

"ETHEL."

So it was done. And was she about to go without one good-bye? No; she could not. On a slip of paper she wrote in French:

"DEAREST,

"I am too indisposed to descend to-night, but I must see you to say good-bye before you go. At half past nine be on the terrace by the morning-room."

"ETHEL."

Summoning her maid, she gave it to her to deliver. Then began to prepare for her departure until the hour arrived. On the quarter striking, putting on a furred cloak, drawing the hood over her head, she hastened to the terrace. It would be dark there, and he would not see the pallor and distress upon her face. Scarcely had she stepped out upon the hard, smooth gravel, than a pair of young strong arms were about her. Roland's voice sounded in her ear.

"My darling, no more visits to 'My Lady's Walk.' How could I have let you be so foolish! I will be firmer next time."

"There will be no need," she replied, with forced gaiety. "I shall never go again—never."

At first she had made to avoid his embrace, but had yielded to it. Was it not for the last time? One embrace—one kiss—then separation.

"You are very ill, dearest?" he asked.

"No—oh, no—to-morrow I shall be well. It was a chill. Roland, let me confess the truth, I was frightened."

"What idiots we all were!" he exclaimed, and drew her closer. "Poor Ethel, how you tremble, despite your furs!"

"Yes, I must not remain long; but to-morrow all will be well."

He did not notice how she nestled to him. He thought the break in her voice was because she shivered. Could he have guessed what the morrow had in store for him—that he would look in vain for her who was his life!

Not even a presentiment came to him, and it was he who urged their parting, nervous for her health.

"I must not keep you here, darling," he said; "the air is piercing, and to-morrow you must be strong and bonnie. Good night."

"Good night, dear Roland."

Her lips trembled as she let his press them; a faintness seized her. It was for the last time!

At that thought she threw her arms passionately about him, crying:

"My dearest—my love! Oh! Roland, tell me, dear, again, and yet again, you will never doubt my affection—you will ever believe you are, you ever will be, the dearest in the world to me?"

Half sobbing, hysterically she clung to him; it seemed her heart would break to let him go.

It was he who forced their parting. Alarmed for her, he led her to the open doors of the morning-room; again, again he kissed her; then he left.

Ethel stood dazed, rigid as a statue; then she sprang to the glass doors.

"Roland, Roland," she sobbed, "come back! Oh! let me look upon you once more!"

But he was gone; he had left with a smile, exclaiming: "*Au revoir!*" She had answered: "Farewell!"

Staggering, she leaned against the door-frame.

Just then, from the front of the house, came the voices of the carol-singers; their song brought no comfort to her. Winter was around her, but a colder winter was in her heart.

"Roland gone," she moaned, bursting into tears, "for the last time!"

When the Christmas dawn broke cold and pale, its gray, chill light fell upon Ethel Winkworth hastening away from Melton Regis to the station to catch the first train, which passed early.

Two hours later her maid entering her room found it vacant.

Twelve hours later Ethel knocked at a small cottage situate among the wild, drear, and sterile beauty of the Highlands. She was answered by an old, tidy-looking body, who exclaimed:

"Hech! a leddie here at this hour! and in sic a night! Ye maun hae lost your way."

"I hope not!" said Ethel. "This is Mr. Winkworth's?"

"Ay, sure. But ye are the first visitor I kened him ever to hae," was the reply, while the clear, Highland eyes peered at the girl suspiciously, curiously. "If it's to see him, ye jest canna, lassie, for he's no well!"

"Then must I nurse him," said Ethel, gently. "Please let me in; the snow is so deep, and I am very tired. This cottage is, I hope, to be my home."

"Your home, lassie! Hech now! Pray, who may ye be?"

Heartsick, and ready to drop with fatigue, yet deeply anxious respecting the meeting with her father, leaning against the wall, she answered:

"I am Mr. Arnold Winkworth's daughter."

CHAPTER III. IN THE SNOWDRIFT.

"Was there danger?" had asked Ethel, and learned that for twenty-four hours hope had been abandoned.

Dying—her father—and she had never been told! Was it kind—was it just—was it human of Sir Ughtred?

"Who attended upon him?" she inquired.

"Who men? Why, who was there but just me ain sel? Nabody ever visits Mr. Winkworth?"

Ill, dying, alone, attended but by a hireling! Oh, it was too cruel—too, too unkind!

(To be Continued.)

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