a Judas kiss, her heart throbbing with triumph. Then she went away, saying:

“Your lover will be here soon. How happy you look, Lady Elaine!”

When she was gone the earl’s daughter wandered from room to room, from house to arbor, wherein she and her lover had spent so many blissful hours.

As the time sped away her heart pulsed painfully and dark circles began to form under her eyes.

The sun cast slanting shadows on the grass, then sank to rest in a cloud of fire. Still Sir Harold did not come.

A young moon mounted the purple sky, and my lady sought her chamber. The clocks tolled the hours until the servants closed the windows and doors, and there was no Sir Harold.

“He will come to-morrow,” Lady Elaine told herself; “my love will come to-morrow.”

But the morrow brought no relief to her tortured soul. Margaret Nugent came, with pale face and burning eyes.

“I gave Sir Harold your letter,” she said, “but he tore it to atoms and cast it into my face. He scoffed at you and your love. Oh, Lady Elaine, you have broken his heart! He has left Annesley Park forever!”

“Gone! Forever!”

The words struggled through the pale lips of the earl's daughter.

"Do I hear you aright—he scoffed at my love; he destroyed my letter? Just Heaven, help me to bear this pain!"

She fell prone to the floor, like one stricken with death.

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CHAPTER VI.

THE LETTERS TIED WITH BLUE RIBBON.

Sir Harold Annesley had been in England so short a time that he had made few friends, and not even these had any particular claim upon him. He had no reason to consider them; he had no explanations to make. Was he of any importance, after all? There would be a ripple on society's water when the story was given out that his engagement to Lady Elaine Seabright was broken; then all would become calm again. He might be condemned, but he did not care for that. He would be far away, where no blame could reach his ears.

When Colonel Greyson had gone he heaved a deep sigh of relief. The colonel was well-meaning, but he did not understand. It was impossible for him to understand.

"I have said good-by to my old friend," thought Sir Harold, "and I am glad of it. One bitter parting at least is over, and, in dread of his interference, I will hasten my movements."

There was determination in every line of his face, in every motion of his strong figure.

"No," he repeated again and again, "the unhappy affair shall not be patched up by any one. I would rather die than marry a woman in whom I have not absolute faith and trust. It is perhaps hard upon Lady Elaine that she has been misunderstood by me. I have idealized a creature of clay, and because the veil is torn from my eyes she must suffer—if she has heart enough to understand!"

The bitter words escaped him in accents of scorn. Then he held his hands toward heaven and cried:

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"Merciful God, forgive me, if I am wronging her! Oh, my darling! my darling!"

The strong man wept, and it seemed to him that his tears must be tears of blood!

For an hour he scarcely moved. Then he summoned his valet, who came to him with anxious eyes.

“Stimson,” Sir Harold said, “how long have you served me?”

The valet hardly understood the question, but he answered:

“Nine years, Sir Harold.”

“And you have always been faithful to me and satisfied with your position?”

“I have no wish to change it,” the valet said. “I would like to die in your service, Sir Harold.”

“I believe you, Stimson, I believe you.”

The young baronet paced the floor for a minute, then he went on:

“I am leaving Annesley Park, Stimson, at once. I do not know whither I am going. The prospect to any one but myself cannot be very encouraging, because I have no intention of ever coming back again.”

The valet was startled.

“Under the circumstances,” his master continued, “I cannot ask you to share my exile, Stimson—I can ask no one—and I think that I shall be best alone.”

“Let me go with you, Sir Harold,” the valet begged. “I have no friends, no relations, in England; I have no ties, and I care for nothing, so long as I am with you.”

The baronet was visibly affected.

“I want you to clearly understand,” he said, “that nothing can change my future plans.”

“I am content, Sir Harold, whatever they may be,” was the firm reply.

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“Then let everything be ready for my departure to London to-night.”

“To-night!” echoed Stimson. “Very well, Sir Harold.”

“You must tell no living soul whither I have gone, and be prepared to join me to-morrow. I may even change my name, my very identity. I never wish to be known to the world as Sir Harold Annesley again. You will deny me to everybody, Stimson. I have said good-by to Colonel Greyson. Yes, deny me to everybody except my cousin, Miss Nugent, if she should wish to see me. There, Stimson, I have nothing more to say. For

an hour or two I shall be busy with my letters. In the meanwhile be ready to see me off by the six o'clock train to London."

His manner was now calm, almost perfunctory, and Stimson went about his duties, his mind in a chaos of bewilderment.

"Of course," thought the valet, regretfully, "a woman is at the bottom of the trouble. Women always are. But who would have thought that Lady Elaine could not agree with Sir Harold?"

Meanwhile the baronet indited half-a-dozen business letters. They were concise and to the point, as such letters always were with him. Not one betrayed a single emotion beyond the cold facts they stated.

Then he turned to his desk and opened it, a groan bursting from his lips.

Among other treasures was a tiny bundle of letters, held together with a piece of blue ribbon, and in a secret recess the portrait of a lovely girl.

In the haughty eyes there was the soft light of love; the firm mouth was curved with love's tender lines. The whole face was as beautiful as that of the most idealized angel. This was Lady Elaine Seabright.

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"Dear God," Sir Harold groaned, "why should woman be so fair to lure man's soul to perdition? Who could doubt the goodness and purity of the woman who has made of my life a desolate waste by merely gazing upon this delusive picture!"

A cry of rage escaped him, and he nearly tore the photograph in half. Then he bent his face to the table, and his form shook with convulsive sobs.

"I am only suffering as thousands have suffered—as thousands of men are suffering now," he thought. "Can it be that I am the most despicable coward of them all? Let me put it from me! Let me be a man, not a pitiful cur! My heart cries aloud for love and gets a sword-thrust! What is my duty now? A renunciation of every happy dream. My life begins anew from this very day. I have been a lotus-eater; my brain has been steeped in the opium of self-delusion. I will write an answer to Lady Elaine. I did not think that my nerves would permit me to attempt such a thing, but now I feel that this is one of my first duties. It shall not be said that I went away without one word, and my lady will be free to love where she will!"

A cold chill passed from head to foot, his brain reeled; he felt that to utter such words were almost blasphemy.

He drew writing materials before him and penned the following:

My Broken Idol—I hardly know whether I am writing to a creature of my dreams, or to one who is possessed of neither heart nor soul! Oh, Elaine, your last letter has slain every hope that life held so dear! Better had you pressed to my lips the poison cup—better to have sheathed a dagger in my heart than rend it to atoms and leave the body living. I give you your freedom. I am leaving Annesley Park forever. You will never see or hear of me again. I shall take particular care of that. Your bondmaster sets you free! Think of me kindly, if you can—if[Pg 45] you ever trouble to think of me at all—and believe that I have none but the most sincere wishes for your future welfare.

Harold Annesley.

"This shall be posted to-morrow," he decided. "I will leave it in the hands of Stimson. When she reads it let me be far away!"

Just then the mournful strains of an old harmonium fell upon his ears, and he started up in surprise, to find that a couple of musicians had found their way into the park, and were playing almost under his window.

He was about to toss them some silver and send them away, when his eyes fell upon a girl of rare beauty, who was turning over some music and preparing to sing.

She was attired in the picturesque costume affected by the peasant class of Italy, and in the rich coils of her black hair was a bunch of crimson flowers.

Presently she opened her ruby lips and warbled softly:

"Away, away! You're all the same—

A fluttering, smiling, jilting throng!

Oh, by my soul, I burn with shame

To think I've been your slave so long!

"Slow to be warned, and quick to prove,

From folly kind and cunning loth;

Too cold for bliss, too weak for love,

Yet feigning all that's best in both.

"Still panting o'er a crowd to reign,

More joy it gives to woman's breast

To make ten frigid coxcombs vain

Than one true manly lover blest.

“Away, away! Your smile’s a curse!

Oh, blot me from the roll of men,

Kind, pitying Heaven, by death, or worse,

Before I love such things again.”

Sir Harold listened like one who was charmed. Then[Pg 46] he opened the window and dropped a gold coin into the girl’s brown palm.

“Thank you, kind signor!” she said, in perfect English. “Shall I sing to you again?”

“Yes, sing me that song once more. The words appeal to me strongly, and the air is admirably adapted to your sweet voice,” cried Sir Harold.

The girl gazed at him wonderingly for a moment; then a soft light stole into her beautiful, dark eyes, and she sang to him again, a world of passion in her liquid notes:

“Away, away! Your smile’s a curse!

Oh, blot me from the roll of men,

Kind, pitying Heaven, by death, or worse,

Before I love such things again.”

Sir Harold never forgot those words, and they rang in his ears, the requiem of all his dead hopes!

“Has the kind signor loved one who is frail?” the girl whispered, softly.

“Once more sing to me,” was his reply, and the man at the harmonium played the prelude, glad to have so generous a patron, though he occasionally cast uneasy glances toward his daughter.

Sir Harold was rudely awakened from the spell that the youthful singer had cast about him by the metallic tones of his cousin, Margaret Nugent, who had entered the room unobserved.

“My dear Harold,” she was saying. “What is the meaning of this *extempore* concert? What a sweet voice the girl has!”

The baronet turned as the musicians went away, the girl casting back at him pitying glances from her liquid black eyes.

“And pretty, too, is she not?” continued Margaret.[Pg 47] “Why, goodness, Harold! What is wrong with you? Is it the old story—the first quarrel?”

“Do not jest, Margaret,” Sir Harold groaned. “I know that, in a measure, you have been Lady Elaine’s confidante, but I will add to all else that you may know that everything is at an end between us, and that you have just arrived here in time to say good-by.”

She glanced at him sympathetically, and replied:

“My poor Harold, I am sorry, but I am not surprised. Lady Elaine is young and thoughtless. Such love as yours she does not understand. Must we part with you?”

In her heart she thought:

“And the sooner he goes the better, lest that meddlesome Colonel Greyson will take it into his head to come here again. A few months will suffice to efface her from his heart, and then——”

“I will not inflict myself upon you now, Harold,” she went on, “but you will let us know—mamma and me—where you are going to—how you are progressing? I do not like this sort of thing, but it is not altogether a surprise for me. For goodness’ sake, don’t worry yourself to death! How could I bear that? There is at least one who cares for you disinterestedly.”

She dropped her eyes, conscious that they were burning with all the passion of her intense nature.

“Yes, Margaret,” Sir Harold said, sadly, “you have ever been a dear, dear sister to me, and I think that I esteem you now more than at any other time. I have met with a severe shock, a disappointment which no words can describe. I hate my home, my country even, and shall again become a wanderer in strange lands, until the edge of my grief is blunted.”

“But you must write to us, Harold”—there was real pain in her voice—“you must write to us, and I am sure[Pg 48] that you will be glad to come home again to those who really care for you!”

“Some day I may, Margaret, but it may not be for years! I leave to-night!”

She wept a little, then pressed his fingers in parting, and he was grateful for her womanly sympathy.

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CHAPTER VII.

SIR HAROLD'S DEPARTURE.

"Here is a letter for you to post, Stimson," Sir Harold said, two hours later. "Put it into the box with your own hands. To-night I am going to London, and you must join me at the Southwestern Hotel to-morrow afternoon. I have placed my affairs in the hands of my men of business, and I want you to feel perfectly satisfied that you will never regret leaving home, perhaps forever."

"My home is with you, Sir Harold," was the fervent response.

"Tell no one whither I am gone, and when you rejoin me, be careful that your movements are not watched by well-meaning friends."

Stimson gathered a few points of necessary information regarding the luggage required, and one hour later Sir Harold left the park, simply attired in ordinary walking costume and carrying a light cane. To an ordinary observer he appeared to be going for a stroll. There was nothing in his manner to indicate that he was a broken and hopeless man.

Until he reached the end of the avenue, he looked neither to the right nor to the left. Then he paused and gazed over the smiling gardens, now aflame with flowers. The park stood darkly beyond, clothed in its summer dress, and in the shadow of a thousand murmurous trees nestled his beautiful home.

"Oh, Heaven!" he gasped. "What might have been! What might have been!"

He believed that he was alone, but his gesture of despair[Pg 50] had been seen by other eyes—his words of agony had reached other ears.

There was the sound of a soft footfall, and he turned to behold the Italian singer.

"Pardon, kind sir," she said. "I feared that you were in trouble."

"Trouble!"

He laughed a low, mirthless laugh.

"Trouble, child! Ah, such trouble that never entered another heart! You wonder in your innocence that I—the owner of all these broad lands, of yonder noble home—you wonder what I can know of trouble! For your simple life, even though you know not

from one day to another how you are to live, God knows how gladly I would exchange, if the past could be forever blotted out!"

He turned to continue his way, but spoke again.

"You have not told me your name."

"Theresa Hamilton," she said, simply.

"Hamilton!" he replied. "That is not an Italian name."

"No, sir. My father is an Englishman. My dear dead mother was an Italian. My father and I live together at Tenterden, a village twenty miles away. I only sing for money when it is hard to obtain the rent for our pretty cottage. Ah, here comes father! One of the wheels of his harmonium carriage came off, and he has been to the village to have it repaired. We are going home now." She paused and added in a whisper: "Ah, kind signor, I hope that you will not be long unhappy!"

The musician came toward them, and seemed a little surprised that his daughter should be talking to the lord of this great domain.

He frowned slightly, saying:

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"Come, Theresa, we must hurry if we are to catch the train."

He bowed distantly to Sir Harold, and, having placed the harmonium in the carriage, he started away, dragging the instrument after him.

Theresa looked back once, and the baronet found himself gazing at her, he knew not why.

"Let me do what little good I can with my useless life," he thought. "Even such a chance as this may never occur again."

He followed the musicians, and drew from his pocket a handful of coins, but the sharp eyes of John Hamilton had observed the movement.

"You will excuse me, Sir Harold Annesley," he said with dignity. "My child sings for money, and I employ my poor powers to assist her, when we are driven to do so by dire necessity, but we do not beg. Pray keep your money."

The girl blushed painfully, and the young baronet continued on his way, a bitter laugh upon his lips. Even that small pleasure was denied him.

The nearest railway station was called Crayford, and when he asked for a ticket to London the booking clerk was startled by his hoarse tones and the strange, gray pallor of his face.

He had a quarter of an hour to wait, and paced the platform with quick, restless strides. He dreaded lest some friend should follow him. He felt that any interference now would madden him.

At last the bell rang, and he heard the distant scream of the coming train. There were few people on the platform, but at the last moment John Hamilton arrived with his harmonium and his beautiful daughter.

The instrument had to be lifted into the luggage van, a task that the railway porter did not relish, and he was[Pg 52] not slow in showing the contempt he felt for traveling musicians and such like.

The same man subsequently attended upon Sir Harold, and was surprised to find himself gruffly ordered out of the way.

The train started, and until he heard a hoarse cry of "Tenterden, Tenterden!" he had lost count of time and space. Then he awakened to a momentary interest in life, for he remembered that the sweet singer told him that she and her father lived at Tenterden.

He looked from the window and saw that the station was a mere wooden shanty.

It appeared to be quite deserted now, and the old musician was struggling to lift his harmonium out of the luggage van, while the guard swore roundly at him for wasting the company's time.

All at once there was a crash, and a cry of anger and dismay from John Hamilton, mingled with the laughter of the guard, as the train steamed onward again.

In a moment Sir Harold had grasped the situation. The harmonium had been precipitated to the platform, and lay a wreck, while the old musician was alternately bewailing his misfortune and threatening the railway company.

Burning with pity and indignation, the young baronet resolved to help the old man in his distress, and, opening the door of the carriage, sprang lightly to the ground.

No one appeared to have seen his action, and the train steamed slowly from view round a curve in the line, and in this simple manner commenced one of the most extraordinary mysteries of modern times.

When Sir Harold's feet struck the earth he had not correctly estimated the speed at which the train was traveling, and was thrown violently down.

His head struck a large stone, and he lay, dazed and unconscious.

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CHAPTER VIII.

"THE PAST IS ALL A BLANK."

It was four weeks before Sir Harold opened his eyes to the beauty of the summer world.

There was not much wrong with him bodily, but mentally he was a wreck. His memory had been completely destroyed.

He gazed wonderingly at his surroundings, and inhaled the odor of a hundred flowers that ornamented the table in the humble little room he occupied.

Near to a latticed window sat an old man reading, and Sir Harold watched him curiously. He never remembered to have seen him before.

John Hamilton glanced anxiously at his guest.

"Do you recognize me yet, Sir Harold?"

"Recognize you? No, sir. Who are you?"

"My name is Hamilton. I am the musician whose daughter sang to you at Annesley Park. Do you not remember falling from the train?"

"No, sir," replied the baronet. "I think that you must be mistaken."

John Hamilton sighed.

"You fell, and hurt your head terribly," he went on, "and I have nursed you through a long mental illness. I did not call in a doctor for several reasons, one of which is that I once practiced the healing art myself."

"I remember none of these things," Sir Harold said; "I would not even know that my name were Sir Harold if you did not tell me so. The past is all a blank."

"This is terrible—terrible!" John Hamilton groaned.

“I do not experience any of your terrors,” laughed the[Pg 54] young man. “What a lovely day! If you will permit it, doctor, I would like to go out into the sunshine.”

“Certainly, sir! It may do you much good.”

He gazed anxiously at his guest for a few moments; then he assisted him to dress, and the light, boyish laughter of Sir Harold shocked him.

“He is happy now,” he thought, “and perhaps it will be a blessing to him if he never again awakens to his misery—the misery that I have heard was driving him from his home. It was my duty to warn his friends of his whereabouts, but I dared not do it. I should have brought ruin upon myself and child.”

Sir Harold nodded brightly to him as he left the room and strolled into the garden. And such a garden it was—of blossom and perfume! It seemed to be scented by many millions of flowers.

As he wandered about he whistled merrily. He did not dream that he was being watched by loving, anxious eyes. He knew of nothing but the happy present.

Then John Hamilton called Theresa to him, and bade her sing the songs in which Sir Harold had been so interested on that fatal day a month ago.

“Oh, father,” she whispered, “must I?” Her lips quivered.

“Yes,” he said, sternly. “His memory must be awakened. He cannot stay here forever.”

She seated herself at the window, while her father played an accompaniment, and sang in her matchless tones the scoffing words of Moore:

“Away, away! You’re all the same—

A fluttering, smiling, jilting throng!

Oh, by my soul, I burn with shame

To think I’ve been your slave so long!

[Pg 55]

“Slow to be warned, and quick to prove,

From folly kind and cunning loth;

Too cold for bliss, too weak for love,

Yet feigning all that’s best in both.

“Still panting o’er a crowd to reign,

More joy it gives to woman’s breast

To make ten frigid coxcombs vain

Than one true manly lover blest!

“Away, away! Your smile’s a curse!

Oh, blot me from the race of men,

Kind, pitying Heaven, by death, or worse,

Before I love such things again!”

Sir Harold listened with a smile on his face, and when the singer had finished he stepped toward the window, while Theresa watched like one who was fascinated.

“To whom am I indebted for such sweet music?” asked the young man. Then he paused and bowed gallantly upon observing the figure of Theresa Hamilton, who was half-crouching behind her father.

“This is my daughter, sir,” Mr. Hamilton said. “Do you mean to tell me that you do not remember her?”

Sir Harold smiled.

“If I have ever seen the lady before, the circumstance has quite escaped me,” he replied. “But I hardly think that I could forget any one so lovely.”

A low moan of surprise and fear left Theresa’s pale lips, and her father looked on displeased.

“Sir Harold Annesley,” he said, “I am placed in a desperate position, and I have none to advise me what is best to do. I hoped that you would be off my hands in a few days, and intended demanding that you keep my identity a secret. I think that you understand what I say, though your mind regarding all that is past has become a blank.”

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“Yes, I understand,” replied the young man, his admiring gaze fixed upon Theresa’s sweet face.

“My child,” observed Hamilton, turning to her, “you had better leave us.” Then, as she began to move away, he added: “But, no. It is just as well that you hear. Sit beside me, Theresa.”

The girl obeyed him, and he went on addressing Sir Harold.

“I wish you to understand your position, sir. Are you not aware that you are a wealthy man, a famous man, whose unaccountable disappearance is the talk of all England?”

“I am not aware of this,” smiled Sir Harold. “It may appear to be a terrible thing to you, but I am like a man who has just dropped into a half-familiar world from some mystery that he cannot fathom. My faculties are clear and my health and strength unimpaired. I do not know why I am famous, and I have no use for wealth. But tell me all of myself that you know. At present I am more amused than alarmed by whatever misfortune may have befallen me.”

Theresa was watching him, pity and love smoldering in her soft, dark eyes.

“A few weeks since,” Hamilton went on, “I had never seen or even heard of you. For five years I have lived in this cottage, a recluse who hates and fears the world beyond. I see surprise in your face, and I will explain. By profession I am a doctor, but it is long since I practiced the healing art until you crossed my path, and Theresa and I have lived upon the scanty earnings of my pen. When this has failed me, and we have been pressed for money, it has been comparatively easy to make up our deficiencies by playing and singing before the houses of the wealthy. In this way we came to Annesley Park. Do you remember?”

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“No, sir; I do not.”

There was not the faintest hesitation in Sir Harold’s tones.

“Well, my daughter’s singing attracted your attention,” went on John Hamilton, “and you were free with your money. You appeared to be in great trouble, and I pitied you from the bottom of my heart, though I resented your offer of further money a little later.”

“I am sorry,” faltered Sir Harold, and Hamilton smiled faintly.

“You entered the same train with us, and I did not think of you again until I saw you lying insensible some thirty yards beyond the platform of Tenterden railway station.”

“Extraordinary!” murmured Sir Harold, pressing his hands to his brow.

A sharp spasm of pain shot through his head, and he added:

“No, no! I will not try to remember. I feel dazed and bewildered. I do not wish to remember.”

“My duty was clear,” continued Hamilton. “I ought to have sent to Annesley Park at once, but I was afraid for myself—I was afraid for Theresa, because the story would have got into the papers. I thought that I would cure you, exact from you a promise of secrecy, and send you away; but now I know not what to do.”

“What is this fear that you have concerning yourself?” asked Sir Harold; but he did not press the question when he met the appealing glance of the old man.

“Some day,” Hamilton whispered in his ear, “I will tell you. It affects my darling child even more than myself. Her life, if not mine, is in danger.”

There was silence for a few minutes; then the old man went on:

“When you had been here a little while, Sir Harold,[Pg 58] I read in the papers something of your trouble. I had not bought a newspaper for years, but I was anxious to see what they had to say about you—to learn if there was even a suspicion concerning your whereabouts.”

“Yes; go on with this extraordinary story, Mr. Hamilton. I am interested because it concerns myself, not that I have any knowledge of one hour of my past.”

“I will tell you everything, and then you shall decide upon your future course. You were engaged to be married, Sir Harold, to one of the highest ladies in the land—to Lady Elaine, the daughter of the Earl of Seabright.”

He looked keenly at the young baronet, and only saw a puzzled smile, that deepened into one of incredulity.

“I do not remember Lady Elaine,” he observed, “and to the best of my belief this is the first time that I have ever heard the lady’s name.”

“You were engaged to her, and the papers say that you loved her madly, but that you deserted her because you believed that she was not true to you.”

“By Jove!” ejaculated Sir Harold, “this is extraordinary! Are you quite sure that you are not mistaking me for some other man?”

He buried his face in his hands and tried to think, but again was afflicted by an agony that was excruciating.

“Mr. Hamilton,” he said, at last, “I cannot recall one incident—I cannot recall one hour of my past. The accident which has befallen me may be considered a terrible one, but at present I cannot be brought to regard it as such. It does not make me suffer in the least until I try to use my darkened brains. I cannot doubt one word of your story, but I have no wish to go back into a world that will have nothing but pity for me. Some time in the future I may recover what I have lost, but I have no desire to do so, for it seems that my life must in some way have been a failure.”

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“Sir Harold,” cried John Hamilton, in dismay, “you must permit me to take you home! I do not like to hear you talk in this way. I will tell your story to your friends without revealing too much of myself, and you will be cured by some of the great doctors of the day.”

“No, no!” pleaded the young baronet. “I could not bear to be pitied! Time will heal all things. Do you not see that I should be held up to ridicule everywhere? A man who had been jilted—a man who was little better than an idiot! The idea that I might eventually be adjudged insane is terrifying! Do you not see the force of my reasoning? Suppose that I return to Annesley Park, and specialists are called in to diagnose my case—what will be the result? I shall be pitied and ridiculed. I cannot remain in blissful ignorance of this like the ordinary lunatic, even if the doctors were unsuccessful. My life would be to me a daily torture. I may even have a keeper constantly at my elbow, or be shut up altogether in an asylum for idiots. On the other hand, if I am cured, my mind will reawaken to much that will be unpleasant, and the ridicule will be the same. People will point at me, and say: ‘There goes a man who went mad because a woman jilted him!’ I could not bear it, and I am so happy here! No, sir! Let me stay where I am until the excitement has cooled down. Let me enjoy the perfect peace of this little paradise until I can face the world again as Sir Harold Annesley of old!”

Theresa had listened to him with shining eyes, and now she turned them anxiously, appealingly, toward her father.

“Shall I be doing right if I accede to this request?” the old man muttered.

“You have spoken of some reason for the recluse-like life you are leading,” added Sir Harold; “you have spoken of some danger that menaces your daughter if[Pg 60] your identity be discovered. Why should you run the risk of this? If you object to my presence here, let me go quietly away elsewhere.”

At that moment he saw the light of adoration in Theresa’s humid eyes, and he never forgot it.

“Sir Harold,” Mr. Hamilton said, brokenly, “you shall please yourself. You shall do just as you wish—all but one thing. I cannot part with you; I dare not let you go away until God lifts the cloud that has blotted out your past. We are poor—miserably poor—but you will not miss the luxuries of life now, and it may be that soon, very soon, you will awaken to the full knowledge of all that you have lost. At least, we will hope for the best. We will wait for a while, and then——”

But Sir Harold interrupted him with words of thanks, saying:

“Enough, sir; I am quite satisfied. You have told me sufficient to convince me that my past, whatever it may be, is linked with the perfidy of some woman—that it is one of misery. The present is one of perfect joy! I shall not be a burden upon you. I have money in my pocketbook amounting to hundreds of pounds. I will stay until I can return to the world a rational being, and it will be amusing to read the papers about myself—to see how a man is valued after he is thought to be dead.”

He laughed a little, and while Mr. Hamilton grasped his hand in token of acquiescence, Theresa glided swiftly from the room to hide her joy.

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CHAPTER IX.

“I SHALL WAIT, IF NEED BE, FOREVER.”

The mysterious, unaccountable disappearance of Sir Harold Annesley was the talk of all England.

In some way, the quarrel between himself and Lady Elaine Seabright had got into the papers. First, it was published in a society journal; then it went the whole round of the press.

This is the way in which the public received the news:

Romance Outdone.—It now transpires that the quixotic young baronet, who has provided society with a new nine days’ wonder, has violently quarreled with his *fiancée*, the Lady Elaine Seabright. My lady discovered at a very early stage of their love-making that Sir Harold was periodically attacked with insane jealousy. The theory of Stimson, the valet, that his master has met with foul play is absurd, simply because he got rid of Mr. Stimson by a sly trick. No, Sir Harold merely left England under an assumed name, and is no doubt quietly enjoying the sensation he has created. At any rate, he is teaching his capricious ladylove a lesson which she may not readily forget.

Colonel Greyson read this with bristling mustache and a face purple with anger.

He showed it to Margaret Nugent, little dreaming that the cruel story had emanated from her. Then he rode over to Seabright Hall, and found that a marked copy of the paper had been sent to Lady Elaine.

This was his first visit since he had appealed to her on behalf of her lover. He had started on his journey with fierce resentment in his heart, but at sight of Elaine's white face his anger turned to tender pity.

The earl was disgusted with the whole affair. He pretended that he could not understand it.

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"Egad, sir," he said, "if Sir Harold has gone away deliberately, leaving my daughter to be made a laughing stock of, I say that he is worse than a scoundrel; he is a coward! For my part, I never wish to see or hear of him again. She can have her pick among a score of better men, and is a fool to give him another thought. I'll call him out, by Jove!"

"I have not come here to defend him," replied Colonel Greyson; "but Sir Harold Annesley is neither a scoundrel nor a coward. There is some mystery about the affair that is quite beyond me. He made all arrangements for his valet to meet him in London. He left Crayford by the six o'clock train on the evening preceding, and has never been seen or heard of since."

"Disguised himself!" sneered the earl. "He is so used to newspaper sensation that he must have it at any cost."

The colonel glared at him angrily, but went on:

"I don't believe one word of it. I know the boy too well. I have had a clever detective at work for a week, and we have not advanced one step. He made several appointments in London, not one of which he kept. He was perfectly sane when he went away, and quietly wished his cousin, Miss Nugent, good-by. He went away under the impression that Lady Elaine did not really care for him; but I will swear that he never contemplated this miserable scandal. His final wishes were that he should bear whatever blame was attached to the——"

The earl interrupted him with a harsh laugh.

"It is of no use, my dear Greyson," he said; "your defense only makes his actions appear the more contemptible. For some reason, he wished to break the engagement

between himself and Lady Elaine, and adopted this course for the sake of the theatrical effect. He will turn up again from Timbuctoo or some other outlandish place, by and by, for the sole purpose of creating another sensation;[Pg 63] but he may get far more than he expects. For my part, I wash my hands of the affair, and shall insist upon Lady Elaine accepting Viscount Rivington."

The earl spoke decidedly, and Colonel Greyson had little to say. What argument could he offer? None, until the mystery surrounding Sir Harold's movements was cleared up.

He did not tell the earl that his visit was to Lady Elaine, and when she did not appear at the dinner-table he became anxious.

"I hope," he observed, "that your daughter is not ill, my lord?"

"She is pretending to be," was the rejoinder. "Of course, this farce must be kept up for a time. I hope you will not stuff any nonsense into her head, colonel."

"I hope not," was the reply.

"I am glad to hear that she is ill," he thought, "though I would not be surprised to find the child of such a father perfectly heartless."

He began to give up all hope of seeing Lady Elaine as the evening advanced and she did not appear. The earl was not particularly cordial, and he had no pretense for prolonging his stay.

Luckily, he encountered my lady's maid in one of the passages, just when he was fuming savagely, and bade her tell her mistress that he desired a few words with her.

"That is," he added, a little considerately, "if she is well enough to see me. I will wait in the west drawing-room."

Lady Elaine came much sooner than he had expected, a world of anxiety and suffering in her face.

He stepped forward swiftly and took one of her hands between his, thinking, "Poor child! How I have misjudged her!"

"I did not know that you were here, Colonel Greyson,"[Pg 64] Lady Elaine said, faintly. She sat down and looked at him pleadingly.

"You have no news for me?"

"None," he replied, sadly. "I came here to-day to see if you—if you cared at all."

“If I cared!” she echoed. “Do you not see that my heart is breaking; that this horrible suspense will kill me? The papers are full of cruel things, and if I have sent my darling to his death, I have no further wish to live.”

“The papers?” he questioned, and then his eyes blazed with anger when she took from her pocket a marked copy of the society journal which had tried to make scandal out of her misery.

“Whose hand is in this?” he muttered. “By Heaven, if I only knew! Toss the thing into the fire!” he added, aloud. “It is not worthy of a moment’s thought, Elaine. Child, be of good cheer. I am leaving no stone unturned. There is foul play somewhere. You promised me that you would send to him. Why did you delay?”

“I did not,” was the piteous rejoinder. “Has not Margaret told you? He scoffed at my love; he tore my letter to fragments and threw it away. Afterward he wrote cruel things to me. But he will come back again, if he lives. I know that he will, and I shall wait, if need be, forever.”

She looked at him in a way that he never forgot.

“I have misjudged you, Lady Elaine,” he said. “I did not think you were capable of such love as this.”

He looked at her pityingly, then his brow became dark.

“Why did Margaret Nugent not tell me of the letter?” he thought. “This puts the matter in a new light. This inclines me to believe that the earl’s theory is the correct one, and yet how could that boy be guilty of such meanness? He must have been mad.”

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He promised Lady Elaine some news at an early date, but nothing came of his investigations.

A small fortune was spent upon detectives and advertisements in papers all over the world, but not an atom of information was to be obtained anywhere. A hundred messages were flashed across the Atlantic, and many harmless, innocent men were made objects of suspicion, but it all ended in—nothing.

The sum total was this: Sir Harold Annesley had been seen to enter a train at Crayford Station, and there he disappeared completely.

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CHAPTER X.

AT LADY GAYNOR'S BALL.

A month had passed, and the world was beginning to forget that such a person as Sir Harold Annesley had ever existed.

His man of business had closed the park, and dismissed half the servants, and it was the general belief that the eccentric young baronet was masquerading abroad. His actions had been strongly condemned; and many leaders of fashion decided to close their doors to him when he did return home again.

"This wearing of the willow must end," the Earl of Seabright said to his daughter one morning. "Where is your pride, Elaine? Do you not see that you are an object of pity among the servants and one of contempt among your equals?"

"I do not care for either pity or contempt, papa," she replied, listlessly.

"But I do!" was the angry retort.

"I do not see how it can affect you, papa."

"You do not see!" he cried, in surprise. "Great Heavens, are you bereft of common sense? What man will care to marry a woman who is fretting after a lover who shamelessly jilted her?"

"My lover will come back to me," replied Elaine. "I can marry no other man."

"Where is your self-respect?" he demanded, furiously. "Your lover will never come back to you! Can you not see through his shallow trick? At least, you must appear in society. I will not have this moping away in dark rooms. Here is an invitation to Lady Gaynor's ball. You[Pg 67] must be there, if only to end the silly gossip about broken hearts. Pshaw, I have no sympathy with such nonsense!"

"If it is your desire, papa, I will accept the invitation," Lady Elaine said, calmly; "but I shall find no pleasure at Lady Gaynor's ball."

The earl was satisfied that he had gained his point so far.

"She will soon forget the fellow in the excitement of pleasure. If necessary, I will take her abroad," he thought.

Two days later Miss Nugent came and kissed Lady Elaine with a great show of affection.

The one subject was the ball and the dresses they were to wear. Lady Elaine treated the whole thing in a listless, apathetic manner.

“I have no special choice,” she said; “I shall leave the selection to my maid. I have no one to please.”

“My dear Elaine, how ridiculous you are,” exclaimed Margaret Nugent. “You know that the viscount adores you.”

“Silence!” the earl’s daughter said, sternly. “How can you speak in that way—you, who know all?”

“It is that very knowledge that makes me speak,” Miss Nugent replied, steadily. “It is that very knowledge that makes me speak, Lady Elaine. You are wasting your life for a man who never cared for you. He confessed to me that it was merely the infatuation of a moment. I dared not tell you so before. These creatures of poetic fancy are never to be trusted wholly. Sir Harold has ever been eccentric and quixotic; he has ever been afflicted with some new craze at which hard-hearted, sober-minded men have smiled. I believe that for a little while he worshiped you as the perfect embodiment of some cherished ideal; but the instant he realized that you were only human, his so-called love changed to actual dislike.”

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Lady Elaine had become deadly pale.

“And do you expect me to listen to you, Margaret Nugent—to believe you?” she asked.

“Before Heaven, I swear that I am telling you simple truth, Lady Elaine! My cousin never really loved you as men are supposed to love women, and soon regretted the tangle he had woven about himself. To escape it, he stooped to trickery and dishonor. I alone am in his confidence. I alone know where he is wandering again. I have had a letter from him this very day. Even if you hate me for it, it is my duty to tell you the truth.”

“Heaven help me!” moaned Elaine. “I have given him my love—the love of my life—and I can never change! I worship the king of my dreams, not the wretched creature of clay that he has proved himself to be! And, now that I know the worst, I will school myself to wear a smile, though my heart is broken!”

It never occurred to her to doubt Miss Nugent’s words. Margaret had always been her friend, and there was no earthly reason why she should deceive her. Besides,

everything pointed to the truth of the statement, and the mystery about Sir Harold was partly cleared away.

At Lady Gaynor's ball she appeared to be one of the gayest of the gay, and my lord of Seabright was delighted.

"She has sense and pride, after all," he thought. "Being a Seabright, it could not well be otherwise."

She danced with several eligible men, but Viscount Rivington was the most favored of all, and his eyes burnt with triumph.

"The earl has told me to go in for rapid conquest," he thought. "Hearts are easily caught in the rebound."

He led Lady Elaine from the heated ballroom, and, seated in a conservatory, they listened to the singing of one of the lady guests:

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"No, not more welcome the fairy numbers

Of music fall on the sleeper's ear

When, half awake from fearful slumbers,

He thinks the full choir of heaven is near—

Then came that voice, when, all forsaken,

This heart long had sleeping lain,

Nor thought its cold pulse would ever waken

To such benign, blessed sounds again!

"Sweet voice of comfort! 'Twas like the stealing

Of summer wind thro' some wreathed shell—

Each secret winding, each inmost feeling

Of my soul echoed to its spell!

'Twas whispered balm! 'Twas sunshine spoken!

I'd live years of grief and pain

To have my long sleep of sorrow broken

By such benign, blessed sounds again!"

"Beautiful words," Lady Elaine murmured, dreamily, "and beautifully rendered!"

Viscount Rivington only dimly comprehended her remark. His whole being was on fire with love.

He made no reply, but snatched her to him in a frenzy of passion.

For a moment Lady Elaine was so overcome with astonishment that she could make no resistance. His action had been so unexpected, so sudden, that she felt herself clasped in his arms before she realized what had happened. Brief as the scene was, it had not escaped the watchful eyes of Margaret Nugent, and she retired with the feelings of a victor.

She encountered the Earl of Seabright a dozen steps away, and he looked about him eagerly.

"Miss Nugent, have you seen Lady Elaine?" he asked.

"Yes, my lord," she smiled. "I would not advise you to interrupt a very interesting *tête-à-tête*."

He grasped one of her wrists and looked straight into her eyes.

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"Is Viscount Rivington with my daughter?" he demanded.

"I have just seen Lady Elaine in the viscount's arms," replied Miss Nugent, with a light laugh. "Not very flattering to my absent cousin, but girls' hearts are not made to break."

The earl was delighted, and the two went away, Miss Nugent to impart the news to an aristocratic scandalmonger, who added to her income by writing sensational paragraphs for a certain unscrupulous society paper, and the earl to excuse Lady Elaine's absence to Colonel Greyson, who had only recently arrived, and had made an inquiry for her.

"My dear colonel," he said, "I am sorry to disappoint you, but I do not think that my daughter would welcome your presence just now."

"I am of a different opinion," Colonel Greyson said, stoutly. "You and I, my lord, will never agree upon one point. What that is you know only too well."

“I have no desire to discuss the matter,” the earl replied, “and I do not thank you for interfering in what is purely a family matter. As I told you recently, I never wish to hear the name of Sir Harold Annesley again. My dear colonel, if Lady Gaynor knew that you had followed me here to-night, of all nights, for the express purpose of annoying me, you would incur her severe displeasure.”

“I have brought news for Lady Elaine,” the colonel said. “I have no wish to annoy you, Lord Seabright, or any of Lady Gaynor’s guests. I bring hope to a breaking heart, and I intend seeing your daughter before I leave to-night.”

The earl laughed harshly.

“You must see her, certainly, if you are determined to do so; but I warn you that Lady Elaine does not wish to[Pg 71] see you or hear from you again. In brief, she has this very day accepted Viscount Rivington for her future husband.”

The colonel’s face became fiery red, but further words were checked by the appearance of Margaret Nugent.

“Miss Nugent will verify my statement,” the earl said, carelessly. “As the affianced wife of Viscount Rivington, my daughter cannot wish to be bothered by news of a recreant lover. It is very bad taste upon your part, colonel, to make yourself a meddlesome busybody.”

He turned coldly and walked away.

“Is this true?” asked Colonel Greyson, turning to Miss Nugent.

“It is,” she replied, pale to the lips. “I myself witnessed the viscount’s declaration; I saw her ladyship in his arms.”

“Then my faith in woman’s constancy is forever shattered,” he said. “Good-by, Margaret. It is perhaps better that he should never know.”

“He? To whom do you refer?”

“To Sir Harold. My detective has found him. He is well in health, but for the present his mind is a wreck. I came here like a happy schoolboy, and go away the most miserable and disappointed of men. I would have staked my life on the constancy of Lady Elaine Seabright.”

Miss Nugent was painfully agitated. There was an unnatural fire in her eyes.

“So my cousin is back!” she whispered, her whole frame quivering with excitement. “You must come and see us to-morrow, colonel; my mother and I will be glad to see

you. It is best for you not to remain here longer. I can understand the shock of your disappointment, but your pity for the earl's daughter is wasted. I have always known this. You men cannot divine the depth of[Pg 72] our sex as a woman can. Lady Elaine is tender and loving, but her character lacks strength. Knowing Sir Harold as I do, the escape from this marriage is a most fortunate thing for him, for he would have found out, sooner or later, that his wife was little better than a doll. You wonder that I should speak so strongly? I cannot help it when I realize how quickly and easily my poor cousin has been forgotten by the woman who may have ruined his whole life. The earl's daughter and I have had bitter words this very evening. I do not think that we can ever be friendly again. She told me calmly of her engagement to Viscount Rivington, and at the same time was wearing the ring that Sir Harold gave her. She spoke of him so lightly that I became angry, and both have uttered things that may never be forgotten."

She accompanied him to the door, fearful lest anything might happen even now to turn the tide against her. She longed to ask him questions concerning her cousin, but dared not.

As they paused for a moment in the hall, he saw Lady Elaine and Viscount Rivington enter the ballroom from another doorway. What further proof did he require that all he had heard was indeed true?

"Good-by, Margaret," he said. "You shall hear the whole pitiful story in a day or two. Sir Harold is in no danger, but his mind concerning the past is blank. He does not know even me. He does not remember Lady Elaine, and now I believe it is better so. I have been cherishing some pet schemes for trying to restore his memory, but now all is over."

He went away, cursing at the frailty of women, and Miss Nugent thanked Heaven when he was gone.

"It is hard to believe," she thought, "that Elaine would so soon succumb to the pleadings of the viscount, but did[Pg 73] I not see her clasped to his bosom with my own eyes? I must find out what it all means."

Had she waited one moment longer, when she was spying upon the viscount and Lady Elaine, how different would her feelings have been!

Recovering from her astonished bewilderment, Elaine had pushed her suitor indignantly aside, a flash of loathing and disgust in her eyes.

“How dare you?” she panted. “How dare you take advantage of me in so cowardly a manner? I hate and despise you for it!”

Rivington fell back aghast. He had not expected this. In his first flush of triumph he believed that she accepted his embraces willingly.

“Lady Elaine,” he said, “what harm have I done you? I offer you the fond love of an honest heart. I have never loved any woman but you, and fancied that the reward of my patience and hope was at hand. Forgive me if I have been mistaken.”

He spoke so penitently that she felt sorry for her harsh words.

“Viscount, I thought that it was a settled thing between us that I have no love to give any man now,” she said, sorrowfully. “I shall never marry, and this talk of love cuts me to the soul! If you value my friendship, you will never hint at love again. My heart is dead to all other but the love that is past.”

He knew not what to say to this, and paced the floor in angry disappointment.

“I cannot live without you, Lady Elaine!” he said, at last. “I have loved you for two years. I can wait for years longer if you will but give me one spark of hope.”

She shook her head mournfully.

“You will forget what is gone,” he went on, desperately. “Time will heal the wound——”

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“You must not continue in this strain,” she interrupted, sadly but firmly, “if we are to be friends. I can give you no hope, Viscount Rivington. Even if I had never met my lover, who is dead, I could not have cared for you—only as a—a friend—as my father’s guest. I can never love again, and once more I warn you that if you do not put this vain and useless desire away from you I will not speak to you or recognize you any more.”

He bowed his head in silence. In his heart he was a raging demon. He told himself that he would never give her up.

They passed through the ballroom together, and my Lord of Seabright watched them with glances of approval.

Lady Elaine escaped to her apartments and retired for the night, while Viscount Rivington and Margaret Nugent conversed in the open air.

Two days later the following announcement appeared in a society paper:

We have pleasure in being able to inform our readers that the famous beauty, Lady Elaine Seabright, and Viscount Henry Rivington have become engaged. The match is suitable in every way, and gives unbounded satisfaction to both families. It will be remembered that the Earl of Seabright's beautiful daughter was to have been married to Sir Harold Annesley, of Annesley Park, who recently disappeared in so mysterious a manner. Poor fellow! He is gone! *N'importe!* Off with the old love and on with the new. Such is life! We offer the happy couple our sincere congratulations.

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CHAPTER XI.

MY PLACE IS HERE TO PROTECT THERESA.

John Hamilton's cottage was one of the prettiest of its kind. It was built of brown stone, and seemed to be a combination of nooks and gables. To the doors, both at the back and the front, there was a trellised porch, wreathed with trailing vines, roses and sweet-smelling clematis. On every window-sill there was a box of bright-hued flowers and fragrant mignonette, while the garden that surrounded the house was a veritable maze of bewildering beauty.

At the farther end was a summer arbor, and there Sir Harold spent many happy hours, a cigar between his teeth and a book in his hands.

Sometimes he would dream lazily, and try to think of the mystery of his life, but always gave up these efforts with a sigh.

John Hamilton and his daughter attended to the household duties, and the labor was equally divided. No stranger ever crossed the threshold of the little cottage door.

Sir Harold would watch the girl in wonderment, and listen with rapture to her sweet singing as she worked about the house.

Oh, how happy she was, though at times a great black cloud would rise before her, and she would clutch at her heart to still its agony!

When her work was done, her sweetest delight was to sit near to Sir Harold, and drink in eagerly every word that he uttered.

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John Hamilton saw all this, and frowned, but he felt that he was helpless at present.

One day he spoke harshly to his daughter, and she listened half-ashamed.

“Theresa,” he said, “you must not seek the society of our guest so much, or I shall send him away.”

The girl started, and a swift blush leaped into her cheeks.

“Father!”

“Do you not understand that your conduct is unbecoming a lady?” he continued.

“What have I done?” murmured Theresa.

“You are wasting your thoughts upon a stranger, my dear,” he said. “I can see it in your eyes. You are not so much to blame for this, because you are purely a child of Nature, but it will be best if Sir Harold Annesley is left more to himself.”

“Oh, father, must this be?” cried Theresa. “Must I not speak to him again? Must I not listen to his reading while I work? It is like heaven to me! I never understood the meaning of life until he came here!”

She rocked herself to and fro bitterly.

“I wish that he had never crossed our path,” he returned, harshly. “You are in love with this man!”

He was very angry—as much with himself and Sir Harold as with his daughter—and left the room determined to speak to the baronet.

He found him in the summer arbor, reading and smoking as usual, the happy light of contentment in his blue eyes.

“Where is Theresa?” he asked. “I have been reading Tennyson’s ‘Maud,’ and I want Theresa to hear it. Much of the beautiful poem seems to be but an echo. I feel that I have known these lines before:

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“Go not, happy day,

From the shining fields;

Go not, happy day,

Till the maiden yields.

Rosy is the west,

Rosy is the south,

Roses are her cheeks,

And a rose her mouth.

When the happy yes

Falters from her lips,

Pass and blush the news,

Over glowing ships;

Over blowing seas,

Over seas at rest,

Pass the happy news,

Blush it through the west;

Till the red man dance,

By his cedar tree,

And the red man's babe

Leap beyond the sea.

Blush from west to east,

Blush from east to west,

Till the west is east;

Blush it through the west.

Rosy is the west,

Rosy is the south,

Roses are her cheeks,

And a rose her mouth!"

He paused to turn over another page, and Mr. Hamilton spoke:

"Sir Harold, this is sufficient evidence to convince me that you cannot—must not remain here longer. Your place is in the great world beyond."

“I am quite happy,” the young baronet replied. “You promised that I should suit my own inclinations.”

“Then I must withdraw that promise. Circumstances have arisen that render it imperative.”

Sir Harold dropped his cigar, and looked at Mr. Hamilton in surprise.

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“What is wrong, my friend?” he demanded. “If there are pecuniary troubles, it will not be difficult to obtain money upon the valuables I have about me.”

John Hamilton made a deprecatory movement, and sat down opposite his guest.

“It is not that, Sir Harold,” he said. “I wish you to leave my humble home for the sake of my dear child. She is young, impressionable, imaginative. She has never been used to the society of young men. She knows nothing of the world. This poetry reading has influenced her young mind, and the most gallant of the old-world knights pale into insignificance when compared with you in her estimation. In short, Sir Harold, she is in love with you, as romantic girls will be with handsome young men.”

Sir Harold was surprised. “I had never dreamed of this,” he said. “Poor Theresa!”

“Do not pity her; I cannot bear it, but go—go!”

“Why should I leave her to unhappiness?” Sir Harold mused. “I love her as a very dear sister. I have never cared for woman in any other way, and Theresa has first claim upon me. Mr. Hamilton,” he added aloud, “why should I throw away the priceless gift of Theresa’s love?”

“You are mad!” was the rejoinder. “You know not what you say. This thing cannot be!”

“And why not?”

“Your memory will return, and your heart go back to its old love.”

“I do not think so. Whoever the woman may be, you say that she was false to me. That is quite sufficient to kill my love forever.”

John Hamilton pressed his hands to his head to still his reeling brain.

“I know not what to say,” he whispered, huskily. “Just Heaven, guide me aright! Let me not make shipwreck[Pg 79] of my child’s life! You tempt me sorely, Sir Harold, for I know not what will become of her when I am dead, and I am far from being strong! At times my heart pains me so that the fear of sudden death fills me with terror for my

dear child's sake. I know the symptoms only too well. Some day, aye, at any hour—the knife of the assassin may be turned against her, and if I am gone, who is to protect her then?"

He was silent for a minute, then went on: "I owe you a story, Sir Harold. I promised weeks ago to tell you why I lived in this secluded place, and held no communication with the world beyond. I am old now, and poor, with no hope for rest this side the grave. At thirty I was a successful man, with a brilliant future before me. The whole world was my battlefield, and I gathered fresh laurels wherever I went. At last my surgical skill attracted the attention of a Russian prince, who had for years been suffering with a malformation which made of him an object of pity. He offered me an enormous fee to operate upon him; he cared not what pain he endured; he cared not whether he lived or died unless he could mingle with his fellows, and enjoy the sweets of life. I was warned by the cleverest physicians of the day that the task was hopeless; but, fired with the enthusiasm of youth, I shook off all restraint; I turned a deaf ear to all counsel, and went to St. Petersburg. I will not weary you with a description of my anxiety—of the weeks of patient waiting while my charge lingered between life and death after the operation. Let it suffice that I was successful; my name rang through Europe, and fame and fortune met me at every turn."

His pale cheeks flushed, and his eyes brightened with the recollections of those bygone days.

"A few months afterward I was tempted to go to Italy by the promise of an unusually large fee if I could remove[Pg 80] a tumor from the cheek of a wealthy old count. As usual, I was careful to receive correct reports concerning the condition of my would-be patient, and I heard that no power on earth could save his life. Already had he been twice operated upon.

"This news fired me with determination, and I accepted the onerous task.

"It was a foolish decision on my part, for now I could not afford to make a mistake, or the fame that had so suddenly encircled me would fall in ruins at my feet.

"One glance at the sufferer convinced me that the days of Count Crispi were numbered—whether he was operated on or not. The taint of the tumor was in every artery of his shriveled frame.

"'It is of no use adding fresh torture to the brief span of your life,' I told him. 'You have less than a month to live in any case.'

“‘You lie!’ he said, fiercely. ‘I will live—I must live! You think that I am old, and that the fire has forever left my veins! Ha! you cold Northerners know nothing of the passions of the children of the South! I tell you that I will live, for the sake of one whom I adore—one who is to be my wife. She is youthful—she is beautiful! *Carissima mia!*’

“I was startled into a feeling of pity and contempt. It seemed absurd for so old a man, on the verge of eternity, going into raptures of this kind.

“‘If you insist, Count Crispi, I suppose that, as I have accepted the commission and your fee, I must do my best, but I warn you that it will be needless infliction of pain and disappointment upon you.’

“But no words of mine could dissipate the strong belief that he cherished in the certainty of his speedy recovery, and I began to make arrangements for the operation, which I decided should be conducted in two days’ time.

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“In the meanwhile, however, I was careful to inform all those friends who were immediately concerned in his welfare that his death, which was certainly near at hand, would possibly be accelerated by the needless butchery. Among these friends I made the acquaintance of the young girl whom he professed to love so violently, and I must confess that I was almost bewildered by her brilliant beauty.”

John Hamilton paused, and Sir Harold saw that he was momentarily overcome by the emotions which were raised by this recital of the story from the shadowy past.

“Let me continue,” Mr. Hamilton said, hastily brushing a tear from his cheek. “Sir Harold, I soon discovered that this beautiful, guileless creature was Count Crispi’s wealthy ward, and that, while she feared the man, she also loathed him. In my pity for Theresa Ludovci, I soon drifted into a passion that seemed to consume me. I loved her as strong men love but once in a lifetime, and she returned my adoration only as such burning natures can.

“At all risks, I determined that she should be my wife, and within two weeks of the count’s operation we fled, and a priest made us one.

“When the story reached the ears of Count Crispi, his rage was so great that he fell back with blood-flecked lips, and with his last breath denounced me as an assassin. I had deliberately planned his death, so that an obstacle might be removed which threatened the disruption of my connubial pleasures.

“His relatives, who had counted upon being the ultimate recipients of a goodly share of Theresa’s wealth, registered an oath of vengeance, and a vendetta began, under the awful ban of which my beloved wife died, two weeks after the birth of our daughter—Theresa.

“For a time I struggled against the terrible fear—fear[Pg 82] only for my little child—until some poor fellow who had the misfortune to resemble me was stabbed to death in the streets of London. My name and that of Count Crispi were attached to the handle of the murderer, and I knew its meaning! The newspapers made a great fuss of the mysterious tragedy, and I changed my name and sought retirement.”

“Then your name is not Hamilton?” asked the baronet, greatly interested.

“No; it is Egerton—Lambert Egerton. I even start when I utter it myself. Not one word of this story does my poor Theresa know—not even her real name; and thus have I lived for fifteen years, my waking and sleeping hours never free from the shadow of the knife! My own little fortune has long since gone, and my wife’s money I have not dared to claim.”

“It is infamous!” Sir Harold said, when Hamilton had concluded. “I utterly refuse to leave you now, sir; I should be an ungrateful coward if I did. My place is here to protect Theresa—to make the poor child happy if I can.”

“I will not give my consent yet,” Hamilton replied, distressfully, “and yet, why should I stand in the light of all that is near and dear to me? Not yet—not yet,” he added, “it would not be fair to you, Sir Harold. Your mind is not clear, and you do not rightly estimate the burden you would take upon yourself. Oh, my poor Theresa!”

He clutched at his side, his face becoming pale and clammy with the dews of excruciating pain.

“My old trouble,” he whispered to Sir Harold, who was anxiously bending over him. “There, it is gone. I am always bothered in this way if I become agitated. One word more; try and avoid my daughter for a little while, until both have had time for calm reflection. If I[Pg 83] have rightly diagnosed your case, your memory will return by easy stages. Some of the brain cells are merely paralyzed, and in time will recover their action. You may then turn with disgust from your present surroundings and the thoughts that now——”

“My friend—my good friend,” Sir Harold interrupted, “what you say is impossible. I accept from you the sacred trust of devoting my life to Theresa. I care for her deeply, and will protect her with my life, if need be. As for my memory, let me confess to you

that many years of my early life are now as clear as noonday; but at that point where I left Eton for Cambridge all becomes enshrouded in an impenetrable mist."

"Ah! why did you not tell me this before?" Hamilton said, betraying much excitement.

"Cannot you guess? I did not tell you lest you should wish to send me away. I distinctly remember my boyhood's friends—my cousin Margaret—my beautiful home at Crayford—and in spirit I am but seventeen years old. There is nothing peculiar about the sensation, but I have no wish to return home until the threads of the remaining years are gathered together, though I am naturally curious to know that my business affairs are being carefully attended to. I am even wishing to look upon the woman who wrought such havoc in my life, though I have nothing but contempt for her and for myself."

He laughed lightly, and Hamilton said:

"This is just what I expected, Sir Harold. You spoke of a cousin Margaret a moment or two ago. Would you not like to send for her?"

"No," was the energetic reply; "I only remember her as a child of twelve years old. She must be a woman now. No, I do not wish to see her or any one else until my mind has regained its normal state. I prefer things[Pg 84] as they are. I am perfectly content, and while Theresa is near, this little home is paradise!"

"Wait, wait," said Mr. Hamilton. "I will not give my consent yet."

"Hark! Theresa is coming!" Sir Harold exclaimed. "I hear her voice in the garden."

He turned and ran to meet her like a happy schoolboy.

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CHAPTER XII.

COLONEL GREYSON'S VISIT.

That very day Mr. Hamilton had an unexpected visitor, and he knew at once that the friends of Sir Harold had discovered his retreat.

He met the intruder at the garden gate, and Colonel Greyson (for it was he) regarded him suspiciously.

"Good-morning, sir," Hamilton said.

“Good-morning,” was the gruff rejoinder. “You have a gentleman staying here, I believe?”

“Yes, sir. Sir Harold Annesley is here. Do you wish to see him?”

“One moment, my friend. A detective has traced him. I trust that you have not detained him against his will?”

“On the other hand, sir, I cannot persuade him to leave,” replied Hamilton, with dignity.

“I have heard that he met with an accident that paralyzed his memory. No matter how I obtained the information—there is the substance of it. Now answer me truthfully, Mr.—Mr.——”

“Hamilton,” was the calm reply, although the old musician strongly resented the brusque, condemnatory manner of his interlocutor. “Your information is perfectly correct. May I ask, sir, who and what you are?”

The colonel bent upon him a ferocious glance.

“I? My name is Greyson—Colonel Greyson. I have known Sir Harold since he was a mere boy of twenty. I succeeded to the co-trusteeship of his business and social welfare when his natural guardian died. I have traced him here, and will be responsible for him, while I may have to hold you responsible for his detention!”

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“I am prepared to meet any reasonable question you may think fit to put to me,” was the haughty reply; “but I object to this bluster.”

“Why did you not send for his friends? Why has he not received proper medical treatment?”

“I have valid reasons for my actions, however neglectful they may seem to you. Sir Harold has been in good hands,” Hamilton said. “Will you follow me, sir?”

“Wait!” the colonel commanded. “I have not quite done with you, Mr. Hamilton. Never let it be said that I condemn a man unheard, and if you are as innocent as you strive to appear, you will not be afraid to answer one or two questions which, to save time, I will put to you in categorical order. As a man of sense, it must at once be apparent to you that you are guilty of a serious misdemeanor in the eyes of the law for retaining a titled and wealthy man without making a single effort to restore him to his friends. To add to this, you have permitted him to regain bodily health at the expense of his mind, while

proper medical treatment would doubtless have resulted in sound reason also. To my thinking, this constitutes in itself a most serious offense, as the natural conclusions are that you have had but one end in view—extortion!"

Mr. Hamilton flushed angrily and knitted his brows.

"Pray go on with your questions," he said. "I am prepared to answer."

"Good," the colonel replied. "Now, sir, when and where did you first make the acquaintance of Sir Harold Annesley?"

"Upon the very day that he disappeared. I am an itinerant musician when money runs short, though this has been my permanent home for fifteen years. I and my daughter, by pure accident, turned into Annesley Park, and, after hearing my child sing, Sir Harold was very[Pg 87] liberal with his money. By the same train that returned to Tenterden, Sir Harold evidently intended to go to London, but met with an accident, which will never be properly explained except by himself, just outside the Tenterden railway station. As is often the case, there was no porter in attendance, for the train had to be stopped by signal for me and Theresa—my daughter—to alight; and it was not until the train had steamed away that I saw the figure of a man lying at the mouth of the tunnel. I went to his assistance, and, much against my will, was forced to bring him here lest he should die."

The Colonel smiled unpleasantly.

"Who was your confederate? You do not expect me to believe that an aged man—a feeble man—could possibly convey the insensible body of a big fellow like Sir Harold Annesley for upward of a mile over an uneven road!"

So saying, Greyson fixed upon Hamilton his keen eyes.

"I had no confederate, as you term it, unless you call my Theresa a confederate," the musician said. "In my travels I take with me an harmonium, and that harmonium is conveyed upon a flat carriage, which you may inspect if you desire. Sir Harold's inanimate form was placed by myself and daughter upon that carriage and brought here. As for my secrecy, I have my own private reasons, with which my guest is fully acquainted. Answering your complaint concerning proper medical treatment, Sir Harold can satisfy you upon that point, if he considers you worthy of implicit trust."

The colonel bent one of his piercing glances upon Hamilton, and held out his hand, saying:

“I believe you, sir. If I have been unreasonably suspicious, forgive me. Now let me see the boy.”

“If you will step into my cottage, Colonel Greyson,”[Pg 88] Hamilton said, courteously, “I will send Sir Harold to you. He is somewhere in the garden, I have no doubt.”

The old soldier permitted himself to be conducted into a little parlor fragrant with the incense of flowers.

“If you will wait here, colonel——”

“Certainly—certainly!” was the quick interruption. “My nerves are simply quivering with the excitement of expectancy.”

The musician withdrew, and when Sir Harold entered, five minutes later, looking well and happy, the colonel held out his hand, saying, tremulously, “Harold, my boy, do you not know me?”

The young man took the proffered hand, but there was a puzzled expression on his face.

“I have heard the name of Colonel Greyson very often,” he said, “but I do not remember that we have ever met before, sir.”

“My Heaven!” groaned the colonel, “this is terrible. Why, my dear boy, who was it that got you out of your scrapes at Cambridge? Who was it that undertook the sole management of your business affairs while you went trying to emulate Livingstone, Stanley and those fellows?”

Sir Harold laughed.

“You understand, colonel,” he said, “my friend, Mr. Hamilton, who is in reality a clever surgeon, predicts that I shall recover in time, and then we may be able to enter into these matters with mutual interest. At present they are of very little importance to me. Of course, I have heard much that greatly concerns me, and I have no desire to return to Annesley Park as an object of pity and curiosity, if you will be so kind as to see that my affairs do not get muddled. Perhaps I am asking too much.”

“Asking too much?” the colonel interrupted, with tears[Pg 89] in his eyes. “I would lay down my life for you, Harold. Now, tell me, do your thoughts ever return to Lady—to Lady Elaine?”

“Mr. Hamilton has told me something of Lady Elaine, but I really do not remember her, colonel. From what I understand she must be a heartless beauty. I only wonder that I was fool enough to succumb to her wiles.”

“Do you wish to see her again?” Greyson asked.

“No—only perhaps out of idle curiosity,” was the indifferent reply; “but there is one thing that I am anxious about, Colonel Greyson. What do the newspapers say about me—and about Lady Elaine?”

“Oh, the usual twaddle. It is supposed that you went away in a huff and are abroad again.”

“Capital!” laughed Sir Harold. “I could not bear to be pitied as the brokenhearted lover, who, in addition, had lost half his wits! I intend to remain here, colonel, and rely upon you to keep my secret until I am again in complete possession of my faculties. I can trust you—I know that I can trust you, and let me confide to you something concerning my host, who calls himself John Hamilton.”

He straightway repeated the old musician’s story, and all became as clear as noonday to the brusque old soldier.

After conversing with Sir Harold for an hour the colonel sought John Hamilton.

“I have to ask your pardon again,” he said. “Annesley has told me sufficient to exculpate you completely. I am almost ashamed of my unworthy suspicions, and I am deeply sorry for you. Now, sir, I have not yet quite resolved what is best to be done. Sir Harold does not want to leave here until he is perfectly restored, and you, as an eminent surgeon, may be able to give me some idea[Pg 90] of the extent of his malady. Can I introduce him to his friends—to the world—in months, or years?”

“I have already carefully worked it out,” replied Hamilton, readily, “and am of opinion that an operation is necessary. There appears to be a clot of blood, or other viscid matter, pressing upon some of the nerve-centers of the brain. This matter may assimilate with the blood, and it may remain where it is for many years unless removed by a careful surgical operation.”

“Which you are willing to perform?”

“Certainly, if it is Sir Harold’s wish.”

For a little while the colonel was thoughtful.

“We will not press the question yet,” he said, at last. “I must discuss it with—er—other friends. He appears to be very happy here, but his duties are elsewhere, and he must be awakened to them. In a few days—a week at most, Mr. Hamilton—I will come again, and I may bring other friends with me. Good-day, and accept my hearty thanks. I trust that our friendship, so awkwardly begun, will be lifelong.”

“Thank you,” said John Hamilton, as he accompanied him to the door.

At the end of one of the garden walks they saw Sir Harold and Theresa stroll past, and the expression upon the girl’s face was a revelation to Colonel Greyson.

He glanced sharply at Hamilton, remarking:

“I said that you should hear from me within a week. Alter that to three days. Good-by, sir.”

“Good-day!” replied Hamilton; then he called angrily to Theresa, and bade her attend to some household duties while he lectured his guest.

“Sir Harold, it amounts to this: Until I hear from your friends I will not give you permission to harbor the slightest hope regarding my daughter. I even forbid[Pg 91] you to speak to her except upon terms of the merest civility. Her young life shall not be ruined!”

“I do not care one atom for the opinion of my friends,” retorted Sir Harold. “Theresa is dearer to me than all else in the world!”

“Wait, wait,” was the testy rejoinder. “You may think differently in a few days’ time.”

“Never,” was the confident reply.

One—two—three days passed, and then a letter and some newspapers came from Colonel Greyson.

This is the letter:

My Dear Mr. Hamilton—I do not think it necessary to subject poor Annesley to a further operation. Let time work its own cure. I left you full of hope, believing that he and Lady Elaine Seabright had been the victims of a misunderstanding, and with the confident intention of bringing them together again. However, I was mistaken in my lady, and send to you papers containing the news of her engagement to another man. This may serve to dissipate any lingering doubts if Sir Harold should recover sooner than we expect. You may use it how you please. The affairs at Annesley Park are in the hands of competent people, and I intend going to the Continent at once for the autumn and

winter. I will send you my address later. I strongly counsel you to keep Sir Harold's whereabouts a secret, or you will be overrun with newspaper reporters, and the distressing notoriety might retard his recovery. As I have practically assumed control of Annesley's affairs, I inclose you authority to draw upon my bankers for any funds that may be required.

Very faithfully yours,
Everard Greyson.

Hamilton turned to the newspapers and saw the items to which the colonel referred, ejaculating:

"Thank God!"

He placed the letter and the papers in Sir Harold's hands, saying:

"I think that the bar is removed, and if you are sure of your own heart, my darling child is yours. That she loves you with the pure love of a romantic girl there is[Pg 92] no doubt, and with the passing years this will ripen into the deep affection of a warm-hearted and noble woman. I pray of the great Master of our lives that you may never misunderstand my child, Sir Harold. She is giving to you unreservedly every thought of her innocent life, and to meet with coldness or indifference in return would kill her as surely as a flower dies for lack of sunshine! In some way I have all confidence in your chivalry and devotion, and if there is any passing shade of doubt it is when I think of the position that my child must occupy as your wife. The world of fashion will be so new and strange to her at first that you may suffer some sense of disappointment if she prefers the quiet life of home to the giddy whirl of society. But," he added, proudly, "I have no fear for the result. Theresa is a lady by birth and instinct. In a few years she will fall easily into the ways of fashion."

A warm flush mantled the young man's cheek and a sparkle came into his eye.

"Theresa will be my fondest care," he said. "I am quite content with her as she is."

He turned to the newspapers, and his lips curled with scorn.

"The world makes light of the folly that is past. Some day I may meet Lady Elaine Seabright again, and if my contempt for her is as great as that which I feel for myself it will be immeasurable."

CHAPTER XIII.

A STRANGE WILL.

Miss Nugent was bitterly mortified by the action of Colonel Greyson. He had promised to call upon her mother, and instead had taken himself off, no one knew whither, and with him the secret of Sir Harold's movements. He had not even troubled himself to write one word of explanation.

She had waited for whole days in miserable expectation, and then suddenly announced her determination of calling upon the colonel.

"You will come with me, mamma, dear. I believe that Colonel Greyson has news of Harold. He hinted as much to me at Lady Gaynor's ball, and I am so anxious. It is not more than an hour's drive to the colonel's place."

Mrs. Nugent rarely attempted to combat the wishes of her handsome daughter. She was one of those invalids who find pleasure in nursing their own ailments, and though it was a positive martyrdom to leave her lounge for several hours, to be jolted over miles of stony ground, she assented to the proposal with a long-drawn sigh of resignation.

The carriage was ordered, and immediately after lunch Mrs. Nugent and her daughter were driven to the colonel's cottage at Crayford.

To Margaret's dismay there was an air of desertion about the place, and she was informed by his house keeper that her master was going abroad for the autumn and winter.

"Then he has not yet gone?" asked Miss Nugent, with a gasp of relief.

"No, ladies; but his man is upstairs packing, and he knows more about it than I do."

With a nod the woman ran into the house, and in a few minutes the colonel's military manservant appeared, as straight and stiff as a ramrod.

"What is this I hear about the colonel, Simmons?" asked Miss Nugent.

"My master is going away, madam," replied Simmons, saluting solemnly.

"Yes—yes! I have heard all about that. But where is he now?"

Simmons looked surprised.

“In London by this time, Miss Nugent. He spent the whole of yesterday at Annesley Park, and last evening left for London, where I am to join him to-night.”

Miss Nugent bit her lips with vexation.

“It is extraordinary,” she said. “I really do not understand Colonel Greyson, after his promise to me and knowing how anxious I am concerning my luckless cousin.”

The concluding part of her speech was uttered aside.

“My dear!” Mrs. Nugent mildly remonstrated, “I do not see anything so extraordinary in it. You know what the papers have said about Sir Harold, and it is quite possible that the colonel intends joining him somewhere. I am sure that I shall take a chill if we remain here much longer.”

“You are sure that there is no message for us—for me, Simmons?” continued Margaret.

“Quite sure, madam.”

“Well, it is possible that your master will write to me from London, but I wish you to impress upon him some sense of my great disappointment. He will understand[Pg 95] why, and I shall expect a lengthy letter of explanation and particulars. You will not forget, Simmons?”

“No, madam.”

Simmons’ right hand flew up automatically in answer to Miss Nugent’s farewell nod, and the carriage rolled away.

“I cannot expect everything to fall into my lap,” she thought, “and in one sense it is perhaps lucky that the colonel has taken himself off, though his unlooked-for movements have left me completely in the dark.”

As the carriage swept round a bend in the road, Annesley Park was revealed with startling distinctness some two miles distant. The towers and minarets stood sharply against the purple sky, while a golden fire seemed to flash from every window in the light of the sun.

“If we only had a fourth of Sir Harold’s money, how happy we might be!” sighed Mrs. Nugent. “I really think that he is most unkind in not giving the Park to us while he is chasing wild beasts in Africa. I believe that such an exhilarating prospect would almost give me health again; or, at least, as much as I can ever expect to enjoy.”

Margaret laughed musically.

“Mamma,” she said, “the Park may be our home yet!”

It was a prize worth scheming for, but, to do her justice, Miss Nugent loved Sir Harold for himself alone. How impatiently she awaited the letter-bag next morning, only to be filled with a disappointment that almost amounted to dismay. There was no letter from Colonel Greyson, and she blamed herself for not insisting upon his London address. Still, it was not too late to give up hoping, and she denied herself several pleasures by remaining at home throughout the day, so that she should immediately receive any news that came.

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In the evening a boy from the telegraph office delivered the following:

Miss Margaret Nugent—I have no good news for you, and the less said the better. Time alone can straighten the tangle. I leave London for Paris to-night. Kind regards.

Greyson.

Margaret angrily tossed the telegram in the fire.

“A miserable evasion,” she muttered. “How much does he suspect? I see through it all. He is taking Harold abroad with him. If I only dared to follow them and nurse my darling back to life! It may be months or years, and with my lady out of the way my devotion is sure to win in the end.”

That very night, at a late hour, some terrible news reached the Nugents. The Earl of Seabright was dead, killed while riding over his own estate. His horse had stumbled over some hidden brambles, and my lord was pitched headforemost to the earth. The land steward was with him at the time, and the accident at first appeared to be only a trivial one. The earl had struggled up again, but only to sink back with a groan. The shock had injured him internally, and he was carried to his bedchamber a dying man.

“You have only an hour to live, my lord,” the hastily-summoned doctor gravely told him. “If your affairs are not in order there is no time to be lost.”

The earl listened incredulously at first.

“I suffer no pain,” he said. “Surely you are mistaken! Am I to die because my horse stumbled—I, the maddest rider in the county?”

“You are bleeding internally, my lord. No human power can save you,” was the decided reply.

Then the earl had wept childishly for a little while, and sent hastily for the nearest lawyer. He wished to make a new will—to appoint fresh executors.

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The lawyer came and was closeted with the dying earl for half-an-hour.

"Now read it over carefully," the earl said, and the lawyer obeyed him.

The will was short and concise. My lord left the whole of his personality to his only child, the Lady Elaine, upon the condition that she became the wife of Viscount Henry Rivington within six months of the date of the will. If she refused to obey this last wish of the earl his fortune would pass away to various charitable institutions, which were carefully named. In addition, the viscount was made joint-executor with Lady Gaynor. As the title and estate of Seabright Hall reverted to the next male heir in succession the earl's daughter would be under the immediate control of the executors. There was a clause to the effect that if the marriage was not consummated, through the refusal or inability of the viscount to ratify the contract, the whole of the earl's fortune would be devoted to the exclusive enjoyment of his daughter, the Lady Elaine Seabright.

In the presence of many witnesses the will was signed, and twenty minutes later my lord breathed his last.

It was an impressive scene. The awful suddenness seemed to have bewildered everybody, and Lady Elaine hardly realized that her father was, indeed, no more until she was gently led from the death-chamber by Lady Gaynor and the doctor.

The earl had ever been a selfish man, but, notwithstanding her loveless life, the full force of her loss seemed to numb every sense for a time.

At last she burst into a passion of tears. How well she understood his last words to her, and how her soul revolted from the wishes they expressed.

"We quarreled this morning, Elaine. Do not let a last disobedience haunt you through life. I mean all for the[Pg 98] best, child. Annesley has left you to humiliation and scorn. Obey my last wishes, and some day you will understand that I have acted harshly to be kind."

Her reply had been a sob, and a few moments later a quick, fluttering sigh told that all was over.

He was gone—first her lover, and then her father; and, locked in her own apartments, she gave way to her grief in sobs and tears.

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CHAPTER XIV.

AN EVIL GENIUS.

It was not until the funeral was over and my lord's last will and testament had been read that Lady Elaine Seabright was brought to a knowledge of her true position.

She had many sympathizing friends, and the new earl and lord of the domain kindly offered to leave the house and effects at her disposal for any reasonable length of time.

"Indeed," he added, magnanimously, "with the consent of my wife and daughters, I may offer you a home here until the viscount claims you. The late earl and I were not good friends simply because he had no son and I was his natural heir."

Elaine thanked her cousin, but told him that what he had proposed was impossible.

The old family lawyer was thoroughly indignant, and muttered threats about contesting the last will; but what could he do in face of a dozen witnesses, who were all convinced that the earl's mind had been clear to the last? Besides, Lady Elaine would never have consented to such a course of action.

"Even if you cared for this man—this Viscount Rivington—the will places you in a most humiliating position, my lady," he told her, indignantly. "By what I gather, it was made really in the heat of anger, notwithstanding the fact that the earl was dying. You had resolutely declined to encourage the advances of Rivington that very morning and my lord was determined that he should be your husband. In an apparently easy-going[Pg 100] way your father was a perfect martinet. He generally had his own way, even if he waited long years for the opportunity. And then why should the original executors be struck out—myself and Colonel Greyson?"

Mr. Worboys snorted angrily, and stamped to and fro across the floor of the library, where he had come at Lady Elaine's bidding, so that she might learn her true position.

"There is no doubt at all that you have been treated badly by Sir Harold Annesley," he went on, but Lady Elaine interrupted him.

"Please do not speak of Sir Harold," she said. "My heart tells me that he will come back to me some day."

“Well, my lady,” proceeded Mr. Worboys, “it amounts to this: If you refuse to wed Viscount Rivington you will lose a fortune of nearly half-a-million sterling and an income of ten or twelve thousand a year.”

“I have my private fortune,” she reminded him.

“A paltry five hundred a year,” he told her, “and even that is under the control of your guardians until you are of age.”

“It appears that I am practically bound hand and foot,” she said, bitterly. “Must I submit to these people?”

She stood erect, with flashing eyes, and deathly-white face—a pathetic figure in her loneliness.

“Cannot you help me, Mr. Worboys?”

“The law will not permit of my interference, my lady. Now, look at matters on their brightest side. Within one year you will be of age and your own mistress. You are determined to lose your fortune rather than marry Viscount Rivington. No one can legally force you into this marriage, and if undue pressure is brought to bear upon you, then I may be able to step in to your assistance. What manner of woman is this Lady Gaynor?”

“I do not like her,” Elaine replied. “I do not know[Pg 101] why, but we were never upon friendly terms. Had my father lived I believe that he would have made Lady Gaynor the Countess of Seabright.”

The old lawyer was silent for a little while, then he glanced at the girl pityingly and said:

“I do not think that we can improve matters by remaining here longer, Lady Elaine. Above all, we must avoid arousing suspicion. Note carefully the manner in which Lady Gaynor approaches you, and always rely upon my active friendship whenever such is possible.”

Mr. Worboys went back to London, and for three or four days Lady Elaine was practically left to her own devices, while her maid was busy packing up.

On the fifth day, however, there was a letter from Lady Gaynor, which ran as follows:

Dear Lady Elaine—I sincerely trust that the first edge of your grief is dulled by this time, and that you have made preparations for leaving the old home. The new earl has been extremely kind and considerate toward you. According to the provisions of your

father's will, I and Viscount Rivington are in a measure responsible for you, and as you are practically without a fortune, your future home must be the best I can afford. The Lodge will doubtless appear a very insignificant place after the splendid surroundings of Seabright Hall. Still, none of us can choose our own lot in life, and the dear viscount has acquiesced to all my proposals. I have written to your cousin, the new earl, informing him that it is my intention to relieve him of further responsibility, so far as you are concerned, to-morrow morning. Your very dear friend, Miss Nugent, will accompany me.

Sincerely yours,
Eleanor Gaynor.

Lady Elaine shivered when she read the letter. There was something ominous in its softly-turned sentences.

At dinner the earl broached the subject.

"If you are not quite ready to leave, Lady Elaine," he said, "I shall be glad to have you here as long as it suits[Pg 102] your own convenience. The countess and the girls will be here next week."

"Thank you," Elaine replied, listlessly. "There is no reason that I should delay the inevitable. I will leave Seabright Hall to-morrow morning with Lady Gaynor."

"A strange choice of the late earl's," he mused. "Lady Gaynor is notorious in certain circles. She is miserably poor, and makes an income by coaching the daughters of rich Americans and successful tradesmen generally."

Lady Elaine did not reply, but again that icy shudder passed through her, leaving her as cold as death. Her great sorrow had left her numb and spiritless.

Lady Gaynor came next morning; she was a large, handsome woman of fifty or thereabouts—a woman with determination marked in every line of her smiling face. For ten years she had succeeded in maintaining a small estate known as "The Lodge" upon absolutely no assured income at all. The house and lands were incumbered, but Lady Gaynor had managed, so far, to keep off the marauding hands of the money-lenders. But of late her practices had obtained the severe notice of people who moved in the charmed circle of the court, and Lady Gaynor knew that she must employ sharp wits in other directions, or fall a prey to the harpies which, like the vampire, feed upon the blood of human hearts. Then the Earl of Seabright in some way became entangled in her toils, and many rumors were rife when he died. This was a serious blow to Lady Gaynor, but there was one hope still left. Upon his marriage with Lady Elaine, Viscount

Rivington had promised her a handsome check—a check that would free her of the Jews, and still leave a respectable sum with which to make fresh ventures. It was really a matter of life and death to Lady Gaynor.

“My dear girl!” she said, effusively kissing one of Lady Elaine’s pale cheeks, “how sweet of you to be so considerate![Pg 103] Here you are quite ready, and we shall be back at the Lodge in time for lunch.”

Then Margaret Nugent came forward and greeted Elaine with a great show of affection. She could afford now to be affectionate in reality, for she no longer regarded Lady Elaine as a rival.

The drive to the Lodge was without incident, and Lady Gaynor showed the girl to a suite of shabbily-furnished rooms. The curtains were dingy, the carpets threadbare, and there was an air of mustiness everywhere that was stifling.

“Ah! I can see disappointment in your face,” her ladyship said, with well-assumed regret, “but this is the best that I can offer. Let us hope that you will soon reign as mistress of a home equal to the one you have left. I shall then expect you to requite the kindness I am endeavoring to extend to you now. Ah! how selfish poverty makes us all, Lady Elaine. You do not care to come down for lunch? Well, you shall have a cup of tea up here and spend the rest of the day as you please, assisting your maid to unpack.”

Lady Gaynor went away, and a little later Margaret Nugent came to say good-by.

“I am going home,” she said, “because mamma has a fresh attack of fancied woes. Shall I bring the pony-carriage to-morrow, and we will have a long drive?”

“No, thank you, Margaret,” said Lady Elaine, “I think that I hate the old, familiar scenes. My great trouble has fallen on me with the weight of an avalanche. I do not seem able to realize it yet. My lover—my father—all—at one blow. My energy—my spirit is killed within me!”

“Time will soften your grief, Elaine,” said Margaret, gently. “There is a great future before you—a future[Pg 104] bright with triumph and splendor, if you only grasp it aright.”

There seemed to be a hidden meaning in Margaret’s words.

“I believe that I understand you, Miss Nugent,” Elaine said, coldly; “but I fail to appreciate your counsels. In some way my troubles began when I was weak enough to listen to your advice. I accepted it against my better judgment, and I beg of you not to refer to matters which particularly concern myself again. In my present loneliness I

need friends badly enough, Heaven knows, but I can never associate you with anything but unpleasantness and misery. I feel that you are my enemy, and am only sorry that I did not make the discovery sooner. The very fact that you are a close associate of my oppressors precludes the possibility of any sympathy between us, and I shall consider it a favor if you will cease making any pretenses of affection for me in the future. I must now know upon whom I can depend, Miss Nugent, and I can neither accept you as a confidante nor an adviser. I am not superstitious, but there is a fatality about some people which it is impossible to withstand, and everything in connection with yourself has resulted in evil for me."

"I am sorry," Miss Nugent said, and her face was pale. "Can it be possible, Lady Elaine, that you regard me as a sort of evil genius?"

"That is just it. In some way I feel that you are my evil genius!" Elaine replied.

Without a word, Margaret Nugent turned away, and the two girls did not meet again for many months.

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CHAPTER XV.

LADY GAYNOR SHOWS HER HAND.

A week passed, and Lady Elaine had been permitted to indulge in almost perfect seclusion, but at length a message was sent to her announcing that Lady Gaynor wished to see her in her *boudoir*.

The servant who delivered it glanced pityingly at the black-robed figure, and told the shabbily-dressed butler a little later that the atmosphere would soon be sultry.

The butler smiled, as only an upper servant can smile, and remarked:

"We are hall hinterested in this last spec., John. Three years' money owin' to me, an' not a stitch to my back, hardly. If her ladyship hadn't hev explained, it meant a county court case for her."

John smirked.

"It's hin the *boudoir*, eh?" continued the butler. "Then that's hominous."

"How blood do tell," said the footman. "I was hordered to deliver the message peremptory like, and you should hev seen the beautiful young lady's eyes flash!"

“Look ’ere, don’t you take sides with her, John, because my back pay depends hon the winnin’ side being Lady Gaynor.”

The footman’s manner had seemed extremely rude to Lady Elaine, and Nina had strongly resented it by closing the door in his face.

It is true that Elaine had met one or two kindly inquiries with an exasperating indifference, and Lady Gaynor decided that it was time to show her authority.

Fully understanding that the servant’s manner was[Pg 106] but a reflection of that of his mistress, Lady Elaine promptly attended the summons, her blood raised to a white heat of indignation.

She paused momentarily at the half-open door of her ladyship’s *boudoir*, and immediately heard the soft, cooing tones of the woman she hated and distrusted.

“Is that you, child? Come in, and close the door after you. I am far from feeling well this morning, and the tiresome viscount has written to say that he is coming to dinner to-day. Will you sit down, please, Lady Elaine? Nothing makes me so uncomfortable as to see my friends standing about the rooms when I wish to talk to them.”

She sighed, and arranged the folds of her dirty dressing-gown, watching the girl at the same time from the corners of her eyes.

“Lady Gaynor,” Elaine said, haughtily, “I am here to learn what it is you wish to communicate to me. Mind you, I am not to be deceived by this outward complaisance after your bold attempt to humiliate me in the eyes of your servants!”

For a few moments the cool woman of the world was taken completely off her guard.

“My dear Elaine,” she said, aghast, “whatever are you driving at?”

Inwardly she reflected: “I have heard that she has a temper of her own, but it must be crushed! Backed by strong friends and perfect independence, the task might be a difficult one, but now—faugh!”

She eyed the angry girl with a glance that gradually deepened into a smile of bitterest contempt.

“Is it to be open warfare between us, Lady Elaine?” she asked, sneeringly, a baleful light in her deep-set eyes. “As you appear to have taken the initiative, I must accept the impudent challenge!”

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“It is as well that we should at once understand each other,” the earl’s daughter replied, icily.

“I agree with you there perfectly, my lady, and for that very reason I sent for you here. My frankness may appear almost brutal, but you yourself have forced me to cease from paltering with words. My lady of Seabright, you must forget that you are the daughter of an earl, and remember that you are practically little better than a pauper upon my bounty.”

“Stop!”

Elaine advanced one step, with flashing eyes.

“Who dares to beard me on my own ground!” screamed Lady Gaynor, losing all control of herself. “Girl, I am your legal guardian, and will force you into obedience! Do you think that I will permit my guests to be insulted as you insulted Miss Nugent? Do you think that I will endure your moping away in silence, with a maid dancing attendance upon you at my expense? What is your paltry five hundred a year? It will not keep personal attendants and buy you handsome clothes. I say that your maid shall be dismissed this very day; I insist that you appear downstairs at my request, and amuse my guests. I am determined to exercise my full authority, and since you have treated the viscount so shamefully I am sure that he will exact a similar obedience.”

At the end of her tirade she rose to her feet, her face purple with unbridled rage, and shook both her tightly-clinched hands at the astonished girl.

“Have you finished?” Lady Elaine asked, calmly. “I do not forget that the blood of a hundred earls flows in my veins! I am not to be frightened by a creature like you. Your melodramatic ravings are more amusing than otherwise. I need say little more. I ignore your commands and wishes alike, because I despise you for an unprincipled[Pg 108] adventuress. You must not imagine that I am wholly without friends, and I give you warning that I shall quit the Lodge to-day!”

With a glance of withering contempt, Lady Elaine swept from the room. She hurried to her own apartments, and commanded Nina to begin packing at once.

“I have quarreled with Lady Gaynor,” she said, “and we cannot remain here another hour. Oh, Nina, I am in great trouble, and now I want your help and sympathy. The mistress of this place has insulted me cruelly, and I must seek the advice of Mr. Worboys, our old family lawyer, at the earliest possible moment.”

“And where shall we go to, my lady?” ventured Nina.

“To London—to a hotel. I have five hundred pounds a year, surely they cannot deprive me of that! Then we will find a comfortable little home somewhere, Nina, and you shall stay with me as long as you like—not as a mere servant—but as a friend, the most faithful friend I have ever had.”

Nina’s face flushed with pleasure, and she clapped her hands together joyously.

“Oh, my lady, won’t that be nice! But what a shame for all your fortune to go because of that wretched will.”

“Hush, Nina; I never wish to think of it again. Never before was a poor mortal so afflicted as I, but beyond the black clouds of the present I have faith that there is a golden promise that will blossom into glorious fruition. I know that my lover will come back to me some day—and I shall wait—even if it is until I am old and gray. Bitter as my sorrows have been, the most dreadful blow has not fallen. There is no proof that Sir Harold has been false to me. If this were so, then I should be stricken with death, indeed!”

Lady Elaine shed a few tears, then, with rapid and[Pg 109] decisive movements, assisted her maid to turn out the contents of drawers and wardrobes, and pack them into her traveling trunks.

In the meantime, Lady Gaynor had sent an urgent telegram to the viscount, who was dutifully visiting his octogenarian uncle, the Duke of Rothwell. The duke’s country seat was within twenty miles of Ashbourne, and the viscount had many reasons for trying to conciliate the old gentleman. In the first place, his grace had complete control of every acre of his possessions. There was not a square yard of entail, and the viscount had never been a favorite with his uncle.

When the telegram arrived, Rivington was reading that morning’s *Times* to the Duke of Rothwell. The day was bright and warm, and they were sunning themselves on one of the terraces that overlooked miles of undulating woodland.

“What is that, Henry?” asked his grace, suspiciously.

“Lady Gaynor desires my immediate presence at the Lodge,” replied Rivington, knitting his brows.

“Lady Gaynor!” echoed the duke, contemptuously. “You must break with that woman, Henry. Let me see the telegram.”

Rivington reluctantly handed the slip of pink paper to his uncle, who slowly read:

You must come at once. Trouble with the girl.—Gaynor.

“Trouble with the girl,” repeated the duke, suspiciously. “What does that mean? No deception, please. I endured quite enough of that in your young days, when you used money that did not belong to you. Sometimes I think that I have been a fool to take you back again and make you a handsome allowance. It is hard to believe in the reformation of a blackleg and a gambler. But my will is not yet made in your favor, and all depends[Pg 110] upon your marriage with Lady Elaine Seabright. After that there is some hope for you!”

“Uncle!” pleaded Rivington. “How unkind you are!”

“The telegram, the telegram!” was the interruption.

“Oh, that is nothing. The facts are simple. Of course, everybody is aware of Lady Gaynor’s crippled condition so far as finances go, and I recently recommended to her care the—er—sister of a fellow I know, who suffers with periodical attacks of mild insanity—the result of a carriage accident. Her brother was willing to pay a decent sum to any one who would take particular care of the girl until she was quite recovered, and I recommended Lady Gaynor. That is all there is in it. It is a great nuisance at all events, just now.”

“H’m! Is that the truth?” the duke grunted.

“My dear uncle,” exclaimed Rivington, distressfully, “it pains me beyond measure that you should continue to doubt me.”

“Can you wonder at it? Well, I suppose that you must leave me. If it was anywhere but Lady Gaynor’s place I would go with you. I can’t think what possessed the Earl of Seabright when he mixed that woman up with his affairs. I must see Lady Elaine as soon as she has got over her spell of grief. I must hear from her own lips that she intends to marry you, and then you may depend upon getting something from me besides the title. I won’t believe one word of the story until her ladyship confirms it. It will ever be a mystery to me how you managed to ingratiate yourself in the Earl of Seabright’s good graces. He was no fool, and must have known what a worthless scoundrel you were in your younger days. I would see you hanged before you should marry a daughter of mine, no matter how much you promised to reform. I have no belief in reformed rakes. Confound it, I am almost disposed to put a stop to this abominable[Pg 111] marriage, but I suppose that Lady Elaine knows her own business best. There never is any accounting for taste—particularly a woman’s! Not only are you deficient in what I consider the ordinary attributes of manhood, but you are small and insignificant. You will be the most undignified Duke of Rothwell that has ever borne the title. Why the deuce didn’t I marry myself, I wonder!”

Inwardly the viscount was fuming. He hated his uncle, and cursed Lady Gaynor for a fool. Why had she sent the insane telegram? What had she done to Lady Elaine?

When once beyond the notice of the old duke, his haste became almost frantic. He helped the groom to saddle a horse, and then galloped away as though upon an errand of life and death.

In less than two hours he was pacing Lady Gaynor's drawing-room, hot, dust-stained and angry; and when her ladyship appeared his irritability burst out.

"Well! Until now I have looked upon you as a woman of sense. That telegram nearly exploded the whole business to the duke!"

"Why should the duke see it?"

"See it he did. Now for the trouble. What is the matter?" he demanded.

"My lady is packing up. She refuses to remain here longer, and, of course, we must use our authority."

"Use our authority," he sneered. "I suppose you have been using your infernal temper, woman-like! Where is your tact? A girl of Lady Elaine's spirit would submit to no living woman—not even you. It appears that I have been depending upon a broken reed!"

"What was I to do? I have tried kindness in vain, and I consider that——"

"Well, please don't employ your extraordinary considering powers again," Rivington interrupted savagely.[Pg 112] "My very life depends upon my marriage with Lady Elaine. If the duke discovers that he has been deceived I shall be a titled pauper. I lose both fortunes—while you will find a resting place from your labors in one of her majesty's prisons. It is a serious offense to purchase thousands of pounds' worth of jewelry on credit and to pawn it the same day."

Lady Gaynor was deathly pale.

"Now," he continued, a little more calmly, "tell me exactly what has taken place."

"If you persist in your taunts," she told him, "I may have something to say. As for this girl, I tell you that it is impossible to manage her, and the marriage will have to be forced. Money will do anything. I repeat that I have tried kindness in vain, and because I remonstrated with her this morning she flew into a temper, and declared her intention of quitting the Lodge at once. As her legal guardians we must exercise our authority."

He did not reply immediately, but continued to pace the floor. At last he came to a standstill, and said:

“Lady Elaine will not be coerced into anything, and it was a mistake to bring her here at all. Your suggestion of compelling her to suitably respond to the marriage lines must only be adopted as a last desperate resort. I do not even wish to hear you hint at the means to be employed at present, because, independently of what the marriage means to me, I honestly love the earl’s daughter.”

Lady Gaynor laughed doubtfully.

“Now,” continued Rivington, without deigning to notice the interruption, “for the present I shall assume active control of affairs, and Lady Elaine will be permitted to follow her own devices. I shall even advise her to hasten her departure, and constitute myself her guide and protector. Apparently you and I will be upon very bad terms. In this way I shall enlist her confidence, and[Pg 113] also keep her in sight. If my plan fails, well, then we must have recourse to something which requires the nerve of a bad woman to formulate and successfully accomplish.”

“Thank you!” said Lady Gaynor.

[Pg 114]

CHAPTER XVI.

THE VISCOUNT’S SCHEME.

Rivington scribbled the following in his notebook, and for a minute reflected intently:

My Dear Lady Elaine—I have just reached here to learn that there has been some unpleasantness between you and Lady Gaynor. She evidently imagined that I should sanction any course she was pleased to take, but has been woefully disappointed. I quite agree with you that the Lodge cannot longer be your home, and my active advice, if required, is at your service. If you will see me for a few minutes I shall be happy to assist you to the utmost of my limited powers, without in the last interfering with your freedom of thought and action.

Very sincerely yours,
Henry Rivington.

He tore the leaf containing the message out of his notebook, and handed it to Lady Gaynor to read, remarking:

“This merely foreshadows my plan of campaign. In any event, I am determined to make Lady Elaine the future Duchess of Rothwell, and the sooner the ceremony takes place the better for me and for you. My uncle refuses to make a new will until Lady Elaine is either my wife or he is convinced that nothing less than a miracle can prevent her being so. He is not content with my mere word or printed notices in the newspapers. He wishes confirmation from my lady’s own lips. So far, luck has ever been attendent upon me. I shall now pose in the character of the chivalrous but unhappy lover. A week or two will decide me upon its ultimate success. If the plan does not work, I shall require your services again,[Pg 115] Lady Gaynor, and the business will have to be put in hand with expedition. I care not what means are employed.”

“I will be in readiness, viscount,” her ladyship replied, with an evil smile. “Lady Elaine has made an enemy of me, and to punish her I am resolved that she shall be your wife.”

She laughed maliciously.

“After that she will always be in my power, more or less.”

He pretended not to notice this ambiguous speech, but said:

“I shall deliver my written message in person. It is impossible that I may not have an opportunity of speaking to you again to-day, but I will keep you alive regarding my movements.”

“*Au revoir!* my dear boy. I think that there is nothing more to say. You will make me out a monster of iniquity to her ladyship, and your own virtues will shine with luminous brightness against my dark background. You have a subtle brain, and the scheme would work admirably with any ordinary girl, but Lady Elaine Seabright is not an ordinary girl. Unfortunately, viscount, you are not an Apollo, like the recreant Sir Harold, for instance, and I am afraid that the part you have chosen does not suit you. The stage villain is more in your line!”

The viscount did not relish her raillery, but with a bow and a muttered good-morning he left the room in quest of Lady Elaine, conscious that the butler was ever on the alert.

In answer to his gentle knock the door was opened by Nina, and the viscount’s quick eyes saw that the girl was flushed and trembling with excitement. The floor was littered with hastily-packed boxes.

“Can I see your mistress, Nina?” he asked, softly and kindly. “Nay, I have no wish to intrude, and will be[Pg 116] here again in ten minutes’ time. Meanwhile, give Lady Elaine this note from me.”

The maid took the scrap of paper from him, and when he returned in the time he had named he was immediately admitted by Nina.

Lady Elaine was standing in the middle of the shabby little sitting-room, his note between her fingers, and at sight of her graceful, haughty figure and beautiful face, the viscount’s heart throbbed with its old passion.

He stepped forward with what appeared to be warm impulsiveness, and gently took one of her hands between his.

“I have heard something of the annoyance to which you have been subjected by that vulgar woman downstairs. Indeed, she telegraphed to me,” he added, with an air of candor, “and the result has not been pleasant to her. I believe that we have good and sufficient grounds to cause her co-guardianship to be rescinded. I applaud your determination to leave this wretched house, and only hope that I may be permitted to help you in some way.”

“You are very kind, viscount,” Lady Elaine said, gratefully. “I scarcely knew how you would view my conduct.”

“You could not believe that I would oppose you, Lady Elaine?” he said, softly. “I had no hand in bringing you here. I had no knowledge even of the late earl’s choice of executors until it was too late to offer a protest upon my own behalf at least. The position naturally prejudices me in your eyes.”

“No! No!” the girl interjected.

“As for Lady Gaynor, she merits nothing but my contempt. She is a violent and dangerous woman. This house is nightly the resort of gamblers, and it is wonderful the influence that she obtained over the late earl. I have myself lost fabulous sums of money among the card-sharpers[Pg 117] who frequent the place. I make this confession with shame, but Lady Gaynor and I are open foes at last!”

“I believe that I have misjudged you, and I am sorry, viscount,” said Elaine, a little penitently.

It was so sweet to have a friend at this unlooked-for moment—a friend in one whom she had feared would be an enemy!

“You are nearly ready to leave!” he observed, glancing around.

“I shall be quite ready in an hour.”

“And may I ask whither? I would like to take you to my uncle’s place—Rothwell Abbey—but I do not wish it to appear that I have any hand in shaping your course. At the same time I should like to help you.”

“I intended going direct to a London hotel—I and my maid,” Elaine said, “and then seeking for a pretty home somewhere in the country. I have a few hundred pounds in money, and there is my private fortune. Now that I have your friendship, viscount, I know that no bar will be put against my deriving full benefit from that. You see my plans are very simple,” she added, pathetically; “I have no desire to meet those friends who have nothing but pity for me, and my soul sickens at the thought of gayety.”

“I quite agree with all you say; indeed, nothing could be better under existing circumstances,” the viscount said. “I will order the carriage to be ready in an hour. The luggage had better precede us to the railway station, if it is ready. Allow me to tighten the straps.”

He busied himself for some minutes, then asked if lunch should be sent upstairs.

“No, thank you,” Lady Elaine said. “I shall not breathe freely until I am out of this house forever. I shall never forget your kindness, viscount.”

[Pg 118]

There were tears in her eyes and in her voice, and Rivington felt that his cause was half won.

“I will accompany you to London,” he said. “A man is useful in looking after things, and I may be able to assist you in the choice of a house. I know every inch of the suburbs. I would suggest a pretty villa in the vicinity of Hyde Park—a sort of combination of country and town, where people mind their own business. The ordinary country village is a perfect hotbed of malicious gossip.”

“I am sure that I shall be content to leave the selection in your hands,” Lady Elaine replied, thoughtfully. “And it will, perhaps, be wise to be within easy reach of Mr. Worboys.”

“The late family lawyer!” the viscount exclaimed, incautiously, but added quickly, “yes, and you may have need of his services soon. Lady Elaine, at present I stand between you and a vast fortune. You know what my hopes have been and ever will be, but I want you to acquit me of having any hand in that infamous will! It is impossible to

alter it, but I am not so mean a cur that I will permit you to lose one shilling because I suffer the keenest disappointment that it is possible for man to endure and live!"

She looked at him gratefully, and he pressed her hand in silence.

"There," he concluded, "I will send the cart to the door for your luggage, and find that prying footman something to do. You have selected your train, I presume?"

"Two-thirty from Ashbourne," Elaine said.

"Very well," he went on, consulting his watch, "the carriage shall be waiting at two."

He bowed gracefully, and left the room with the feelings of a victor.

"I shall win her," he thought. "Aye, in a canter, I[Pg 119] verily believe. Sympathy and kindness appeal to her haughty soul."

At two o'clock Lady Elaine, Viscount Rivington and Nina, the maid, left the Lodge in Lady Gaynor's rickety brougham, and were driven to Ashbourne station.

"It happears to me," remarked the butler to the footman, "that there's a good chance of our getting the back wages, but hang me if I can see the drift of the little game."

[Pg 120]

CHAPTER XVII.

THERESA'S LOVE.

Never until Sir Harold Annesley came into her life had Theresa Hamilton understood the ecstatic joy of living. The songs of the birds were tuned afresh, the flowers took on a newer bloom, and the bees that buzzed in the blossoming garden told but one story, and its name was Love—beautiful Love!

In a few short weeks she had changed from a girl into a woman, and the soft, happy light that shone in her glorious, Southern eyes told its own story.

And now that Mr. Hamilton had given his consent to Sir Harold's wooing, he became aware that Theresa wanted new frocks, and things of which most girls are proud.

One day he called her to him.

"My darling," he said, kissing her tenderly, "in one way I have been very unkind to you, and you have never once complained."

She looked at him wonderingly.

“You do not understand me, Theresa?”

“No, father; because I do not know the meaning of unkindness. You have ever striven hard to teach me all those accomplishments that are so essential to women of refinement. I never knew their value until——”

She hesitated, and he asked:

“Until when, Theresa?”

“Until Sir Harold expressed his pleasure and surprise,” she replied, blushing vividly and burying her face on his shoulder.

“Theresa,” her father went on, “I will tell you how I[Pg 121] have been unkind, though my motives in all things concerning you have been actuated by my keen desire to leave you in some way provided for. Have you ever wanted nicer frocks and boots, and all those little fineries that add a charm to woman’s dress?”

“No, but I should like them now,” she replied, naïvely, “only that I know we are poor.”

“Then you shall have them,” he promised her, with a sparkle of triumph in his eyes. “I have a little money put away, Theresa—a little hoard of gold which I have saved for you. What do you say to going with me to one of the big towns and choosing all that you require?”

She clapped her hands gleefully. “I wonder what Sir Harold will think of me then,” she laughed.

It was always Sir Harold first with her now, and her father smiled indulgently.

“Well, Theresa, is it settled? I am feeling better to-day than I have for years. A burden seems to have been lifted from about me.”

“Oh, father, I am so happy! Is it much money that you have saved—very much?”

“Enough for present needs, Theresa, and I have dreamed of buying this little house in which to spend the evening of my life, but it may not be needed now.”

He looked wistfully from the window, adding: “How strange are Thy ways, O Providence! * * * Well, Theresa, we must start early, and for a few hours leave Sir Harold to his flowers and books.”

The girl ran about the house like a happy child. A new world was opening to her, filled with unexpected treasures, as beautiful even as the stories of fairydom.

Mr. Hamilton took his daughter to a town called Farnwell, and left her in the hands of a firm of *costumiers*, while he made other purchases. He spent his money freely, and it seemed to afford him infinite satisfaction.[Pg 122] A further visit to Farnwell was made a few days later, followed by several large parcels which were delivered by the local carrier.

The next day was Sunday, and, after the midday meal, Sir Harold was startled by a vision of beauty that suddenly appeared before him. It was Theresa in one of her new frocks—a perfect-fitting dress of creamy, shimmering stuff, a coral necklet round her ivory throat, and a bunch of scarlet poppies in her hair.

"Theresa!" gasped Sir Harold. "Surely not. Oh, how lovely you are, little one!"

"Do you think so? I am so glad if you are pleased!"

Mr. Hamilton was looking on, and a deep sigh escaped him.

"It is her mother over again," he said, in a half-whisper. "I never noticed it before. The likeness is almost fatal. They would know her anywhere!"

He shuddered, and his face blanched. But with Sir Harold his darling would be safe!

He watched them into the garden, Theresa looking trustfully up at the man she loved, and her happy laughter ringing in his ears.

"I never knew the meaning of real happiness until now," she was saying to the young baronet; "my father has always told me that it was illusive, and the mere imaginings of the poets and romancists."

"But it is real, Theresa, is it not? We have proved it to be so," replied the baronet.

"How could it be otherwise when we love so well?" she whispered.

He did not reply; he was thinking what a pleasant duty it was to take care of this lovely child, who lived wholly and solely for him.

"As my wife, Theresa, you will some day be one of the highest ladies in the land," he said.

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"I shall be one of the proudest and happiest, Harold. I covet no greater honor than to be by your side in a cottage or a palace."

"We will live abroad for a few years," he went on, "until my memory is fully restored. Then I can return to the home of my ancestors without fear."

“And if you should ever meet and recognize the Lady Elaine?” she asked him, her face paling at the thought.

“It is hardly likely,” he laughed. “I must have hated her when I went away—hated myself for my folly. She will never cross my path again.”

They sat down in the little arbor side by side, but Theresa would talk and think of nothing but love. Love was her eternal theme. She heard it among the leaves, and in the stream that trickled behind the garden. She heard it in the song of the birds and in the drone of the bees.

“If you did not love me, Harold, I should die,” she said. “I could almost wish that the few years you have forgotten would never return again. Have you ever heard the Romaic song which tells of the deathless agony of slighted love? Listen, Harold. Its burden has fascinated me:

Ah, Love was never yet without

The pang, the agony, the doubt,

Which rends my heart with ceaseless sigh,

While day and night roll darkling by.

Without one friend to bear my woe,

I faint, I die, beneath the blow;

That love had arrows well I knew;

Alas! I find them poison’d, too!

Birds yet in freedom shun the net

Which love around your haunts hath set;

Or, circled by his fatal fire,

Your hearts shall burn, your hope expire.

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Who ne’er has loved, and loved in vain,

Can neither feel nor pity pain.

The cold repulse, the look askance,

The lightning of Love's angry glance.

My curdling blood, my maddening brain,

In silent anguish I sustain;

And still thy heart, without partaking

One pang, exults, while mine is breaking.

Pour me the poison; fear not thou!

Thou canst not murder more than now;

I've lived to curse my natal day,

And love, that thus can lingering slay!

She stopped with a sob, and flung her arms about Sir Harold's neck, a passion of tears raining from her eyes.

"Poor little Theresa," he said, tenderly; "but how foolish you are to give way to such fears. Am I not near you—shall I not be ever near to protect you?"

With a long, fluttering sigh, she nestled her head upon his shoulder and was content.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

SIR HAROLD'S WALK TO FARNWELL.

"Sir Harold," Mr. Hamilton said, a day or two later, "I have engaged a woman-servant to live in the house. She is old and deaf, and will notice nothing in particular if we simply call you Mr. Harold. I have known her for some years in connection with the laundry work, and as her husband is lately dead, she is very glad of a home. Now that it is settled that Theresa is to be your wife, we must take better care of her."

"I am glad that you have mentioned this, Mr. Hamilton," Sir Harold replied, "because I want to talk with you about our future. This idle life is growing a little tiresome, and I should like to travel. Theresa loves me, and relies upon me so much, that I do not see why the wedding should be long delayed."

"She is very young yet," faltered Hamilton.

“Nineteen—is she not? And I am nearly thirty, though I have the feelings of a boy,” laughed Sir Harold. “As the autumn will soon be upon us, I intend asking your consent to an early marriage, so that the winter may be spent in Nice, or some similar place. Of course, you would accompany us if you chose to do so, but I do not anticipate returning to England until I can take possession of that which is mine with unimpaired faculties.”

“I am afraid, with all my fears and fancies, that I should be a sort of death’s-head at the feast,” replied Hamilton, a little mournfully. “I hate parting with my Theresa, but she is safer with you. As your wife, the enemy may never suspect whom she really is. If it pleases you—if it pleases Theresa, my dear boy—I am[Pg 126] agreeable to all that you may do and desire. But for myself, I shall remain here. I have enough money to buy the place—the money I have saved for Theresa, and I think that the evening of my life may be spent in comparative happiness now that I know my beloved child is well provided for. Treat her tenderly, Sir Harold, for she is like a delicate flower, that would droop and die if neglected or deprived of the sunshine of your love.”

“God helping me, I ever will,” the baronet fervently responded.

“And now,” continued Mr. Hamilton, “what of your business affairs? Between us—Colonel Greyson and me—everything can be managed until you feel disposed to assume the reins of control. I have had a letter from the colonel to-day. He is in Switzerland, and inquires anxiously about you. His letter contains news that surprises me, and we must really try and keep better informed with that which is happening about us. The Earl of Seabright recently met with an accident, and is dead.”

“Indeed!” remarked Sir Harold, indifferently. “I endeavored to become interested in the *Daily Telegraph* you brought home last Saturday, but its very strangeness bewildered me. I felt like a man who had been asleep for half a century when I tried to connect the politics I remembered and the politics of to-day.”

“Well, what do you think of my proposal?” continued Hamilton; “you will require funds while abroad, and who so reliable as myself in all that interests you? Besides, the occupation will be of benefit to me, for when you and Theresa are gone, I shall be a lonely old man.”

“I am grateful to you,” the young man said, heartily; “no better arrangement could possibly be made.”

“I am glad that you think so, and, as I have a letter of introduction from the colonel to his London bankers, I[Pg 127] will present it to-day. It is of no use leaving everything until the last moment, and you will be wanting money soon.”

“Yes,” was the thoughtful rejoinder. “You may draw a few hundreds on my behalf, and enter into arrangements with the colonel to let me have five thousand pounds in a month’s time. I suppose that I have plenty of funds, and I must make Theresa a handsome wedding present. You can explain, if you like, that I am going to be married!”

He laughed pleasantly.

“It shall be as you say,” Mr. Hamilton told him. “And now, if you will excuse me, Harold, I will go and dress, as I want to catch an early train. Our new servant will arrive by and by, and Theresa will look after her.”

An hour later Mr. Hamilton was gone, and after a little lover-like talk with Theresa, Sir Harold strolled into the garden. Wet or fine, he rarely was to be found anywhere else. The low-ceilinged cottage seemed to envelop him. He could not breathe within its close walls.

There had been a heavy fall of rain in the night, and the leaves were still dripping, with a sound that irritated his nerves.

He had been provided with plenty of books and cigars; but neither afforded him any pleasure now, and he wandered out of the garden into the lane beyond.

How many weeks had he been confined within the cottage and its environs? Six or seven? He could not remember exactly, and now the idea for viewing the country beyond seized upon him like an inspiration.

If he should chance to meet people who remembered him, what did it matter? He was a free agent. But there was little likelihood of that, and he strode away, interested in every new object that met his view.

When a sense of weariness began to creep over him,[Pg 128] he knew that he must have walked half-a-dozen miles. He looked at his watch. It was eleven when he left the cottage, and now the hands pointed to the hour of one.

Half-a-mile away there was a town perched upon the side of a hill.

“I will get refreshments there,” he thought, “and then hasten back. Theresa will wonder what has become of me.”

He went into the town, and pulled his hat over his eyes like a man who has committed some crime. The people whom he met stared curiously after him. His was no common, everyday figure.

At last he turned into a public house, and, walking into a little parlor, the door of which was held invitingly open by a trim-looking maid, he called for a glass of ale and some biscuits.

“This is Farnwell, is it not?” he presently inquired.

“Yes, sir,” replied the girl.

He was about to express his astonishment at the number of alterations that had taken place in an amazingly short space of time, when he remembered his accident.

“I have not been here for a long time,” he explained, “and everything seems quite strange. Who is the landlord now?”

“Mr. Fletcher, sir.”

“Fletcher? Oh, I do not remember him. I suppose that the house has recently changed hands?”

“Not for ten years, sir,” the maid replied.

“Of course; I had forgotten my long absence. A very nice and quiet town, is it not?”

He turned to a newspaper that lay near him, hoping that the girl would take the hint and retire; but it was not often that so handsome a gentleman talked to her, and she endeavored to continue the conversation.

“Yes, very quiet,” she said; “rather too quiet to my[Pg 129] liking, sir, though, of course, we do get a bit of sensation sometimes in connection with the gentry. Now, the best bit for years is the disappearance of Sir Harold Annesley, and everybody is talking about it.”

Fortunately for Sir Harold, another customer came in, and he hastily finished his beer.

His thoughts reverted to Theresa, and he regretted that he had left her without a word about his intentions.

He jumped up, said “Good-morning” to the buxom maid, and left the house.

He strode rapidly through the town, unaware that he was being followed by a spare little man, whose face betrayed emotions of the most violent and complex kind.

Once out of the town, Sir Harold’s long legs took quicker and longer strides, and the little man began to run. He panted painfully for a little while, and then cried:

“Master! Master!”

Sir Harold swung round, and eyed the man wonderingly.

“Well?” he demanded. “I am afraid that you have made some mistake, my good fellow.”

“Don’t you know me, Sir Harold?” cried the man. “I’m Stimson, your valet. You left me to go to London, and I followed the next day with all the luggage, and have never seen you since.”

“I really don’t know you, Stimson; I am very sorry, and I wish that you had not met me.”

“Oh, Sir Harold, I thought that you were dead. I never did believe what they said about your running away. I knew you too well.”

“That is what they say, is it?” Sir Harold said. “Well, I am glad of it. I have no desire to undeceive them, whoever ‘they’ may be.”

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Stimson stood watching anxiously every expression of his master’s face.

“I will tell you that which very few people know, Stimson—I fell from the train at Tenterden on that fatal day, and had ten years of my life utterly obliterated. That is why I do not recognize you. I am told that I shall soon be all right again, and there is only one other of my old friends in the secret—Colonel Greyson.”

“Oh, master, it is good to hear your voice again!” was the valet’s hysterical rejoinder. “You want me again, don’t you, Sir Harold? You said that I should always remain with you.”

“I am ready to keep my word, Stimson, because I am really in need of a valet. I am to be married soon, and intend going abroad immediately, to stay until my memory is fully restored.”

The valet stared at him doubtfully, and blankly said:

“Married, Sir Harold?”

“Yes, to the daughter of the man who saved my intellect, if not my life. I never want you to refer to the past, Stimson. That is over and done with—at least, that portion which brought me so much sorrow. I understand that I was infatuated with a cold-hearted, beautiful flirt, who is engaged to some other fellow already. There, that is done with. You may accompany me now, but I rely upon your absolute secrecy. I am not staying far from here, and you will be very useful, for my wardrobe is limited to what I have on my back!”

“The luggage is still at the London hotel, Sir Harold, and I waited there for you until I was penniless. Shall I fetch it away?” the valet asked.

“We will talk about that later, as I wish to arouse no suspicion. To everybody, for a time, I am to be plain Mr. Harold.”

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“Yes, master; I shall not forget,” the half-hysterical Stimson replied.

Theresa was watching for her lover, and the dark rings under her eyes told of the anxiety she had endured.

The appearance of a stranger frightened her, and Sir Harold drew her aside, whispering:

“Poor little girl! How thoughtless of me to leave you so long without one word of explanation. But I did not intend going so far, Theresa, and then, my old valet recognized me, and I have engaged him to go with us on our wedding tour. I can see that he is trustworthy, and he is half-frantic with joy. Is there room for him in this little nest? If not, we must find him lodgings somewhere until we go away.”

“I think that we can manage, Harold,” Theresa said, happy tears standing in her eyes. “Oh, I was so frightened when I could not find you. I am always dreaming that I have lost you!”

“There is not much fear of that, darling,” he said, laughingly, and pressing a kiss to her lips.

By the time Mr. Hamilton returned from London a room had been put to rights for the valet, the resources of the cottage being taxed to their utmost.

The visit to the metropolis had been successful in every way, and the evening was spent in writing a somewhat lengthy letter to Colonel Greyson, wherein Sir Harold’s arrangements for the immediate future were fully set forth.

It was nearly midnight when Sir Harold retired, and he wished Hamilton an affectionate “Good-night!” saying, “You have overdone yourself to-day. Do not sit up too long.”

“No, Harold; I have a few old papers to destroy. I shall not be many minutes.”

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The young man went up to his room, which was directly over the one in which he had left Mr. Hamilton.

For a little while he heard the rustling of papers, then a sudden silence, followed by the opening of a door.

Five—ten minutes passed, and there was not a sound.

Slipping into his clothes again, Sir Harold stepped downstairs, and Mr. Hamilton was apparently asleep. The young man spoke to him, but there was no reply. Then he ran and shook him. The head dropped forward, and one glance revealed that he was dead—the hanging lower jaw, the glazing eyes, filled with unutterable horror, and the stiffening hands.

"My God!" gasped Sir Harold. "Poor Theresa!"

He lifted the poor old man to a sofa, and a scrap of paper dropped from the nerveless fingers, bearing these words:

Tracked at last, Lambert Egerton, assassin of the Count Crispi, of blessed memory. It is useless to evade us longer. Your doom is sealed! Your life and the life of the child of the false Theresa Ludovci are demanded by the Brotherhood. Blood for blood! Prepare, for at any moment the avenger may be upon you! You are spared a little longer, so that you may understand the tortures of the doomed!

The writing was a mere scrawl, and the spelling and grammar proclaimed the author to be an illiterate foreigner.

For a minute Sir Harold stared at the paper aghast, then darting through the open doorway, he plunged into the garden in quest of the man or woman the shock of whose presence had deprived Mr. Hamilton of life.

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CHAPTER XIX.

A FUNERAL AND A WEDDING.

In every bush, and tree, and lurking shadow the young baronet probed, but without avail. The evil messenger was gone, and he now had to break the awful news to poor Theresa.

He stood for a few minutes with his hands clasped to his throbbing temples. Then he hurried back to the cottage, and after taking one hasty glance about him, his first care was to destroy the fatal scrawl.

This much accomplished, he crept softly to Stimson's room, hastily roused the man, and sent him for the nearest doctor.

"Mr. Hamilton is dead," he whispered to the horrified valet; "has died of heart failure! To me it was not unexpected, as he predicted it only a few days since; but we must have the independent opinion of a doctor to save trouble."

"Yes, Sir Harold. I know Tenterden very well. The parish doctor lives next door to the rectory," Stimson said.

In a few minutes he was gone, and Sir Harold was confronted by the awkwardness of his position. There was only one thing for him to do now, and that was to marry Theresa at once. He would be then her natural and lawful protector.

"Stimson shall call upon the rector of Tenterden," he decided, "and I will interview him here. I see no reason why I should hide my identity. Let people think and say what they will. No, I will be married as Sir Harold Annesley immediately after the funeral, and we will go[Pg 134] abroad at once! As for this accursed vendetta, I will leave no stone unturned to bring the fiends to justice!"

The doctor came and viewed the body. He was satisfied that death was the result of heart disease. He listened to the relation of Mr. Hamilton's unusual exertions during the day, and was satisfied. An ordinary certificate would be promptly granted.

When he was gone, Sir Harold and Stimson carried the body upstairs, and laid it on the bed wherein Mr. Hamilton had slept for many years.

Then the house became silent again, and Theresa was sleeping, a happy smile upon her face and Sir Harold's name upon her lips.

The morning broke dull and gray. There was a wet mist everywhere, and the birds that loved to carol in the sunshine were voiceless.

The deaf servant came downstairs at an early hour, and was surprised to find Sir Harold already about and talking earnestly to his man.

When Theresa appeared, she noticed the worn look upon her lover's face, and he took her gently aside.

"You are not well, Harold!" she said in sudden alarm. "You have heard bad news!"

“Theresa, my poor Theresa, I have heard bad news, and I know not how best to tell it to you.”

He felt that he was blundering, and his heart smote him when her face blanched deathly white.

“My dear little girl,” he said, “come to my arms and let me hold you tight.”

“Oh, Harold, what is this that is coming upon us? Tell me that I am not to lose you!”

“Never, darling, never! You are the sweetest charge that man ever had. You shall never leave me, Theresa!”

“But this trouble—this bad news. Oh, Harold, do not torture me!” she sobbed.

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“Theresa, cannot you guess? Your father is an old man and——”

“Ah! my father is ill! My poor, dear father. Let me go to him, Harold. Take me to him now.”

He led her to the chamber of the dead man, but paused at the door, saying:

“Theresa, he will never speak again. He died last night, and the doctor has already been here.”

He never forgot the faint moan that left her anguished heart. For an instant she reeled, then glided into the death chamber, and kissed the cold face, her eyes tearless, her breath hot almost as a furnace.

After this she did not speak for a long time, but was never far from her lover.

Stimson was very busy all day, and several strange men moved about the house. The funeral was to be hurried. Sir Harold had strong reasons for this. He wanted it over and done with, and both the rector and the doctor were of the same opinion when he had explained his somewhat anomalous position.

The clergyman was deeply interested in his story. He had heard of Sir Harold Annesley, and while he believed that it was wise to go abroad immediately after the marriage, he did not quite approve of so much secrecy.

“It is an extraordinary experience,” he said, “and the reawakening will be a mental shock, Sir Harold. I once read of an accident to a bricklayer—some heavy substance was dropped down and struck his head, utterly destroying his memory. He fancied he was a child again. Twenty years elapsed before he recovered one month of what he

had forgotten. His case was similar to yours in many respects, only that he remained in the care of his friends. Have you no one—no lady friend—-who you could send for? Miss Hamilton needs some one, Sir Harold. Even[Pg 136] a fond lover cannot supply all wants. A little womanly sympathy from one who is related to you would be a real blessing to the lonely child in this trying hour."

"I can think of no one, except my cousin, Margaret Nugent. I do not remember much of her, but my valet says that we were good friends until the last—that Miss Nugent was with me within an hour of my leaving Annesley Park."

"Excellent!" the rector said, rubbing his hands briskly together. "Now, with your permission, Sir Harold, I will run down to Ashbourne and see Miss Nugent. It is a duty you owe to her to let her know something of your true position, and if you have confidence in my tact, I will undertake to prepare her carefully, and see that no one else hears one word of the story."

Sir Harold hesitated a moment, then he said: "I am very grateful to you, Mr. Pembrose, and accept your kind offer. I clearly see that Theresa will be the better for it."

So Mr. Pembrose went to Craythorne that very day, and in the afternoon Margaret Nugent arrived at the cottage.

Her first thought was that an objection to the marriage might be raised, but when she had seen Theresa and talked with Sir Harold, she knew that such a proceeding was quite beyond her control.

"You have become a very beautiful woman, Margaret," he said, "and you and I were always good friends. I shall never forget this kindness. I suppose that the rector has told you all?"

"Yes, Harold."

Her lips were hot and dry, and there was a look of unutterable longing in her eyes. It seemed that all her scheming and wrongdoing had been in vain. She was to lose him, after all.

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"There is one other thing that you must know, so that you may guard my Theresa with greater care."

He bent closer.

“Listen, Margaret, and you shall hear that which must be forever locked in your heart—the story of an infamous vendetta. I would not have Theresa know one word of it for all that life is worth.”

He then told her the story that he had heard from Mr. Hamilton, and the final cause of the old man’s sudden death.

“And these assassins may be near us now?” she whispered. “Oh, Harold, it is terrible!”

“As my wife, Theresa may lose her identity. I shall guard her with constant care, and if I can succeed in making an example of one of the fiends, I will show him no mercy!”

For hours after this recital Margaret Nugent was very thoughtful, and her face was not pleasant to look upon.

The funeral of John Hamilton took place the next day, and when the last sad rites had been administered to the dead, Sir Harold gently told Theresa of his wishes concerning an immediate marriage.

“As my wife, darling, I can care for you, and shield you from every storm. I have made all arrangements for the wedding to take place next Tuesday, and, in the meantime, my Cousin Margaret will advise you concerning the clothing you will require, and other matters of which a man knows nothing. We will leave the servant woman in charge of the cottage, and go to London. There a suitable maid can be engaged and our tour begun.”

“If it pleases you, Harold, I shall be content,” Theresa said, pitifully. “The pain is still big at my heart, and now you are my all in all.”

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He kissed her tenderly, continuing:

“And after the wedding Miss Nugent is willing to remain with us until we are ready to go abroad. I am sure you must find her assistance and sympathy of great value.”

“I had rather she left us after the wedding day, Harold,” Theresa said. “I do not think she really likes me.”

“Nonsense! Why should you think so?” he asked.

“I don’t know, Harold. Still, I cannot get rid of the feeling.”

There was a quiet little wedding a few days later at Tenterden Church, and in the afternoon the bride and bridegroom left for London, accompanied by Miss Nugent and Stimson, the valet.

A splendid suite of apartments was engaged at the Victoria Hotel, and Margaret was of great help to Theresa.

“You must try to like me a little, Theresa,” she said, when they were alone for a few minutes. “I felt disappointed at first, because I did not believe that Harold could really know his own mind. And then, you know, Lady Elaine Seabright is a very dear friend of mine.”

“But she was unworthy of my darling!” Theresa replied, quickly. “I do not wish to hear her name again!”

“No! no! my dear! It was all a misunderstanding, though, of course, it would never do to tell Sir Harold now! Lady Elaine loves him still; indeed, she is somewhere in London, and I dread a meeting between her and my cousin.”

There was a wicked light in Margaret’s downcast eyes when she noted the deadly pallor of Theresa’s lovely face.

“Why should you tell me these things?” she said, piteously. “Ah, Lady Elaine never loved Sir Harold as I[Pg 139] love him! He has told me many times that I am all the world to him!”

“But when his memory returns, Theresa,” Margaret said, “you must be prepared.”

And every word she uttered was as painful as a knife-thrust in poor Theresa’s heart.

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CHAPTER XX.

THE AWAKENING BEGINS.

Although Margaret Nugent had strongly advocated as short a stay in London as possible, she placed every obstacle in the way of the Annesleys’ speedy departure.

“Theresa is so young, so inexperienced,” Sir Harold had told her, “that I leave the engagement of her maid in your hands unreservedly.”

So Miss Nugent had sent advertisements to the newspapers, and entered into correspondence with a dozen or more ladies desiring the post of maid to Lady Annesley, but there appeared to be something wrong with them all.

In the meantime, Sir Harold devoted himself assiduously to his beautiful young wife. Her pale face, almost listless manner and heavy eyes were a source of constant uneasiness to him.

"My darling," he said one morning, "you must not dwell so much upon the grief that has been caused by the loss of your poor father. I cannot afford to have my little one fade before my eyes in this way."

"I shall be better when we are out of London, Harold," Theresa said. "I have heard of the cruel things that go on daily in this great city, and I am afraid."

It was a strange speech, and he glanced at her keenly.

"Afraid of what, Theresa?" he asked.

"Oh, my darling, afraid of losing you!"

He laughed now. The idea was so utterly absurd.

"Sweetheart," he said, "do you imagine that I shall be kidnaped? Poor, imaginative Theresa! While this seemingly interminable business of engaging a maid is in progress, you shall accompany me everywhere I go. I[Pg 141] quite expected that we should have been in France by this time. Colonel Greyson has arranged with me to meet us in Paris."

"I wish that we could start to-night, Harold," Theresa said.

"And I echo that wish, darling. Do you know if Margaret has yet decided upon a suitable person?"

"No, Harold; I think that we might have managed our affairs much better alone. For some reason, Miss Nugent wishes to delay our departure. She objects to haste of any kind."

"It is only because she feels the responsibility of suiting you in every way, Theresa," Sir Harold hastened to assure her. "I think that Margaret has been very kind to us."

Theresa shuddered.

"I do not like her, Harold," she said. "It may seem a silly prejudice, but I cannot get rid of the feeling that your cousin is our enemy."

For a moment Sir Harold was inclined to anger. An exclamation of impatience escaped him, and the young wife never forgot his look of annoyance.

“Theresa, I cannot listen to such folly. Margaret Nugent our enemy? Why should she be our enemy? It is unjust—cruel!”

He turned and left her, and Theresa shed bitter tears. But in one minute he was back again, and soothing her with tender words and caresses.

“Forgive me, dear one,” he cried. “I spoke hastily, and I am sorry. I will speak to Margaret, and we will not wait for the maid if it is so difficult to find a suitable one. The bustle and whirl of the streets makes me irritable, and lately I have suffered excruciating pains in my head at times. It annoys me when I am accosted by people of whom I know nothing, and this occurred twice[Pg 142] yesterday. Fortunately, this is the time of year when London is comparatively empty, or I should be afraid to go out at all. I believe that my memory will soon assume its proper functions,” he added, reflectively. “I distinctly remember many things this morning which have been a blank.”

She clutched at his arm in sudden terror.

“It will be better if we leave London soon, Harold,” she said. “A maid can be picked up anywhere, and as I have never been used to the luxury, the loss will not cause me any inconvenience. I dread that you may be discovered here by old friends, who will make you forget me!”

He kissed away her tears, and she added, plaintively:

“I should like to live in my mother’s country, Harold. You cannot think how I long to see the blue skies of Italy.”

He shuddered a little, and replied, huskily:

“Yes—yes, Theresa! It is only natural. Now I will speak to Margaret, and this very night we will shake the dust of London from our feet!”

She seemed greatly relieved, and smiled at him through her tears, murmuring:

“How good you are to me, my husband, and how selfish I am!”

“The duty of my life, Theresa, is to love and care for you,” he said. “I believe that Margaret is at the door—yes; and I will speak to her now.”

They were in a private sitting-room, and Miss Nugent’s voice was asking if she might enter.

For reply, Sir Harold opened the door, and Margaret saw at once that something was wrong.

“I hope that I am not intruding,” she remarked, sweetly. “Dear Theresa is not well?”

“No, Margaret. Lady Annesley is naturally upset by[Pg 143] her recent bereavement, and the bustle of busy London is too much for her. I purpose going away to-night, maid or no maid, and you must not take this sudden decision unkindly.”

“My dear cousin! how can you speak so? I am here for your pleasure alone,” Miss Nugent said.

“I believe you, Margaret,” replied Sir Harold. “And now I will leave you two together while I hunt up Stimson and give him imperative orders. I shall probably go for a last stroll also.”

He kissed Theresa tenderly, and Margaret saw the action with jealous anger.

“He is very fond of you, Theresa,” she observed, when her cousin was gone; “but you must not be too exacting; he is already sacrificing so much for you. I suppose that it is your wish to fly from London because of Lady Elaine Seabright, and I am pleased that you think so well of my advice.”

“I do not care to discuss the matter,” Lady Annesley said, coldly. “In all things I wish to please my husband.”

“You do not like me, my lady,” was Margaret’s next shaft. “I know that you do not like me. Why is it?”

“Because you are not my friend. A woman’s instincts rarely err!” Theresa replied.

“I like your candor,” Margaret laughed, a little bitterly, “but it is a poor return for my efforts to warn you against the shipwreck of this love of yours. You profess to love my cousin, but it is a selfish love. It is this which makes me doubt you.”

“You speak in riddles, Miss Nugent,” Theresa said, angrily. “I would willingly lay down my life for my husband. My love is richer than pearls or rubies. For his sake I would willingly walk barefooted through life. I would even renounce my hopes of heaven!”

“It sounds very nice, truly,” was the sneering rejoinder;[Pg 144] “and yet because of you he carries his life in his hand. Do you wonder that I do not fall into raptures over such a sacrifice? Blood is thicker than water, Lady Annesley. You affect not to understand me, when you must well know that you and yours for all time are the victims of a secret vendetta. Your countrymen know how to hate and to stab in the

dark. Your father stole another man's bride, and the shadow of the knife for this act killed your mother. In fear Mr. Hamilton buried himself in the country to escape the fate that was sure to follow sooner or later. The executive of the vendetta visited him the night he died!"

"No—no!" gasped Theresa, terrified beyond mere words.

"Why will you seek to deceive yourself?" continued Miss Nugent, vindictively. "You know that it is true—you also know that Sir Harold, as your husband, is a marked man. He may be stabbed to death at any moment. Do you think that I, his cousin, can love you, knowing the ban that his alliance with you has placed upon him? We English do not understand these things. It is revolting."

Lady Annesley was lying back, deathly white. It seemed that all the beauty of the early September morning had suddenly been enveloped by a black ball.

"Is this true?" she whispered, hoarsely. "Yes, my heart tells me that it is true!"

"Do you mean to say that it is news to you?" demanded Margaret, with well-assumed astonishment. "Oh, Theresa, if it is so, you must not tell Sir Harold, or he will never forgive me. Promise that you will not tell him!"

"Swear that you have not lied to me, and I promise," Theresa said.

"Before Heaven, every word is truth, and I could cut out my tongue for having spoken it. Sir Harold himself[Pg 145] destroyed the written warning from the executive which threatened his own life. Oh, Lady Annesley, I shall never forgive myself for what I have done!"

"Leave me, Margaret Nugent. I never wish to look upon your face again. I hate you!"

Theresa rose, with heaving bosom and flashing eyes.

"Go," she continued, pointing to the door. "Upon that condition only will I keep silence. You have this day dealt me a blow that will be my death!"

Half-frightened, Miss Nugent left the room, and an hour later she quitted the hotel, leaving as an excuse the following, addressed to Sir Harold:

Dear Harold—An urgent telegram from mamma, who is an invalid, obliges me to run down to Ashbourne at once. Let me know of your movements, and always count upon my help if you need it. I have said good-by to Theresa.

Your affectionate cousin,
Margaret Nugent.

In the meanwhile, Annesley had given his orders to Stimson, and gone to Coutts' Bank to transact some financial business on behalf of Colonel Greyson, from whom he had received various drafts and letters of credit.

While standing at the counter, a gentleman had placed his hand familiarly upon his shoulder and ejaculated:

"Great heavens! Is that you, Sir Harold?"

"You really have the advantage of me, sir," replied the baronet, with a cold stare.

"Come, come; this will not do," the stranger continued. "You may wish to hide your identity from most people, but when you try that on with your lawyer and man of business, I think that it is time to draw the line! To refresh your memory, Sir Harold," a little sarcastically, "my name is Babbet, of the firm of Babbet & Co., and as you have not removed the management of your affairs[Pg 146] from our hands, I naturally suppose that you continue to have confidence in us. Of course, we are in communication with Colonel Greyson."

Sir Harold suddenly put his hands to his head, and reeled like a drunken man. His face turned deathly white.

"Ah, I recognize you, Babbet!" he gasped, "but the effort was awful. I have been ill, you know. Let me have fresh air."

The lawyer led him to the door, much concerned, and walked with him toward Charing Cross.

"You will see me again before leaving London?" he said.

"Yes, I will endeavor to do so," was the reply.

"Are you sure that you are able to proceed alone?"

"Quite," said Sir Harold. "My hotel is near."

They parted, but Annesley did not go to his hotel. He felt utterly bewildered, and walked in the direction of Hyde Park, where he seated himself, and bared his hot brow to the cool September breeze.

"It is all so strange, and yet so familiar," he kept murmuring. "I cannot make it out at all. I must not delay; Theresa will be waiting for me. Poor little Theresa! I am married to Theresa—or is it a dream? I am on my wedding tour, of course, but I hope that I am not going to be ill. Oh, that cruel knife is ever present! My poor little Theresa!"

He saw that two persons were approaching, and he replaced his hat. The figures were those of ladies, but they appeared to be misty and far away. He wished that they would go on, so that he could be alone. Then he was conscious that one of them gave utterance to a half-stifled scream, and cried:

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“Oh, my lady! my lady! it is Sir Harold himself!”

Again that awful throbbing made him dizzy, and he saw before him the face of an angel.

“Oh, Heaven!” he whispered, hoarsely, “am I dreaming, or is it the face of my false love, Lady Elaine?”

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CHAPTER XXI.

THE VILLA IN HYDE PARK.

The subtle, insinuating manner of Viscount Rivington completely deceived Lady Elaine. Open and honest as the sunshine of day, it was impossible for her mind to descend to the lower plane wherein his schemes had birth.

He accompanied her and her maid to London, and saw them comfortably quartered at an hotel. He it was who elected next day to escort Lady Elaine to the office of Mr. Worboys. He had no desire to know anything of her business with the old family lawyer, and he remained in the waiting-room without.

In truth, it was but a formal call, and at first Mr. Worboys waited expectantly to hear what Lady Elaine had to say.

She told him briefly of her quarrel with Lady Gaynor and Viscount Rivington’s unexpected help and sympathy.

“You can trust him?” questioned the lawyer. “Do not blind yourself to possible ulterior motives.”

Lady Elaine flushed slightly.

“The Viscount thoroughly understands that all hope in that direction—in the direction of an alliance between us—is at an end. He has even been generous enough to hint that I shall ultimately be no loser by my father’s eccentric will.”

“Ah! you surprise me, Lady Elaine; indeed you do. I am astonished that any man can so easily relinquish so great a prize as yourself and a princely income—particularly when that man is so needy as Viscount Rivington. It is not generally known, but within the last three months the Viscount’s name has been filed in bankruptcy[Pg 149] by importunate creditors, and he has only escaped a receiving order by very doubtful practices. He has made known the contents of your father’s will to several money lenders for pecuniary reasons purely, and his marriage with you means, at least, social salvation to him. You wonder how these things come to my ears? My dear child, a lawyer gets such knowledge without any seeking. I only say, be careful of Viscount Rivington.”

“I am deeply sorry for him if all this is true,” Lady Elaine said.

“And now as to your future movements,” went on Mr. Worboys.

“Yes. My maid and I will rent a small house somewhere in the suburbs—until—until—__”

“I understand what you mean. Until something lucky happens, eh?” he smiled. “Well, it appears to me that I can do little or nothing for you, Lady Elaine, but remember that I am always at your service. Let me know where you reside when you are settled, and if you require a small advance for furniture or anything of that kind, don’t go to any one else.”

“Thank you, Mr. Worboys; you are extremely kind, but I have a reserve fund amounting to a few hundreds.”

A little later the old lawyer bowed my lady out, and Viscount Rivington escorted her back to her hotel.

The next few days were so full of busy hours that Lady Elaine almost forgot her pitiful lot. The viscount managed to secure a bijou villa within half a mile of Hyde Park. It was a pretty little place, set in an acre of garden, and the whole was surrounded by a high brick wall. To add to its advantage, the villa was already furnished, and the agent who let it to the viscount proudly announced that the last occupant had been a Russian prince.

“I have taken it in my own name,” he explained to Elaine, “to save the bother of references and the needless[Pg 150] exposure consequent upon such a course. You have no idea how loth people are to have responsible business transactions exclusively with ladies. I have paid the rent three months in advance—a matter of fifty guineas, which includes all rates and taxes—so that you will not be bothered by

anybody. Here is the key to the house. Now I am leaving London for a week or two to join some friends in Scotland, but if you require anything at my hands, a telegram will promptly bring me back."

Lady Elaine did not quite like the arrangement, but it was perhaps the best that could be made under the circumstances. It almost appeared that she and her maid were living in a house to which Viscount Rivington alone had legal right. However, she paid him the amount of money he claimed to have disbursed upon her account, and thanked him warmly for the great trouble he had taken in all matters concerning herself.

"I do not think that I shall willingly trespass further upon your kindness," she told him. "My life is already mapped out, and I shall be content to spend it quietly between the four walls of yonder garden until hope breaks through the dark clouds of the future."

"Time will dull the edge of your sorrow," he said, gently, but with a sense of bitter defeat gnawing at his heart. Her very words, the mournful sadness in her tones, sounded the death knell to his hopes. "You cannot live here always—you, the loveliest girl in England—the daughter of an earl! Oh, Lady Elaine, it is impossible!"

He spoke almost passionately.

"I have no other choice—no other wish—until my lover comes back to me," she said.

The viscount turned away to hide the disappointment—the fury in his eyes.

"Good-by," he said, suddenly. "I will send you my address[Pg 151] to your new home in a few days. You will take possession at once?"

"To-morrow," replied Lady Elaine. "Nina is engaging a servant to-day."

He went away—a raging demon in his heart.

"Lady Gaynor was right," he said to himself. "Force and questionable means must be employed or I am a ruined man! But I have my bird safely caged. She cannot escape me; she shall not, by Heaven! Now have I to conciliate the vampires who seek for my heart's blood—to prove to them that Lady Elaine is under my protection—living in my house. I know that I no longer belong to myself, and that my life is a living death—all for what?—Money! Money! And when I have humbled myself to these birds of prey, whose talons are red with the blood of human hearts, I have to turn toward that old dotard—the Duke of Rothwell, and lie and fawn to him—for what?—Money! Money!"

He ground his teeth with impotent fury, sprang into a cab, and ordered the driver to take him to Oxford Circus, where we will leave him.

In the course of a few days Lady Elaine Seabright was comfortably installed in her new home, and then commenced a weary time of waiting. Two or three of the curious-minded neighbors called at the villa, but she declined to see them. The efforts of the clergyman who claimed that respective district were equally futile, and nearly three weeks passed without one word from Viscount Rivington.

Then a letter reached her from the Duke of Rothwell's country seat. The viscount professed that he had been unable to go to Scotland on account of his uncle's indisposition. She made no reply to this, and appeared to be growing thinner and whiter every day to the eyes of the watchful Nina.

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"My lady," she said at last, "I am getting frightened. It is killing you in this stifling place. You ought to go for a morning walk every day."

"Am I really looking ill, Nina?" asked Lady Elaine, listlessly. "Yes," she added, looking at herself in a mirror. "What a miserable being I shall be when my lover comes home! This will never do, Nina!"

After that Elaine and Nina were often seen in the park, and many people wondered whom the graceful and lovely girl could be.

At length another letter came from the viscount, and with it a newspaper.

This is what he wrote:

My Dear Lady Elaine—I have news for you which you may hate me for sending, but I must honestly confess that I cannot withhold it, for the very reason that it may influence you to look more favorably upon the wishes that are still dearest to my heart. Surely my patience deserves some recognition, and I shall wait in a fever of anxiety for your reply. To be brief, it is proven beyond all doubt that Sir Harold Annesley has been masquerading about the country for some time, and his eccentricities have culminated in his marriage to a young and beautiful girl, named Theresa Hamilton. The ceremony took place a few days since at Tenterden Church, and I forward to you a copy of the *Telegraph*, containing a description of the wedding. I do not wish to force my attentions upon you, but I ask you to give me hope. I care not if it is months before I may look to the happy consummation of my soul's delightful desire. I only want hope, after your most careful consideration. I love you, and shall ever love you! Till death, yours alone,

Rivington.

Lady Elaine read this extraordinary letter with the numbness of an awful despair at her heart. Hope! how could he dream of hope?

Then she opened the newspaper, and saw a paragraph ruled round with red ink that looked like blood.

It was true then—all true! She sat for an hour dimly[Pg 153] comprehending the fact that life was at last ended for her. Sir Harold was her lover no longer! Sir Harold—her darling, her king—belonged to another!

She mechanically penned a few words to the viscount, as follows:

Your letter has filled me with pain. I thought that you understood. I can give you no hope—absolutely none. I shall never marry. My love has been given, and is lost. My heart is dead.

Elaine Seabright.

She told nothing of the crushing facts to Nina until the next day, when they went for their usual walk in Hyde Park, and the girl listened in wonderment and with righteous indignation.

The letter to the viscount was posted, and they were returning homeward, when Nina noticed the figure of a man that seemed to be familiar, reclining on one of the park benches.

When they came nearer to him, the girl's eyes dilated wildly and she screamed loudly:

"Oh, my lady! my lady! It is Sir Harold himself!"

Then Lady Elaine forgot the news of his marriage, and cast herself at his feet in a paroxysm of tears.

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CHAPTER XXII.

"TO-MORROW SHALL DECIDE."

It was a trying moment—a moment never to be forgotten by Sir Harold and Lady Elaine—never to be forgotten by Nina, who was looking helplessly on.

"Not false, Harold—not false to you in word or deed!" cried Lady Elaine. "Oh, my dear love, why did you doubt me? Why were you so cruel?"

“Hush!” he whispered. “I am not yet quite clear as to your meaning. My brain is on fire. Let me think—think! All this is so strange. You do not know what has happened—you—oh! the pain is maddening! I cannot bear it!”

In an instant my lady was on her feet, in her eyes a look of infinite love and pity.

“I know that there is now an impassable barrier between us, Sir Harold,” she said, “and that it is wrong for me to even speak to you upon familiar terms. Do not think that I shall forget my duty.”

He held out his hands blindly, saying:

“I must see you again, Elaine—my lost darling! Theresa is waiting for me—poor Theresa. I will come to the park another day, when my head pains me less.”

He shook hands with her and staggered away. The forgotten past was passing before him like a dream within a dream.

He never knew how he reached the hotel. He had lost all count of time and space; his eyes were bloodshot, his lips and tongue parched and dry.

He was late, and Theresa met him with tear-stained cheeks and hollow eyes. At sight of his haggard face her[Pg 155] thoughts immediately fled to the story that Margaret Nugent had told her—the story of the vendetta.

“Harold, dear Harold, my husband,” she cried, “you are ill!”

He pushed her from him, but the next instant turned to comfort her.

“Yes, little one, I am ill, and I wish that I might die! What sin is mine that my misery should be so great that others should be cursed by the relentless fate that pursues me? Theresa, poor little confiding Theresa! Do not look at me in that way, dear one. I will shield you from every threatening storm. You will not be disappointed, Theresa, but we cannot leave London until to-morrow night. I have not completed my business yet; I have arranged for one more interview with—with an old friend.”

She noted his hesitation, and a pang shot through her heart.

“Is it imperative, Harold?” she asked. “I hate London so much—I hate it for your sake, darling. The hum that ever sounds in my ears sings of strife and woe, and every strange footstep fills me with undefinable terrors.”

“Silly girl!” he said, pettishly. “Ah, my brain is surely bursting! Send that footman away!”

“Footman, Harold? There is no one in the room except ourselves!” she cried, clinging to him tightly.

He laughed a hollow laugh, and reeled toward his bedroom, uttering wild words.

“Who is this,” he said, “that dares stand between me and freedom? Who has robbed me of my love of my life? Oh, cursed is my fate!”

A doctor was sent for, and Sir Harold was pronounced to be in a high state of fever. A sedative was administered, and the medical man would give no decided opinion as to the malignancy of the attack. For two days he[Pg 156] raved of many things, appealing by turns to Lady Elaine and his young wife for protection against some mysterious and dreaded phantom, and Theresa drank in every word—drank them in one by one—poison drops that crowded her soul with a hopeless misery more bitter than death.

On the sixth day he was pronounced out of danger. The fever had in reality only been a passing attack, and his first rational words were a demand for his wife.

“Theresa,” he said, softly, “is it not annoying that I should become ill so soon after our wedding? But I shall soon be all right again, dear one, and we will leave England, perhaps forever. I hate it now!”

“And why do you hate England?” his wife asked, with a look in her eyes that made him feel uneasy. “Would you have hated your country if we had never met, Harold?”

“Have I been talking some nonsense in my delirium?” was his quick demand. “Oh, Theresa, you must forget every word of it! Kiss me, little wife! and let me see the happy smile of old upon your sweet face! Do you remember how happy we were in the little garden at Tenterden, with its wonderland of flowers and nooks, its singing birds and humming bees?”

“Don’t, don’t, my husband!” she sobbed. “Those blessed days are passed. They were but an illusive dream. If we were back again in the cottage, and things were just the same as then, without knowledge of the cruel world beyond, how sweet to die, with my head on your breast!”

He could not understand these strange words or the hopeless look in her eyes, and he watched for Stimson with an anxiety that was painful.

At last the valet was alone with him, and Sir Harold[Pg 157] spoke quickly: “You have attended me during my fever, have you not, Stimson?”

“Yes, master.”

“Have I talked much? Out with it, man! Why was my wife permitted to remain at my bedside?”

“She insisted, Sir Harold, upon watching over you. You have talked rather wildly about Lady Elaine Seabright, the shadow of a knife, and other equally foolish things.”

For a minute Annesley was silent. His thoughts were perplexed.

“Stimson,” he said at last, “my mind is now as clear as possible. I am not quite sure, though, whether or not I met Lady Elaine in Hyde Park the same day that I was taken ill. It may have been a dream, and I want you to find out the truth.”

“You did meet Lady Elaine, Sir Harold. Her maid has called twice to inquire about you. Lady Annesley is not aware of it, though.”

Sir Harold groaned.

“Stimson, there has been some horrible mistake. I must see Lady Elaine for a few minutes, and then leave England forever. My duty is toward my loving, trusting wife.”

“Yes, Sir Harold, I have Lady Elaine’s address. I send her news of your condition daily. I may have done wrong, but——”

“Hush, Stimson! Not another word! I rely upon you completely.”

The valet understood, and three days later he bore a message to Lady Elaine Seabright, which read in this way:

My Lost Love—To-morrow night I shall leave England forever. Before doing so, I must see you once more, if only to vindicate myself in your eyes. I have a wife who is devoted to[Pg 158] me heart and soul, and, God helping me, I will do my duty toward her. At three o’clock to-morrow afternoon I shall arrive at your address. Do not deny me this last farewell.

Harold.

Lady Elaine shed tears over this missive, and replied simply:

It is wrong, but I cannot deny you. Heaven forgive me!

The very knowledge of his disloyalty to his wife increased his tenderness toward her. He called her by many pet names, and spoke in glowing terms of the brightness of their future, but she only smiled in a sad, sweet way, and sometimes shook her head.

“You will forget me some day, my husband,” she said. “You will forget me, and it may be soon. Already have your thoughts gone back to the woman you first loved.”

“My silly ravings again,” he replied. “Theresa, it pains me to hear you talk in this way. I shall never fail in my duty to you.”

“I know it, Harold; you are too good, too noble, too unselfish. I could never blame you; I love you too well, and my love is all-sacrificing.”

She pressed hot kisses on his brow, mingled with tears.

“Dear little Theresa,” he said, dreamily, “how you love me! Ah! sweetheart, a life’s devotion cannot repay such wonderful love as yours! To-morrow we enter upon a new life—new scenes, new aspirations, and leave the past behind.”

He sighed, and for a few minutes Theresa’s face looked almost happy.

“If I could only believe it,” she thought. “If I could only believe it! No, no! It is not possible; I am the bar to his happiness! I am the dread phantom that kills his peace! But to-morrow—to-morrow shall decide!”

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CHAPTER XXIII.

THERESA’S WARNING.

Theresa was much more cheerful the following morning. There might yet be happiness for her and the man she loved so much. He had declared his intention of quitting England that very day and devoting his life to her. Surely her all-absorbing passion for him would meet with some return!

“I know that the sight of his old love, and the memory of the old days have revived much that has lain dormant within him, but he is mine—mine—and I love him best! Why should she steal away my happiness? I who am so lonely and sad. If he were free to make his choice, which would he take? Ah, my love is no mere outward show. For his sake I would willingly lay down my life!”

She had forgotten the vendetta, but that very day she had a note thrust into her hand by an urchin who had found his way to her apartments unobserved.

In astonishment and horror she opened it and read the following:

Lady Theresa Annesley, daughter of Lambert Egerton and Theresa Ludovic, remember the death of Count Crispi cries still for vengeance. You and yours are forever under the

ban until the hateful blood of your people is wiped from off the face of the earth. Think not to escape us. The executive awaits the signal to strike.

In a moment all sunshine was blotted away, and she stood pale, trembling and hopeless.

In this way Sir Harold found her, and his heart smote him with remorseless pangs.

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"If you don't wish it, Theresa," he said, "I will not go out at all to-day. Your pallor frightens me. Tell me, child. What is your trouble?"

He waited anxiously, fearfully. If Theresa asked him to stay with her, then he might never see Lady Elaine again. It was a terrible sacrifice, but he was prepared to make it.

For one brief space she hesitated, then burst into a storm of tears.

"No, darling, you must not forego every pleasure for my sake," she sobbed. "Have I not surrounded you with a network of perplexities and dangers already? I am frightened—not for myself, but for my beloved husband! See! You ought to read this. A danger menaces you, my love—the danger of death!"

He took the paper, and his face flamed with fury.

"The cowards!" he hissed—"the pitiful, wretched cowards! Theresa, this is a mere, contemptible threat! Why was the boy not seized? I will get to the root of it if half my fortune is spent in so doing!"

He made inquiries from the hotel clerk, the burly *commissionaire* in the doorway, the servants about the hall. Then he was driven to Scotland Yard and placed the matter in competent hands. Money was no object. The wretches must be brought to justice, and his wife's person properly guarded.

He returned and told her what he had done, and she said, in reply:

"I am glad for your sake, Harold, but I am very much afraid. My father ought not to have hidden this from me!"

Then she looked up at him, with a mournfulness in her eyes that he never forgot.

"My husband," she said, "I am going to make a strange[Pg 161] request of you—a request which I hope that you will grant, because I know that it is for your good."

"Well, Theresa? Sweet one, don't look at me in that way! Your eyes will haunt me forever. Now, what is it you want?"

“Sir Harold, I want you to divorce me! I was reading only recently in some paper that a marriage under any serious misapprehension was practically null and void—that the law would unhesitatingly set it aside. I ask you this with a breaking heart, because I love you as no other can love you—knowing that I am but a clog—a menace to your future happiness!”

“Theresa—Theresa! What has put this madness into your tender, loving heart?”

He took her in his arms and held her to him tightly. He showered upon her words of endearment.

“A little while, Theresa, and all these worries will have melted like mists in the sun. You are too sensitive—too imaginative. Oh, the thought to me is horrible!”

After lunch, one of the smartest detectives in London was sent to Sir Harold from Scotland Yard. The liberality of his reward for the apprehension of the letter-writer was a strong incentive. He was closeted with Annesley for half-an-hour, and finally pocketed unimportant letters and addressed envelopes which had been received at the hotel since his stay there.

“You must be perfectly frank with me in all things,” said the detective. “If I appear to be curious concerning your private affairs I shall only have one end in view, and that is the elucidation of this little mystery. My theory is already formed, and I do not think that I shall be far out when my deductions are complete.”

“You have *carte blanche* so far as I and my household are concerned,” Sir Harold told him. “To-night[Pg 162] we leave for Paris, and you may send me news of your progress there. I will telegraph my address to you.”

The detective went away, and, half-an-hour later, Annesley was in a hansom, being driven to Lady Elaine Seabright’s villa in Hyde Park. He had promised his wife that he would not be gone long, and left Stimson to prepare everything for their departure by the Dover express.

Lady Elaine’s address was Lyndhurst Villa, and Sir Harold told the cabman to stop within fifty yards of the house.

When the hansom pulled up he sprang out, and the man pointed with his whip to a little Queen Anne building half-embowered in trees, saying:

“That is Lyndhurst Villa, sir.”

“Thank you. I shall not be gone long. Wait here for me, please.”

For a minute his heart beat into his throat, and his eyes were blinded with mist; then he pushed resolutely onward into the presence of the one whom he would love as long as life lasted.

He was admitted by Nina, who conducted him into a prettily-furnished drawing-room.

“Her ladyship will not keep you waiting long, Sir Harold,” the maid said, quietly. She could not find it in her heart to forgive the man who had ruined her mistress’ life.

She withdrew, and in a state of great agitation he paced the floor. Why had he come? It was needless pain for both. It was unfair to his wife. He might have explained all to Lady Elaine by letter. It would have been much more simple—much easier.

At last there was the rustle of a woman’s dress, the door opened softly, and his lost love stood before him. How ethereal she looked. Had the vision appeared unexpectedly[Pg 163] he would have believed that it was a visitant from the spirit world.

“Elaine!”

There was a great sob in his voice, and he held out his arms, but she did not respond.

“Sir Harold,” she replied, softly. “You must not forget the bar between us. You must not forget your wife! I was perhaps wrong to grant this interview, but I wish to look upon you for the last time—to hear your voice once more. My hero is not yet dethroned, and I desire to vindicate myself——”

“Stop!” he cried. “Oh, my God, this is too much for human hearts to bear! Elaine, come and sit beside me; let me place my arms about you—pillow your head upon my shoulder, while I tell you all that has happened to me since that day when you drove me forth! It may be the last time, Elaine; it may be the last time that we shall meet on earth, and I want to carry it through life and to the grave a pleasant memory. Do not forget what we have been to each other—what we are to each other still! When you know all you will not blame me, and then——”

He covered his eyes with his hands, and she was instantly beside him.

“If I am sinning, Heaven forgive me. Surely the sin will be expiated by the martyrdom that is mine!”

Bit by bit, he told his wonderful story—the story of his utter oblivion—the story of his awakening—of his brotherly love for the sweet girl whom he called wife—of his utter despair.

“But my duty is clear, Elaine; I could never shut my eyes to that, although I should be sorely tempted were Theresa other than she is.”

“I feel that I must love her,” Lady Elaine replied. “Love her because she loves you, Harold! You see what my pride—my silly pride—has done for us, but in[Pg 164] some way all the evil that has ever befallen me is attributable to your cousin—to Margaret Nugent. She it was who professed to know your moods and to whom I listened blindly for advice. This is no palliation for the fault—for the folly I committed; but I cannot help thinking that she had some ulterior motive in parting us—that she perhaps cared for you herself.”

He was thoughtful for a little while, and then remarked, sternly: “You cannot both be wrong. Poor Theresa distrusts Margaret.”

“It is fatal to one’s happiness or even peace to permit some people to enter into the secrets of their lives,” continued Lady Elaine, “and I have thought lately that if I had obeyed the wishes of Colonel Greyson, and permitted him to carry my letter of recall—my complete surrender—to you, how different things might have been.”

“Why did you not send that letter, Elaine?” he said, sadly.

“Ah, you have forgotten, Harold. I sent it by Margaret Nugent, and she told me that you scoffed at it, and cast it to the winds.”

“I never received that letter, darling,” he replied, starting up, a bitter imprecation on his lips against his false cousin. “I never received that letter—I swear it! At last I believe that light is breaking upon me! The night that we first met, Colonel Greyson said that Margaret would be jealous, and I laughed at what I considered the absurdity of the idea. And the stories of your engagement to Rivington? Ah, what a blind fool I have been!”

He heard of the terms of the late earl’s will with wonderment and regret.

“I cannot understand it, if your father knew nothing of Rivington’s private character,” he said, “or he may have been blinded to everything in his obstinacy and determination to have his own way.”

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A silver-tongued clock on the mantel-piece chimed the hour of five, and Sir Harold started up in dismay.

“I must go, Elaine. Kiss me, darling, for the last time! Oh, the misery of it.”

He embraced her fiercely, saying, hoarsely:

“If you are in trouble at any time call me to your side, Elaine; I shall never be more than two or three days’ journey away. Promise me, my lost love!”

“Yes, I will send to you if my trouble is serious—if our old lawyer cannot combat with it,” she said.

“And your fortune shall be restored to you. I will see Mr. Worboys within two months’ time. That will be soon enough. Between us Rivington can be brought to his knees. In the meantime I shall not be idle, and will drop the lawyer a few lines. You will understand later, Elaine.”

Another frantic, hopeless embrace, and, seizing his hat, he almost ran from the room—there was a bang of the outer door, and he was gone.

As the cab whirled away in obedience to his wild words, “Home again! Lose not a moment!” the figure of a man appeared from behind a mass of evergreens which grew in the shadow of a spreading and leafy maple. It was that of Viscount Rivington.

He took a final glance through the drawing-room window, where Lady Elaine was kneeling, her face buried in the cushions of a lounge, paused irresolute, then glided into the street, a savage imprecation upon his lips, hate in his flashing, black eyes.

“So this is why my love is spurned!” he muttered. “Why my life is to be utterly wrecked! He is her lover still. What unlucky fate has brought them together again? What of the story of his shattered memory? God! Has Margaret deceived me also, or is there a mine beneath her also which is soon to explode? How long[Pg 166] has he been visiting here? Had I chanced upon them unawares—but, bah! I saw her in his arms, he a married man! I heard her sobs, and I hate her for it! Now it is my turn to woo, aye, and to win! My Lady Elaine shall be my wife at any cost. I am upon the very brink of disaster, a disaster which will forever place me beyond the pale of decent society. I shall be an outcast—a pariah—a thing to be avoided! I have tried soft measures—tender appeals, declarations of a love which has now turned to gall and wormwood! My lady, you have only yourself to blame, and desperation is my master!”

He looked up and down the street, and continued at a rapid pace to Hyde Park Corner, from whence he took a cab to Charing Cross post office. A telegram was sent to Lady Gaynor, as follows:

Your presence is required in town. I am staying at the Metropole.

After a hasty dinner, he decided to play his first card, and went to the Victoria Hotel in quest of Sir Harold Annesley.

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CHAPTER XXIV.

POOR THERESA.

When Sir Harold reached his hotel he found a note awaiting him from the detective, which threatened to alter his plans very materially. It ran:

Dear Sir—You spoke of going to Paris to-night. It is important that you see me before leaving London, even if your journey is postponed for twenty-four hours. If you value your peace of mind, you will not disregard this suggestion, and I will call upon you at the earliest possible moment with news. I have every belief that I can lay my hand upon one, at least, of the despicable wretches who are bent upon the misery of yourself and Lady Annesley.

Obediently yours,
Paul Asbury.

Theresa herself had handed the note to Sir Harold, and, while his face flushed and paled by turns as he read it, she watched him with painful eagerness.

"It is from the detective," he said. "A somewhat ambiguous message—but must I obey it? Theresa, you shall be judge. It seems that everything is conspiring to keep us in London."

He gave the letter to her, and she perused it with mixed feelings.

"I think we ought to stay," she said. "Oh, Harold, what misery, what danger I have surrounded you with! I am terrified for your sake. If one of the men is caught a score may be ready to spring up and avenge him."

"My dear, the English law will not tolerate anything of this kind. I will root out the fiends at any cost. It is a duty I owe to ourselves and society in general. Remember that they have not a poor man to deal with in[Pg 168] me. These secret assassins are always cowards, and they shall be taught a severe lesson."

Though he spoke thus hopefully, poor Theresa shivered with a nervous dread.

Dinner was served in private under the direction of Stimson, who was not ill-pleased at the prospect of remaining in London a few more hours, at least. In his secret soul he desired his master to return to Annesley Park, and live as a rich country gentleman should live.

The meal was hardly finished when Stimson announced that a gentleman wished to see Sir Harold upon urgent business.

"His name?" demanded Sir Harold, a little surprised.

"He has not sent it up, Sir Harold. The servant says that he is waiting in the smoking-room downstairs."

"My detective, I expect," Annesley whispered to Theresa; then aloud to Stimson, "Send him up here. I will see the gentleman in the anteroom. Now, my little girl," he went on, cheerfully, to his trembling wife, "there shall soon be an end to these cowardly threats. The rascals shall feel the weight of British law!"

"But you do not know who this man is!" she said, shivering with a deadly chill.

"I do not anticipate that he is an enemy," he smiled. "Besides, Theresa, I am armed, and shall be merciless enough to shoot the foe like a mad dog!"

He pressed a kiss upon her brow, and noticed that it was moist and cold.

"The gentleman is here, Sir Harold," Stimson announced, adding, in an undertone: "It is Viscount Rivington, sir."

Annesley's face flushed with fierce resentment. What business had the viscount with him? He paused, irresolute, then said, suddenly, "I will see him."

With a fond glance of assurance toward Theresa, he[Pg 169] stepped into the anteroom beyond, softly closing the door of the dining-room behind him.

"I have no doubt that you are somewhat surprised to see me here, Sir Harold Annesley," Rivington said, in his smooth, bland tones, rising quickly from a seat in the corner next to the door. "You will not take my hand? Well, I cannot help it if you are determined to be unfriendly. I came to congratulate you upon your recent marriage, and the recovery of your memory, though I cannot say that either event has made you particularly robust or joyful in appearance!"

"What is your business with me?" Annesley demanded, steadily.

"I came as a friend—an old acquaintance," Rivington said.

“I never recognized you as a friend, and I have no desire for your acquaintance, viscount,” was the cold reply. “Your impertinence would be amusing if it were not irritating.”

Rivington laughed sneeringly.

“Well, if you will not accept my friendship, I cannot help it,” he said. “I hate to be bad friends with any one.”

“Your friendship and enmity are equally indifferent to me,” retorted Annesley, raising his voice; “and I should advise you to retire, or my servant must show you the door. I have nothing in common with gamblers and blacklegs.”

He spoke so loudly that every word reached the ears of the trembling Theresa, and she crept near to the door, ready to push between her husband and the foe. It was not the detective; the man’s tones were strange to her. Who else was he but one of the fiends who was pursuing her with the relentless certainty of fate?

“A gambler and a blackleg, am I?” cried Rivington,[Pg 170] his voice full of concentrated rage. “Well, granted that I am, I think that you are the last man on earth to preach morality, Sir Harold Annesley! To be plain with you, I am here to warn you against intriguing with women to whom you have no right! Pray remember, also, that you are a married man!”

“Scoundrel!”

“Scoundrel to your teeth!” was the bitter retort. “The kisses of another woman are still fresh upon your lips! I heard your words of endearment, and as that woman belongs to me, I have a right to protest against your secret visits to my house——”

“Your house!” cried Sir Harold, in a white heat of passion, his features working with a fury that he could hardly control. “Your house!”

“Yes, my dear Annesley. There are the papers—agreements and receipts to prove it. Lady Elaine Seabright is under my protection, and I was not well pleased to discover that you had been poaching upon my preserves. I hate scandal, but I shall undeceive this trusting wife of yours unless——”

“You craven, lying cur!” thundered Annesley. “Lady Elaine under your protection—the sweetest, truest woman that ever lived! You slander her, and I will choke the words in your lying throat! I have just parted from Lady Elaine—I admit it. I also admit that I love her still, and shall ever love her. We drifted apart through misunderstandings created by serpents of your stamp, and though there is a legal bar between us, I shall watch

over the woman I love with a never-relaxing vigilance, and an arm ever ready to avenge!"

He opened the door, adding, "Stimson, see this creature to the street."

The viscount tried to smile bravely, but it was only a ghastly grin. He never knew how he descended the[Pg 171] broad stairs, but he found himself being advised to "Move on!" by a burly policeman, who had no sympathy with his savage gesticulations.

"I have a double reason now for remaining in London," Annesley reflected, as he paced the floor in fierce agitation. "I must see Mr. Worboys to-morrow, and Lady Elaine must be placed under his protection. Oh, the coward!—the mean, pitiful coward! What a pleasure it would have been to lash him until he screamed for mercy!"

He returned to the room wherein he had left Lady Annesley, but he was too agitated to notice her ashen face, or the fire that shone in her dusky eyes.

"It was not the detective," he said, "but a man whom I detest. He will not visit me again. Excuse me for a short time, Theresa; I have letters to write—important letters."

He went away, and she murmured:

"Who am I that I should stand between my husband and all that he loves best? Who am I that I should place him under the evil ban of the vendetta? If I did not love him beyond all other things I should not care so much, but my love is so great that it is all-sacrificing."

She stared into the fire, the words she had overheard booming in her ears like the knell of fast-advancing doom:

"I have just parted from Lady Elaine. * * * I love her still, and shall ever love her * * * though there is a legal bar between us, I shall ever watch over the woman I love!"

"What is my duty?" thought poor Theresa, a resolute light in her mournful eyes. "My duty is to make my darling happy. Oh, the burden of my misery is greater than I can bear!"

For the first time in many days she thought of the[Pg 172] Romaic love song that had once haunted her so persistently, but, oh! how significant it seemed now!

Ah, Love was never yet without

The pang, the agony, the doubt,

Which rends my heart with ceaseless sigh,

While day and night roll darkling by.

Without one friend to bear my woe,

I faint, I die, beneath the blow;

That Love had arrows well I knew;

Alas! I find them poisoned, too.

Birds yet in freedom shun the net

Which Love around your haunts hath set;

Or, circled by his fatal fire,

Your hearts shall burn, your hopes expire.

Who ne'er has loved, and loved in vain,

Can neither feel nor pity pain,

The cold repulse, the look askance,

The lightning of Love's angry glance.

My curdling blood, my maddening brain,

In silent anguish I sustain;

And still the heart, without partaking

One pang, exults, while mine is breaking.

Pour me the poison; fear not, thou!

Thou can'st not murder more than now;

I've lived to curse my natal day

And Love, that thus can lingering slay.

She retired at an early hour to her bedroom, to weep quietly and to think. No sleep came to her weary, aching brain. The clocks tolled the hour of midnight before Sir Harold came. He stepped about softly, believing that his wife was asleep. Then he pressed a silent kiss upon her lips, and murmured:

"Poor Theresa!"

The words and the tone rang in her ears to the hour of her death—"Poor Theresa!"

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It seemed that Sir Harold could find little rest. He was up again at six o'clock, and, after glancing at his wife, was leaving the room, when she held out her arms to him in a childish, loving way.

"Kiss me, Harold," she said.

He obeyed, and she whispered:

"You will always love poor Theresa a little?"

"Can I help doing so, dear one?" he asked. "I should be a brute, unworthy of the name of man, if I did not care for you and protect you forever."

She sighed, and he thought he had never seen her look so lovely before.

"At a late hour last night the detective made an appointment to see me at seven o'clock this morning," he went on. "I cannot rest in consequence, and shall not see you again until breakfast time."

"One more kiss, Harold," she sighed.

"Only one? A hundred, darling, if you want them!"

He looked back as he was leaving the room—the last time his eyes rested upon her in life!

Poor Theresa!

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CHAPTER XXV.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

Annesley went to the smoking-room, and read the morning news until the detective came in. Mr. Paul Asbury was punctual to the moment, and there was a gleam of triumph in his eyes that spoke of success and self-confidence.

"Good-morning, Sir Harold," he said. "I must thank you for remaining in London at my request, as your presence will very much simplify matters."

"What news?" demanded Annesley.

“I have traced the person who wrote the threatening letter to Lady Annesley, and require further instructions from you.”

“Go on.” Sir Harold endeavored to be calm, but his muscles twitched nervously.

“Must I take steps to make an arrest?”

“Certainly. I mean to make an example of these people. Mr. Asbury, allow me to congratulate you upon your success.”

The detective looked away for a moment, then he said:

“Before you become too enthusiastic, Sir Harold, I wish you to listen to a few particulars. From the very first I had no belief in the story of the vendetta, save in the imagination of Mr. Hamilton. We have investigated dozens of such stories, and discovered them to be mere bubbles. Upon leaving you yesterday I telegraphed for particulars of Lambert Egerton, Count Crispi, and Theresa Ludovic to no less than four reliable agents stationed in Italy. The replies satisfy me that the relatives of Count Crispi made a few threats when the surgeon,[Pg 175] Lambert Egerton, ran away with the ward of his illustrious client. There the matter ended, save in the imagination of Egerton himself.”

Annesley shook his head impatiently.

“But the man who was stabbed in the streets of London—the man who resembled Egerton?” he asked.

“No such thing ever took place—not as described by Lady Annesley’s father. My assistants have made an exhaustive search through the records,” smiled Mr. Asbury. “The fact is Mr. Hamilton—or Mr. Egerton—became a monomaniac upon that one subject. His mind dwelt upon it until he thoroughly believed in it.”

Still Annesley was not convinced.

“The badly-scrawled note that I found upon the night of his death. How do you account for that?”

“Without a doubt he wrote it himself,” the detective said, confidently. “I have met with similar cases, Sir Harold.”

“Mr. Asbury, I am woefully disappointed,” the baronet said. “Nothing but theory—not one atom of fact. And yet you talk of making an arrest!”

“Yes; and it depends upon you whether it is wise to take such a step. You admit having let one other person into the secret—the secret of this supposed danger that menaces you and Lady Annesley.”

“Well?”

“This person is the author of the last anonymous warning, and if you insist upon an arrest, you will be called upon to prosecute your cousin—Miss Margaret Nugent!”

Sir Harold stared at the detective—pale and speechless for a minute.

The monstrous charge against Margaret appeared too much to believe. Then he thought of what Lady Elaine had said—of Theresa’s dislike, and exclaimed, huskily:

“Proof! proof!”

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“As plain as the nose on my face,” Mr. Asbury smiled. “I submitted the letter of warning, or whatever the nonsense may be termed, to one of the best experts in handwriting in all London, together with an assortment of the letters you gave me. My expert unhesitatingly declared that the writer of the letters signed Margaret Nugent was author of the anonymous one delivered here by hand. If you are not yet fully satisfied we can find the boy who brought the letter, though it may occupy several days. A reward must be offered, and advertisements put in the papers.”

“The result has shocked me severely,” Annesley said, after a long silence, “though I am greatly relieved to find that we have been chased by a mere shadow. I scarcely know how to break the disgraceful news to Lady Annesley, and must insist upon Miss Nugent making some sort of a confession to completely satisfy my wife, whose health her insane folly has viciously undermined. Mr. Asbury, I must turn the thing over in my mind for a little while before giving you my final instructions. I am bitterly annoyed and ashamed.”

“I can understand that, Sir Harold,” the detective said, rising.

“One minute, please,” Annesley said. “I am so well satisfied with your abilities, Mr. Asbury, that I shall esteem it a favor if you will undertake another little case in which I am interested.”

“I shall be pleased, Sir Harold, but if you will excuse me for an hour I shall be glad. I am expecting a cable from New York which must be answered promptly.”

Sir Harold glanced at his watch. It was exactly eight o’clock.

“If you like, Mr. Asbury, I will walk with you,” he said. “I have exactly an hour to spare, and I want to[Pg 177] think how best to approach my wife with this shameful story.”

“I am at your service, Sir Harold,” was the respectful rejoinder.

The baronet rang for Stimson.

“I am going out for an hour or two, Stimson. You will tell her ladyship if she inquires for me.”

Now, it happened that Theresa had dressed, and was standing at the head of the main staircase when Annesley and the detective went out.

“Bad news,” she thought, “or my husband would come to me at once.”

Then Stimson informed her that his master would not be back for an hour, and she retired to her sitting-room.

In the meantime, Sir Harold and Paul Asbury walked to Scotland Yard. The detective’s business with one of his subordinates occupied but a few minutes, and he left the office, looking well pleased.

“Sir Harold,” he said, “one more question, please. When did Miss Nugent leave you to return to Ashbourne?”

“Oh, some time before my illness—ten or twelve days since.”

“I have just received information that she left the Victoria Hotel, and proceeded to the house of a lady friend in Bayswater, where she is still staying. Now, the sooner this silly business is exploded the better, or she may be tempted to perpetrate some new joke. I can now do nothing more unless I receive instructions from you.”

“Can you furnish me with Miss Nugent’s present address?” demanded Annesley, savagely.

The detective promptly scribbled a few words on the back of one of his cards, and gave it to the baronet. This is the address he wrote down:

Mrs. Norton, The Laurels, Bayswater.

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“Mrs. Norton is a lady of fashion,” the detective remarked, “and her place is well known. If you do not object, Sir Harold, I prefer to discuss the remaining business in the Café Royal. It is close here, and I have a private room upstairs. We never know who is spying about.”

He stepped briskly along, and suddenly turned into a low archway facing Trafalgar Square. He opened a door with his passkey, and ran up three flights of stairs, at the top of which was a small, dingy-looking room.

“Now, sir,” he went on, “one touch upon this electric button and a waiter appears. I intend having coffee—black and strong. It is the best nerve sedative I know of.”

“Order two cups,” said Annesley. “I shall not detain you five minutes with the new business.”

“And then?”

“I am going direct to Bayswater.” Mr. Asbury smiled grimly. He had not told his client all that he knew.

The coffee was promptly served, and Sir Harold began, briefly:

“It is possible, Mr. Asbury, that you have heard something of the idle gossip concerning myself and Lady Elaine Seabright?”

“I know the whole story from beginning to end, Sir Harold. Even to the later scheming of a swell named Rivington to secure the late earl’s fortune by a marriage between himself and Lady Elaine.”

“Go on.”

“And that there appears to be every probability of his success, luckily for him!”

“It is false—utterly false!” Annesley said, fiercely. “Lady Elaine hates the man, and I want you to protect her.”

“I hardly understand you.”

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“It is plain enough. I will pay you to keep a man on the watch—to protect Lady Elaine against any of this villain’s schemes. Any unusual movement is to be promptly reported to me, as the man made certain threats yesterday which have made me uneasy.”

“I understand thoroughly, Sir Harold, and I will say this much, in confidence, that Viscount Henry Rivington is already under police surveillance. Upon two separate occasions have applications been made to the lord mayor for warrants for his apprehension. By arrangement they have not been executed, but his safety depends upon his obtaining the fortune left by the late Earl of Seabright. His creditors will not

be hoodwinked. It is either the money, for value obtained in many cases under false pretenses, or his body."

Sir Harold gave the detective a silent pressure of the hand, as he rose.

"There is no need for me to say more," he observed, reaching for his hat; "I am now going to Bayswater, and any communication will reach me at the Victoria Hotel."

The detective nodded, said "good-morning," and Annesley hurried downstairs and into the streets, which were gradually awakening to the usual business of life.

"Nine o'clock," he reflected. "Theresa will wonder what has become of me. But this disgraceful conduct of Margaret must be promptly punished. I will never forgive her—never."

He signaled to the first passing cab, jumped in, and told the man to drive quickly to the Laurels, Bayswater.

Arrived there, he was informed by a flunkey that the family was out.

"Since when?" demanded Annesley.

"Last night, sir."

"Miss Nugent, of Ashbourne, has been staying with Mrs. Norton?" he asked.

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"Yes, sir. She and my mistress left for Ashbourne by the six o'clock train last evening," the footman replied.

Annesley was bitterly annoyed, but the matter could not be helped, of course. Unfortunately, he met one or two people who detained him, and when he reached his hotel it was half-an-hour past noon.

He ran upstairs, and was met in the anteroom by Stimson.

"I was just wondering, Sir Harold, what was best to be done," he said, "as I did not know what to order for lunch. I never did feel at home in a hotel."

"Why did you not consult Lady Annesley?" demanded Sir Harold, pettishly, and Stimson stared.

"Her ladyship followed you out, master," he said, a sense of impending evil suddenly coming over him.

"Followed me! Nonsense, man! You must be dreaming!" cried the baronet.

“No, Sir Harold! I gave her ladyship your message, and she just had one cup of tea in her private sitting-room; then she came out, fully dressed, and told me that she was going out.”

Sir Harold was bewildered. Still, why should not Theresa go for a walk if she felt inclined?

He stared blankly at his valet for a few moments; then he turned suddenly, and walked into his wife’s apartments, thinking:

“She may have left some written message for me.”

In this conjecture he was right; a sealed envelope, addressed to him in Theresa’s handwriting, lay on the table before him.

Snatching it up, he tore open the envelope, took out the letter it contained, and read as follows:

My darling—my beloved—I am going away from you forever—away into the unknown shadow land, where I shall be no bar to your happiness in this world. I have loved you—and shall[Pg 181] ever love you, as no other woman can love—so much that it is infinite misery to me to know that I am not all in all to you. I am the bar between you and Lady Elaine; I am even the unhappy fate that causes my king to be menaced by a cruel death! At last, Harold, my darling, my beloved, it is ended, but my spirit will be with you. Good-by. Your unhappy

Theresa.

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CHAPTER XXVI.

THE DUKE’S ULTIMATUM.

Viscount Rivington was placed in a terrible dilemma. The morning after his call upon Annesley he received two letters at his club—one from Lady Gaynor, and one from his uncle, the Duke of Rothwell.

The first one ran in this way:

Dear Viscount—In answer to your telegram, I must say that it would be most indiscreet of me to put my head in the lion’s mouth, as it were. I quite understand your meaning; your plans have failed, as I predicted, and now you wish to try mine. There is safety

only at the Lodge, and if you will come immediately matters may be discussed with some hope of success. I greatly deprecate the waste of valuable time, as things are really growing desperate with me.

Faithfully yours,
Eleanor Gaynor.

The Duke of Rothwell's letter was as follows:

Dear Nephew—Yes, I have no doubt that it is the correct thing to make your *fiancée* valuable presents from time to time, but not at my expense—just yet. I must be satisfied that all is fair and aboveboard, as I am well seasoned to your crooked dealings, and I refuse to send you one shilling, and, in addition, shall stop the allowance I am making you within twenty-four hours unless I have proof that Lady Elaine Seabright is to be your wife. I have not an atom of faith in you, and regret more than ever that I have no son to bear my honored name. This is my ultimatum: Introduce Lady Elaine to me forthwith, and I will soon learn for myself how things really are. No more excuses will do for me.

Rothwell.

"By heavens!" he gasped. "I am ruined—ruined! Oh, I could gladly choke the life out of the old dotard! I am on the brink of a volcano that is rumbling at my[Pg 183] feet, and powerless to move for—what? A paltry two thousand pounds! And now am I driven to the last stages of desperation, and there is not a moment to lose. I must face Isaacs once more, and if the worst comes to the worst, a pill from this will be the end!"

He tapped his inside breast pocket, his sallow face assuming a ghastly hue. Then he laughed lightly, curled the ends of his mustache, and walked from the club library into the hall.

A cab was crawling past, and he hurried to the street.

"Oxford Circus!" he called to the driver, and jumped into the vehicle.

As he moved away he saw a man watching him, and he never forgot the strange look in his eyes. He shivered, and called himself a fool.

"It is my last throw," he thought, "and I must keep my nerves steady. If I fail—exit! Pshaw! Why should I? The very alternative should give me confidence and strength."

He left the cab at Oxford Circus, and strolled along in a leisurely manner until he reached a narrow court.

Here he paused momentarily, and glanced to the right and left. Again those eyes haunted him, but the man was not in the crowd. It was impossible.

Turning into the court, he walked, perhaps twenty paces, and then entered a foul-smelling hallway, almost as dark as night. He was evidently well acquainted with the place, for, without any hesitation, he stepped lightly up a flight of rickety stairs and knocked sharply at a door at the top.

It was opened by a middle-aged automaton, of powerful build, who stared dully at the visitor.

"Is Mr. Isaacs within, Bulger?" inquired Rivington.

"Oh, it's the viscount!" observed Bulger, after a full[Pg 184] minute's reflection. "Yes, sir, he's in. Do you wish to see him?"

"Of course, Bulger; most important. Here is half-a-crown to expedite your movements, old man."

Bulger took the coin between the dirty fingers of his right hand, and smiled a wooden smile.

"Thank you, viscount. I hope you are able to settle with him now."

He laid particular stress upon the word "now," and Rivington understood that things looked pretty bad.

"Announce me," was all he said, again caressing the spot where his revolver lay hidden.

He watched the huge form of Bulger disappear within a farther room, and wondered why the man, who was by courtesy called the "clerk," did not strangle the life out of old Isaacs.

Bulger reappeared, and beckoned to Rivington with one of his forefingers, supplementing this with a jerk of his thumb toward the room occupied by the money-lender.

The viscount went in, closed the door behind him, and dropped languidly into a chair, directly opposite an old man, whose features at once proclaimed him a Jew. He was attired in a greasy suit of black, which had evidently done duty for ten years, at least. His linen and flesh were equally as dirty as Mr. Bulger's own, but, unlike his clerk, he wore a magnificent diamond ring upon one hooked finger. His nose was like the beak

of a hawk, his eyes deep-set and close together, while his mouth was full and large, surrounded by a closely-cropped beard and mustache, as white as snow.

He glanced up at Rivington with a wolfish grin that disclosed two rows of broken, yellow teeth, and said in cackling tones:

"In luck, eh, my future duke? For all your confidence[Pg 185] last Saturday—yes, it was Saturday! How dared you come to my private house on a Saturday? For all your confidence, I did not place much credence in your promise to be here to-day with the two thousand pounds—just the interest upon that document of the duke's—or, I should say, imitation of the duke's signature. Well, well, I am glad that you are at last going to be a man of your word, and I am sure that the gentle Bulger would not have admitted you unless you were prepared to pay me. A very useful fellow, Bulger, and when clients get abusive, he demonstrates the fact, my dear viscount. He was once a prize-fighter, and got ten years for killing a man. Then I took a fancy to him. Splendid fellow for a man to have about him who has many enemies. Now for the interest—only the interest upon that little document for ten thousand!"

He rubbed his hands together and laughed softly.

"Mr. Isaacs, you are too fond of anticipating things," Rivington began, and was promptly interrupted. In an instant the face of the Jew underwent an alarming change. The grin extended, but the eyes glowed like burning coals.

"No money!" he snarled. "Just as I expected. Why did Bulger let you in? You lied to him, you thief! I won't hear you—not a word! I gave you until noon to-day. Time is nearly up. At three my lawyer has instructions to present the bill to the duke himself. Ha! I will not wait one minute more. I will get principal and interest, or——"

He shrugged his shoulders and touched a bell, in answer to which Bulger appeared.

"Turn him out!" cried Isaacs. "Why did you bring him here? He has no money, bah!"

At any other time Rivington would have been sick with rage and fear, but he was at the end of his tether. He[Pg 186] was faced with the very worst, and had already rehearsed this scene.

"Leave us, Bulger," he said, calmly, "or stay, as you choose. I am not going until I have had some assurance from Mr. Isaacs——"

"None! None!" screamed the enraged Jew. "I will not be swindled—oh! you would murder me!"

He cowered back in terror, for Rivington had drawn a revolver from his coat pocket.

“No—no, Isaacs! Your carrion is not worth a cartridge. I wish you to understand my position exactly. I cannot get the two thousand you want until I have secured Lady Elaine Seabright. Those are my uncle’s own terms. I shall endeavor to make her mine to all intents and purposes within three days’ time. If I fail, I shall put a ball through my brains and cheat my enemies. If I succeed, everybody will be paid in full. I am really perfectly indifferent as to what course you take, though I do not think that you are mad enough to present that bill, well knowing that you kill my last chance by so doing, and at the same time lose every shilling of your money. I am not to be frightened again. Do you not see that I am perfectly calm and indifferent?” He laughed, adding, “here is my antidote,” and tapped the handle of his revolver. “You will either hear of my complete success, or read of my suicide, Mr. Isaacs, within three days’ time. Good-morning. Bulger, you may now show me out. Stay—one moment. It may be possible for you, Isaacs, to assist me in some way. I do not mean by any further advances—oh, no; do not mistake me for an instant—I mean that your brain is so full of infernal cunning that you may think of something that might assist me out of this awful predicament. You see, the lady is unwilling, and has to be persuaded”—he laughed hollowly—“and[Pg 187] as you have also a great deal at stake, Isaacs, it is to your interest that I succeed. We are situated in this way. Now, pay attention, and don’t for one moment think that I ever dreamed of shooting you. Lady Elaine Seabright is in London, and will have to be taken before a priest by force to-night. There is no use in further mincing matters and playing with fire, and I have to admit that the undertaking is a most desperate one. A hundred things may happen to upset my plans, but it is my last throw, and if I fail—well, you know what to expect.”

He laughed again that strange laugh that struck a chill even into the heart of the Jew.

“So help me!” gasped Isaacs. “I believe that he is in earnest this time. He never was but once before, and that was when he signed the bill. He!—he! Bulger, my gentle little clerk, the viscount must succeed, and if he will pay you I will loan you to him. What do you say, viscount? Your corpse is no good to me. I want my money—my money!”

Rivington eyed Bulger calmly.

“Probably a good suggestion,” he said. “I cannot trust my thief of a valet. I do not anticipate violence of any kind, but one never knows. Bulger, will you meet me at my club—the Albermarle—at eight o’clock to-night? Stay, I will meet you instead, say at the corner of this court. It will be safer. Good-day, Isaacs. If we ever meet again, it will be under more favorable auspices; if we don’t, well, you’ll be none the worse off in the other world.”

He left the money-lender's office with the feelings of a victor. He had not experienced so much self-confidence and peace of mind for years.

Turning into the first telegraph office he came to, he dispatched the following to Lady Gaynor:

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I am quite in accord with you. Shall arrive by the one-fifty express. Send carriage to meet train.

To the Duke of Rothwell he telegraphed:

Congratulate me. All is settled. Within the time you stipulate I shall have satisfied you.

From the telegraph office he took a hansom to Euston Station, and just succeeded in catching the express to Ashbourne.

To an ordinary observer, the viscount was merely a gentleman of leisure. His face bore no traces of the inward storms that had raged so recently. He smoked a fragrant cheroot, and consulted a timetable while the train was whirling him onwards, now and again making pencil notes in a small memorandum book.

This done, he tossed the timetable aside, and gave himself up to reflection until the engine slowed into Ashbourne.

To his relief, if not actual pleasure, Lady Gaynor herself was at the station to meet him with her pony carriage.

"This is thoughtful of you," he told her. "It may save much time. What have you to say to me?"

She touched the ponies lightly, and smiled at him strangely.

"So you have failed absolutely?"

"Absolutely! To make matters worse, Annesley is pretty much in his usual form again, and has discovered her retreat. I was fool enough to blackguard him in the heat of my jealous passion. Now, then, it is success or ruin for both. I shall not attempt to face things out, and if we lose there will be an inquest."

He looked gloomily away, and Lady Gaynor's face became pale under her paint. Like all women, she dreaded violence and death.

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“Now, then, what are we to do?” he concluded. “Don’t drive to the lodge. I shall feel that I am being stifled. We can talk safely here, and you can take me back to the station after a while. I must catch the next up-train.”

“I have not much to say,” was Lady Gaynor’s reply; “but Lady Elaine Seabright must be brought home to-night without her maid! I have long anticipated this, and am prepared. I shall expect you and her by the last train. Your wit must devise the means. Chloroform, or anything you like. I have an Italian physician staying with me, and a form of marriage ceremony shall be gone through, whether my lady wills it or not!”

A strange light flashed into his eyes, and his dark skin reddened.

“I believe that we shall win, after all,” he said, “and I will teach my wife to care for me some day. Take me back to the station, Lady Gaynor!”

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CHAPTER XXVII.

“WE SHALL NEVER MEET AGAIN.”

Lady Elaine was toying with the breakfast that it was impossible for her to eat, and thinking with a hopeless kind of bitterness of the misery that had come into her life, when Nina suddenly entered the room, her face betraying strong agitation.

“My lady, there is a person in the drawing-room who insists upon seeing you. I cannot say whether she is young or old, but I fancy that she must be young by the sweetness of her voice. She is closely veiled, and speaks nicely.”

Nina stopped to regain breath, adding, “She will not give her name, my lady.”

“I do not wish to be bothered, Nina,” said Lady Elaine, wearily. “This is an extraordinary hour for visitors. Possibly the person is engaged in some charitable pursuit. Tell her that she can state the nature of her business to you.”

“I have done everything in that way, my lady,” the maid declared. “I think that it will be best for you to see her.”

“No, I cannot be bothered. I am weary of everything, Nina.”

Then the maid stammered: “I was to tell you, my lady, that—that she came from Sir Harold Annesley.”

Lady Elaine started, her face turning deathly white. Was Sir Harold ill? Had some fresh misfortune befallen him?

“You are sure of this, Nina?” She held one hand to her throbbing heart.

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“Quite sure, my lady.”

“Then I will see her. Bring the lady to me here. This room is warm, and I fear that I dare not try to walk. My limbs are shaking with nervous dread.”

Nina glanced at her mistress, a pitiful look in her eyes, and left the room.

One minute, and she returned, a black-robed, girlish figure behind her.

“A mere girl,” thought Lady Elaine. “How could Nina be doubtful whether she were young or old?”

“This is the lady from Sir Harold Annesley, your ladyship,” said Nina.

Elaine rose and bowed to her visitor, and was conscious of being closely scrutinized.

Then, at a sign from her mistress, Nina softly withdrew, and the stranger spoke.

The tones were soft, tremulous, and flute-like, and there was a world of pathos in every note.

“You are Lady Elaine Seabright?”

“Yes,” Elaine said, gently. She knew not why her heart went out in tenderness to this black-robed figure. Perhaps it was in sympathy, because she, too, mourned a lost one.

“You are very beautiful, Lady Elaine,” continued the visitor, half-dreamily, “and I have wanted to see you so much! I wanted to see the woman whom Sir Harold loved first—and loves best.”

A haughty light flashed into Elaine’s eyes, but the words that rose to her lips were checked by the girl tossing aside her veil, and revealing a face of wondrous beauty.

“I am Theresa,” she said. “I am Sir Harold’s unhappy wife.”

She dropped into a lounge, and shed passionate tears.[Pg 192] In a moment Elaine was beside her, and murmuring soothing words to poor Theresa.

“I cannot understand why you should come here, Lady Annesley,” she said. “Sir Harold loves you fondly. Why should you call yourself unhappy!”

“I wanted to see you. Oh, I have longed so much to see you—to know if you were good and true! My husband loves me, yes, but not as he loves you. While in the delirium of fever he told me so, and I know that he has seen you recently—that a bitter parting has taken place between you. Lady Elaine, you will never know how happy we were once, in the garden of roses, where I learned to worship my king. Oh, if I could have died then, what a blissful death it would have been!”

“You must forget that Sir Harold and I ever cared for each other,” Lady Elaine said, gently. “It is all over and past, you and he are now husband and wife.”

Theresa looked at her mournfully.

“I wanted to see you,” she went on, “and now I am satisfied. I do not wonder that he loves you best. I have heard much of the shameful story which parted you, and then Sir Harold only married me out of pity for my helplessness, while I loved him, even as you may never love him, Lady Elaine! For my sake he has sacrificed all that makes life worth the living. He does not know that I am here—he will never know unless you tell him. He does not even dream that I have any knowledge of your whereabouts; but I wished to look upon your beautiful face once, and that is why I am here.”

“Lady Annesley, I have parted from Sir Harold forever,” Elaine said. “He came here yesterday to say good-by. His words concerning you were only words of love.”

Theresa did not reply, but gazed wistfully at Lady Elaine.

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“Kiss me once,” she said, after a little while. “I am going now, and we shall never meet again!”

Elaine knew not what to say. After all, Theresa was but a child, and she pressed her lips fondly to the girl’s cold cheek.

“Yes, we shall meet again, Lady Annesley,” she whispered. “In the future, when the pain in our hearts is less. After all, life is but a feverish dream, and our longings are never satisfied.”

Theresa smiled sadly, but there was a sweet, saintly expression on her lovely face that Elaine never forgot.

“I am much happier now that I have seen you,” she said. A long-drawn sigh escaped her, and she added “Good-by.”

She rose to her feet, and Lady Elaine walked with her into the hall, the door of which was standing open, for the early autumn morning was warm and balmy.

There was a last farewell, and then the lovely, little, black figure was gone.

An inexpressible mournfulness seemed to be in the very air, and for a long time Elaine wandered from room to room, a strange feeling of unrest upon her. She could not forget the sorrowfulness of Theresa's last good-by. It seemed to echo about her like a voice from the spirit world.

Late in the evening the little household was startled by an imperative knock, followed by a sharp ring at the doorbell.

The woman who did the duty of housekeeper obeyed the somewhat noisy summons, and a man handed her a sealed letter, saying:

"For Lady Seabright. Hurry up, ma'am; there's an answer wanted!"

Nina received the letter from the housekeeper, and promptly conveyed it to her mistress.

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This is what Elaine read:

Lady Elaine Seabright is requested by Sir Harold Annesley's medical adviser to come to the Victoria Hotel at once if she wishes to see Harold alive. He has met with a street accident, and is fast sinking. His one desire is to see Lady Elaine before he dies. Her ladyship is advised to lose not an instant, but to accompany the bearer of this urgent appeal. A closed carriage has been sent for her exclusive use.

She read the letter twice, and then stood white and rigid. Had this anything to do with Lady Annesley's visit? What tragedy had been committed?

"Nina," she said, "Sir Harold is dying. He has sent for me. You must help me dress at once! I am going to him. Fetch my hat and cloak. That is all I shall want."

"My lady, must I accompany you?" the maid asked, after rapidly obeying the order.

"No, Nina; I do not see the necessity for it. I may have to remain all night. Oh, merciful Heavens! How disaster follows upon the heels of disaster!"

In a few minutes she was ready, and Nina followed her to the door.

"How dark it is, my lady!" she said.

A huge figure loomed forward, and a man's voice said:

"The kerridge is here, my lady. I ain't had no time, your ladyship, to light my lamps; in fact, the order came so sudden that I clean forgot 'em."

"Lead the way," commanded Lady Elaine.

The man obeyed, and she saw a four-wheeled cab harnessed to a powerful horse.

"Do not sit up for me," she said to Nina, "I will telegraph to you in the morning."

She stepped into the carriage, the door was banged fast, and the next moment the horse plunged away under the stinging lash of the whip. Almost at the same instant[Pg 195] Lady Elaine felt that she was not alone, and a terrible dread seized upon her. What did it mean? Against the purple darkness of the night, through one of the windows, she had clearly seen a man's profile! Then, as her eyes became accustomed to the blackness about her, his form was apparent like a misty shadow.

A cold chill seemed to rest upon her heart, but, by a desperate effort, she spoke:

"Can you tell me if Sir Harold's condition is as hopeless as the physician appears to think in the note he has sent to me?"

She waited, but there was no reply. The strain was too awful to bear. She uttered a wild shriek, and a hand was clapped to her mouth, while a sinewy arm clasped her waist. She gasped for breath, and then relapsed into insensibility under the powerful fumes of something pressed to her palpitating nostrils.

The man pulled the checkstring, and the carriage stopped.

"It's all right, Bulger," said the voice of Viscount Rivington. "Drive carefully now, so that we do not attract any needless attention. Straight to Sim's alley, King's Cross."

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CHAPTER XXVIII.

MARGARET'S ATONEMENT.

Like a man bereft of all reason, Sir Harold Annesley paced his wife's room, the words of her last letter seeming to eat into his brain like molten fire.

"Poor Theresa!" he said, at last. "What must have been your mental sufferings to drive you to this? A life's devotion can never repay such wonderful love as yours!"

He clasped one hand to his burning brow, and looked about him mournfully. The place was fragrant with her sweet presence, like the perfume of a flower that is dead.

He stepped to the window, and gazed at the busy crowd below. Then the full force of Theresa's meaning burst upon him, and he cried aloud in his agony.

He reverently placed the letter in his pocketbook, and rang for Stimson. The valet was near at hand, and came quickly into the room.

"Lady Annesley has gone away, Stimson," his master said, brokenly, "has left me with some mistaken notion of giving me my freedom. She heard something last night, when I was angry with that scoundrel, Rivington—something concerning Lady Elaine Seabright, and her heart is broken. Stimson, I must find her if all London has to be searched. Her words may be wild and irresponsible, but my heart reproaches me sorely. Now, try and remember what she said to you last, and how she looked."

The valet could only repeat what he had already stated.

"It seems," Sir Harold said, "that the fates are all[Pg 197] against me. I have been detained at every turn against my will."

He sprang up resolutely.

"There is nothing that you can do, Stimson, and I am incapable of sustained thought at present. Within an hour, though, the whole machinery of the law shall be put in motion."

He stepped swiftly away without another word, and, jumping into a cab, was driven to Scotland Yard once more.

The inspector readily granted him an interview, and listened in amazement to his latest trouble.

"Only an hour since I learned from Asbury that the anonymous letter-writer was within reach when wanted, and I concluded that your troubles were nearly at an end, Sir Harold," he said.

"This is merely an outcome of the disgraceful affair," Annesley replied, savagely clinching his hands. "My poor wife has evidently been driven out of her mind with fear—more upon my account than her own. Now, sir, what can be done?"

"Notice must be promptly given to every police station in the metropolis. The railway station and hotels must be watched. Now, if she had less start of us, the matter would be as simple as A B C. For the present, leave it in my hands, with a carefully-written

description of Lady Annesley's dress, etc. I have no doubt that Asbury has the whole case at his fingers' ends, and I really do not think that you have reason for so much alarm. Women take strange fancies into their heads at times, Sir Harold. Let us hope that you will find her at your hotel when you get back."

Annesley shook his head. "The moment that Mr. Asbury is available let him come to me," he said.

"I am sorry that he is not here now," was the reply.[Pg 198] "I telephoned to his private office only a few minutes before you came in, and hear that he is out of London until the evening. You may depend, however, that we will do our best for you, Sir Harold."

Annesley went back to his hotel, but there was no news of Theresa. He sent for copies of the evening papers, and was almost afraid to read them, lest there should be some awful story concerning his wife.

At this unhappy moment Stimson announced Miss Margaret Nugent, and a wild hope sprang into his heart, to be as quickly dispelled when he saw his cousin standing before him alone, wonder and alarm in her face at sight of his misery.

"So it is you!" he cried, harshly.

"Harold—dear Harold!" Margaret said, "what is the matter? I am leaving London to-day for home. Until last night I have been visiting a friend living at Bayswater, and I have come to see Theresa—because I have been very miserable about something."

"You have driven her from me—perhaps to her death," he replied, flashing upon her a glance of bitter contempt, "wretched woman that you are!"

"You know, then——" she murmured, her lips white and dry.

"Know!" he sneered. "I have had detectives following your every movement. I will have you made a public example of unless you bring my wife back to me, slanderer and liar that you are!"

She dropped upon her knees before him, and sobbed bitter tears.

"Oh, Harold! this from you to me! I who have loved you so well! Let my love for you be my excuse. I have hated all who have seemed to come between us; first, Lady Elaine, and then poor, confiding Theresa. Since I penned that wretched letter my life has been a[Pg 199] torture to me. I have been appalled by the misery that I and Viscount Rivington have already caused you, and yet the gulf between us has but widened. And now I am humiliating myself as woman was never humiliated before. I came back to-day to tell your wife all. I knew that she would forgive me—if she could not forget. I

knew that I shall never forgive myself. Do you not believe me, Harold? Do you not see that I have hardly been responsible for my actions? I think that I must have been mad! I have only just realized the hideousness of my folly—of my wickedness. My love for you, and my jealousy of all others who came between us, have blinded me utterly and completely. Pity me, Harold, though I am not deserving of one moment's consideration from you. Remember the old days—the old days of our childhood—when I deemed that you were all my own. Remember when you petted me, and made me love you! and I never dreamed that any other girl could come between us. I regarded you as my very own! Was it not I who waited in patient expectancy for your return from abroad? Was it not I who gloried in your conquests? And then, when I believed that I was about to taste the sweets of life, the bowl was ruthlessly snatched from my lips. God and myself alone know the bitterness of my trial! I hated all who stood between you and me. I hated Lady Elaine Seabright—I hated the gentle-hearted Theresa; but I have been mad—mad! But at last I have wakened, and it shall be my duty to make atonement!"

Her anguish was terrible to see, but he said, sternly:

"If my innocent Theresa is not restored to me I will never forgive you, Margaret Nugent. I will never look upon your hateful face again! There is no pity in my heart for you—there never will be. Go, and find Theresa!"

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She rose to her feet, her face wet with tears, and turning, silently left him. No punishment could equal the anguish that had pierced her heart. The man whom she had sinned for spurned and hated her!

"I will find Theresa," she whispered to herself; "and I pray to God that I may not be too late, or I shall live hereafter marked with the brand of Cain!"

She did not seek advice anywhere, but went straight to Euston station. She asked for a ticket to Tenterden, but was informed that no further trains stopped there that day. Her only hope of reaching Tenterden was to book to Crayford, and return to Tenterden by a local train. Even by doing this she ran great chances. If the London train was not in exactly to time at Crayford the last local would have left.

"Then I must trust to chance," Margaret thought. "In any event I have to go to Ashbourne to-night, and that is only one station beyond Crayford."

As the booking clerk had anticipated, the train was late at Crayford, and Margaret continued to the station nearest her home, deciding to go to Tenterden the next morning.

In the meantime the day wore late, and still no news came to Sir Harold. It seemed that in a few hours he had aged years.

At nine o'clock Paul Asbury came to the hotel, and there was a look of pity in his eyes.

"I have everything in hand," he said, reassuringly, in answer to Sir Harold's appealing glance; "and all that we can do is—wait! The next few hours are pregnant with big results. I will stay with you if you will permit it. My men have instructions to telephone to me here."

"There is some hope, then?"

"There is always hope," was the reply.

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Annesley told the detective of Miss Nugent's visit that day. Then he wanted to know if Asbury had formed any theory concerning his wife.

"If she had left here at night, I should have feared for the worst," he said. "Impulsive people do strange things in the dark. The river, you know! However, that is quite out of the question, as Lady Annesley left the hotel in the early morning. You say that she had no friend in the world save yourself—not even an acquaintance; but I will tell you this much, Sir Harold, I believe your wife visited Lady Elaine Seabright this morning. A lady enveloped in black was seen to enter Lady Elaine's villa, and leave half-an-hour later. They parted upon the best of terms. I may be wrong, but I incline to the belief that this lady was your wife."

Annesley was strangely moved, but he knew not what to think.

It was eleven o'clock before Asbury was called to the telephone, and he obeyed with alacrity.

In ten minutes he was back, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Two calls almost simultaneously. Sir Harold, your wife was seen at Euston station this morning. Be of good cheer! We shall find her. The second item is even more important. Lady Elaine Seabright was inveigled from home at ten o'clock, drugged, and taken to a certain house in King's Cross by Viscount Rivington and an ex-convict named Bulger."

Sir Harold started up wildly.

“The lady must be released,” continued Asbury; “and I think that it is quite time to stop the viscount’s little career. Come; you can be of no use here.”

Annesley followed him out of the room almost mechanically—received his hat and overcoat from the[Pg 202] attentive Stimson, and the two were driven rapidly in the direction of King’s Cross.

“It will probably be all over when we arrive,” the detective explained. “I issued my orders lest the wily snake gave us the slip. This is a last desperate move on the part of Rivington. His confederate, Lady Gaynor, will be arrested to-morrow upon the charge of obtaining money and jewelry under false pretenses.”

At length the cab pulled up with a jerk, and Asbury jumped out, followed by Annesley, whose blood was boiling with indignation.

A man in uniform was promptly by the side of Asbury, and said:

“A doctor is with her ladyship, and the viscount is dead—shot hisself, sir, and laughed while he did it. Bulger’s locked up!”

“Poor devil,” was the grim rejoinder. “So he has given us the slip!”

They went into the house, and in a minute Annesley was bending over Elaine, one of her hands clasped in his.

“You are not hurt?” he asked.

“No; I shall be better soon. I cannot understand anything yet; my head throbs and burns so much. I knew that you would come to me, Harold!”

The light of a great love was shining in her eyes; then she added:

“Oh, forgive me; I had forgotten—all but your presence here!”

“Do not try to think now,” he whispered, tenderly. “You must return home, and Nina will take care of you. To-morrow you may know all.”

She sighed softly, content that the man she loved was near her!

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CHAPTER XXIX.

PEACE AT LAST.

At the urgent request of Annesley the doctor consented to accompany them back to the villa in Hyde Park and remain in the house all night. He feared that Lady Elaine might be severely shocked when the events of the past hour recurred vividly to her, and wished to feel sure that she would have proper attention at hand. She was tenderly lifted into a carriage by Annesley, and the doctor sat opposite them.

"I will see you at an early hour to-morrow morning, Sir Harold," Paul said at parting. "You may expect news at any time."

Elaine slept through the journey, and hardly a word passed between Annesley and the doctor, the young man's heart was so full of his cruel grief.

When the villa was reached her ladyship was led indoors in a half-dreamful state, and Sir Harold hastened to reassure the terrified Nina.

"You are not dying, sir!" the girl cried. "Oh, what a wicked hoax!"

Annesley said nothing. This was no time for explanations and investigations. He introduced the old doctor, promising to call early in the morning, and was driven back to his hotel.

He looked into his wife's empty room, and wept such tears that men only can weep. He did not undress or attempt to rest. Where was the use of it? The remainder of the night was spent in pacing the floor and thinking of the absent Theresa.

With the advent of daylight a little hope came to him,[Pg 204] and he indulged himself to the extent of a bath. This refreshed him a little, and the sounds of life in the house and the streets told him that there was something to be done. Only in activity could he find relief.

He waited feverishly for the post, but there was only a letter from Colonel Greyson in answer to a telegram. The colonel was coming home at once.

Then Paul Asbury came in. He had no news yet. It was a little too early.

Even while he was speaking a telegram was handed to Sir Harold, and he opened it with trembling fingers. It was from Margaret Nugent, and ran:

"I have found Theresa. Come to the little cottage at Tenterden."

He passed it to Asbury, and the detective read it thoughtfully.

“I have sent a man down there this morning,” he said. “We are forestalled. The next train does not leave until eleven o’clock—the one by which your wife went there yesterday. It is now barely half-past eight.”

“I will go to Hyde Park first,” Annesley replied. “I will see if my wife really called upon Lady Elaine. Asbury, what do you think of this telegram? It has filled me with dread. I am afraid that something has happened.”

“It is like a woman to be vague,” the detective said, evasively. “I do not think that I can be of any further use to you now,” he went on, “but do not forget I am ever at your service.”

They shook hands, and Paul Asbury went away, while Annesley gave his valet some hurried orders.

“My wife has gone back to Tenterden,” he said; “I am going to her at once, Stimson, and, if all is well, shall take her to the Park. You will hear from me during the day.”

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“Yes, Sir Harold.”

Stimson was very pale. He had just been reading of the suicide of Viscount Rivington, and many strange details in connection with it.

It was barely half-past nine when Annesley’s cab pulled up before the villa in Hyde Park.

He was admitted by Nina, and, in answer to his eager inquiries, heard that her mistress was completely recovered.

“The doctor thought it useless to remain,” she concluded, “and has been gone an hour. Oh, Sir Harold,” with quivering lips, “I have read it all in the papers!”

“The papers! Ah!” he exclaimed, “I had forgotten!”

He followed Nina into the morning-room, where Lady Elaine was seated, and a faint flush mounted to her cheeks when he entered.

“You are well, almost?” he said, taking one of her thin hands between his own.

“As well as I can ever be, Harold.”

Some way she could not help addressing him in the old, familiar manner. He was her lover still, though another had a stronger claim upon him.

“I have read all in the newspaper this morning,” she shuddered. “I did not realize the danger I had been in until then, and, but for you, Heaven alone knows what may have happened!”

“Now that Rivington is dead you are free,” Annesley observed, “and I should advise sending for Mr. Worboys at once.”

“I will do as you wish, Harold,” Elaine replied. “It is possible that we shall leave here to-day, but I will let you know soon.”

“Mr. Worboys had better write to my lawyer,” Annesley said, and she flushed redly, saying, “I had forgotten. You will forgive me, Sir Harold?”

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He looked at her, pained and startled.

“I did not mean that, Elaine—not in that way; but of course you have not heard of my possible change of plans—how could you? You have not heard that my wife has left me, and been traced to her own home in the village of Tenterden? I am going to her now, and if all is as I wish it to be, we shall go home to the Park.”

Then Lady Elaine told him of Theresa’s visit to her, and much of what had passed between them.

He listened with tear-dimmed eyes, and only murmured, “Poor Theresa!” How many times had he said this of late!

He said good-by to Lady Elaine, and he believed that it was forever; then he went away, and was driven rapidly to Euston. From Euston he was whirled to Tenterden, and then walked through the old, familiar ways to the cottage embowered in trees and flowers.

“My little Theresa,” he thought, “I wonder if she is waiting for me? Oh, how kind I will be to the sensitive, loving child, and may Heaven punish me if I ever neglect my duty to my wife in thought, word or deed.”

He turned in at the gate, and in fancy saw Theresa’s face peeping at him round the porch. Then he shivered, for all was still, with a silence that spoke of death.

He placed his thumb on the latch of the cottage door, and when it opened he was met by Margaret Nugent. In loathing he turned away, saying: “Where is she—where is Theresa?”

She pointed solemnly upstairs, and he bounded up the steps two at a time, as though madness was in his veins.

“Theresa! Theresa!” he cried, “I am here!”

He stepped into the bedroom, and saw her before him in the sweet dream of death—her hands folded over her[Pg 207] breast, and beside her a huge bunch of the flowers that she had loved so well.

He kissed the dead face, that even now seemed to smile up at him; he shed bitter tears, for he knew that poor Theresa had died for love of him!

They had found her that morning in the old summer arbor—cold and still. Her heart was broken.

Immediately after his wife’s funeral Sir Harold went abroad. The sympathy of his friends was as distasteful to him as the slanderous gossip of the careless and vicious. Never before within the memory of mortal man had the county been in such a turmoil! Following the viscount’s suicide, Lady Gaynor had vanished like a shadow, leaving her servants and debts behind her.

The parting between Lady Elaine and Sir Harold was one that was never forgotten by either. With the concurrence of Mr. Worboys, she had made her home with a widowed sister of Colonel Greyson in a lovely little place among the hills and vales of lovely Kent.

“I will never lose sight of him, Elaine,” the colonel said, “and the future may yet be filled with golden promise!”

A year passed and the wanderer returned, and soon after there was a quiet wedding from the house of Colonel Greyson’s sister. The guests did not number more than a dozen. There was no ostentation—no display—but their way from the church was strewn with flowers, and the bells throbbed with melody.

They went direct to Annesley Park—Sir Harold and Elaine—to the quiet enjoyment of their own home. Their parting had been so long and so bitter that every hour now was too precious to be lost.

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Sometimes they walk hand in hand to the graveyard where poor Theresa lies, and her last resting place is kept fresh and fragrant with flowers, not by their hands alone, but by those of a repentant woman who passes by on the other side—Margaret Nugent!

And when Sir Harold and his wife think of all these things, and bless Heaven for bringing them together at last, the sorrows of the past grow less and less, merged into the fullness and beauty of the present.

THE END.

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