

IN AN EVIL MOMENT.

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CHAPTER I.

MADE DESPERATE.

It was a typical New Zealand day. Not a flock of cloud floated across the Italian blue of the glorious sky. There was a strange stillness upon the earth; the delicious freshness of the air thrilled every nerve and swelled the heart, till one's whole being was ready to burst into a joyous song of praise and thankfulness.

The Southern Alps, crowned with everlasting snow, stood out with cold distinctness against the richer sky.

To the North the giant peaks of the Karkouras kissed the glowing heavens, then to drop and greet the soft Pacific. Snow-fed streams, like silver threads, ran through the valleys; here and there the verdant plains were dotted with homesteads; whilst over the whole magic picture of kindly forest and placid pasture-land, towering mountain and awful gorge, tempting lakes and pleasant hill-sides, was an inspiring light, that could be felt, but cannot be described.

On a pleasant "flat" (as a valley is called here), a moderate distance from Christchurch, stood the stunted home of an English settler. Oaks and maples and poplars were growing about it; much of the surrounding ground was dug up, waiting for the spring time to be sown with English grass seed. In all directions were luxuriant bushes of broom, planted plentifully to preserve the crops from that scourge of New Zealand—the south-west wind; at every turn the eye encountered fresh indications of thought and industry.

It was mid-winter, but the afternoon was beautifully warm. Within the house, a woman, dressed in a short lincey costume, sat by an open window. Near to her, but on the verandah, a man lolled lazily in a low cane, easy-chair, smoking, with apparently much enjoyment and freedom from care, a dark-coloured, chubby wooden pipe. Ere the night comes they will have to close the windows and light fires; for though the day is bright, and the sun has so much power, the darkness will bring a nipping frost, and the early morning show a frozen ground. The woman was short and rather thin. Her black hair lay smooth upon her head, and its deep darkness threw into strong contrast first the peculiarly broad, white parting which struck one as being her strongest feature; then her anxious, pallid face. Looking into this, it was impossible to miss traces of withered beauty; but as she sat with her thin, determined lips pressed closely together, and her hands so tightly clenched that her long, almond nails were forced into her flesh, there was nothing in her expression to win your sympathy. Her eyes were small, but marvelously full of fire; the faint lines running from her mouth told of suffering and suppressed passion. Her nose was pinched, and it had a curious habit of dilating as she sat outwardly calm, but inwardly wrestling with a consuming rage.

The man—tall, stout, broad-shouldered and florid—was her direct antithesis. His large eyes were blue and soft. Her wore his flaxen hair so long that it fell upon his shoulders. His appearance and his manner bespoke subdued geniality. Judging from his open, honest face, he could be nothing but a manly, free-hearted, straightforward fellow—a man who would scorn to do a dishonourable or a cruel action. He had only one bad feature—a thirty-looking, fishy mouth. This was, however, concealed from general observation by a silky moustache. His dress resembled an English gamekeeper's; and, as he sat in his verandah, this bright, still afternoon, slowly emitting clouds of smoke, he appeared to be an excellent specimen of good-natured content.

The faces of these two people—man and wife—were in strong contrast. Her's so full of passion, and so worn and weary; his beaming with a happiness born only surely of good deeds.

"So Gregory," said the woman, her nails pressing deeper into her palms as she spoke, "you mean to do this thing?"

He leisurely knocked the ash from his pipe, and turning his broad face towards her, said, in a curiously effeminate voice—

"Yes, my love, I am going to England."

The woman stamped her foot passionately. "Don't call me your love," she cried, in flat energetic tones. "Don't play the hypocrite indoors, as you are compelled to do out."

He raised his eyebrows, and with a pleasant smile repeated her words—

"Play the hypocrite! Surely, Rhode, you are jesting?"

Her nails were dyed crimson, and from her one hand a little blood trickled. "I could bear with an open scoundrel," she said, between her teeth, "but when I look into your handsome, lying face, and listen to your soft, false voice, I feel as though I should go mad—as though I could kill you, or kill myself, or both of us!"

Hard and bitter as her tone was, his quick ear detected the hint of a moan in her last words, and he smiled more complacently than before. When he replied, however, the smile had left his face, and he spoke drily—had he not been such a noble-looking fellow, we should have said mockingly—

"This climate, Rhode, evidently does not agree with you. A return to England will do you good."

"Do not speak to me of England!" she cried, starting from her seat and wildly pacing the room. "Never, never let me hear of England again!"

As she walked her agitation increased. Suddenly she stepped on to the verandah, and, with compressed lips, stood over her husband.

"Do you want to drive me mad?" she demanded, hoarsely.

He was cleaning the bowl of his pipe. Before he answered her, he carefully blew through the long amber mouthpiece. With great deliberation he freed the scraped bowl from the sodden tobacco at the bottom; then, placing the pipe in its leather case, and turning his broad, honest face to hers, he said quietly—

"I should be sorry, my darling, to drive you anywhere. You generally have your own way, and, as you appear to have made up your mind to it, I've no doubt that you'll go without any assistance from me."

He laughed pleasantly, rose with a languid yawn, and turned from the open air into the room. She sprang after him, and stood between him and the further door.

"You shall not go!" she declared, passionately, her face now flushed, but her voice strangely calm. "You shall not leave me until I have your answer—until, at least, we understand each other."

"My darling," he expostulated, in a soft, injured tone, that made her gnaw her lips, and quiver with passion, "I thought that I had answered you."

"Do not fool me, Gregory. Are you going to England?"

His gentle blue eyes met her steadily as he answered quietly and determinedly, "I am going to England, Rhode."

Her hands flew to the breast of his coat, and she held him firmly.

"When I look into your face," she cried, with fierce energy, "I wonder whether your evil heart ever realises its own baseness. Listen to me, Gregory Axon, and I will show you for the hundredth time your cruelty and your villainies. In an evil moment I met you, and loved you, as God help me, I could love you now. Every word you uttered I believed. No woman ever trusted man as I trusted you. Had an angel from heaven told me then that you were a heartless hypocrite—a living lie—I would not have listened. Even now, though I have had every proof of your treachery, Heaven knows it is hard to credit. Don't look at me like that. Don't smile upon me. Turn your eyes away from me, or I shall fancy that the old days have come again, when I was mad enough to think you loved me."

For a moment the woman paused. When she resumed, her voice was a little softer, and a wistful look had crept into her eyes.

"You know," she said, "how I loved you—how, within a month of our marriage, I gave you all the money I had control over—"

"My darling—"

These two words broke down all her re-

straint. Her face grew almost livid with passion.

"Do not mock me," she cried, "with a show of love which I know so well cannot exist. Do anything say anything but that. I would rather hear you curse me, than you should try to trick my ear, with an echo of the empty words that won me, and once made my heart beat with so much joy."

Again she paused, and a tiny tear trickled down her cheek.

"I know what you would say," she went on. "You have said it many times before. 'I never asked you for the money.' Neither did you; but by a thousand petty deceptions and cunning exhibitions of love you so won my heart that I could not rest until I had made you independent of any chance caprice of my own. The day that my love prompted me to do this thing saw yours wither up. It was hard, hard—hard and very bitter to bear. From that day you were a husband only in name. Until you had spent the last halfpenny, until you were so surrounded by debts that it was dangerous for you to venture out, I scarcely ever saw you. Away from home, you were the popular, generous, kind, and moral George Axon. Not one who grasped your hand dreamt that you were slowly killing your wife at home."

"You are talking very wildly, Rhode," he said, gently—"very wildly indeed. You know that I would not injure you for the world."

"I know that were I lying dead at your feet this moment not one tear of sorrow would spring to your eyes; that with the least possible delay Mary Hope would be your wife."

He smiled reproachfully at her. Had you looked upon him you would have felt convinced that his wife was doing him a grievous wrong.

"When you were penniless, and in daily danger of the jail, you returned to me and charmed me—fool that I was—with a tale of your deep contrition and your revived love. Led astray by the fatal honesty of your face, and the persuasive softness of your voice, I believed that your penitence was sincere. From the income which fortunately uncle had settled upon me, I released you from your debts, forgave you your cruelty and neglect, strove to forget your faithlessness, and made an effort to banish the name of Mary Hope from my memory. I took you to my heart again, and the past was buried. Did I not do all this, George Axon? Did I not do it on one condition?"

"You thought, Rhode," he said gravely, "that New Zealand would be better for me than England, and that I might be more successful at farming than I have been in my other speculations—"

"Speculations!" she echoed scornfully.

"And the result?" he went on quietly, "shows what an excellent little judge you were. I have succeeded."

"You have said so," she cried, "and so comes, all my misery. I told you that all should be forgotten and forgiven if you agreed to leave England—never return to it. You were penniless then," she went on, disdainfully, "and you eagerly accepted my terms. With my money you have made money here. Three short years, and you are a fairly rich man—rich enough to be independent of me—to tell me to my face that you are going to England—to break my heart—to kill me!"

She paused, and for a moment hid her hands.

Then, in a wild entreating voice, she cried—

"Do not do this thing, George. For your own sake, for the sake of your manhood, do not do this wild, cowardly thing. You have, I know, long since, ceased to care for me, to trouble about my agony; but for your own sake I implore you not to do this wicked thing."

Still he looked pleasantly upon the frenzied face beneath his own. He patted her gently on her shoulder, and said, in his softest voice—

"I am going to England, Rhode."

"You are going to that woman," she shrieked.

He smiled, and continuing to pat her, answered, "Perhaps to that woman."

Her pent-up passion burst its flood-gates. For a moment it seemed as though she would choke. Then she raised her clenched fist and struck him in the face. A ring upon her finger caught his forehead, and when her hand dropped and she stared aghast at what she had done, there was a clean deep cut upon it that bled profusely.

No words of anger escaped him. His face

grew a shade paler—his smile became harder. As he pressed the wound with his handkerchief, he said grimly, "If I do leave you this will be my justification in the eyes of the world."

"It will," she cried with bitter vehemence, "and the world will say that the good-natured, easy-tempered, George Axon did well to leave his passionate, dangerous wife. Not a living soul will credit my sufferings. No one would believe you capable of a systematic course of cowardly and heartless cruelty. How day by day you torture me and goad me to do some frightful crime. How you have crushed my heart, and made me reckless, despairing—mad!"

Still pressing the wound with his handkerchief, and with a return of the old mocking smile, he looked steadily at her, and slowly walked from the room.

As the door closed behind him she sank on a chair, and wringing her hands, cried piteously, "God help me!"

Left to herself, she sobbed with intense agony. Her body writhed in deep misery. Suddenly her cries ceased. She again stood hard and rigid, her tears burnt from her cheeks as by a great heat.

"I will not bear it," she declared through her clenched teeth. "I cannot again live through the shame of being deserted—betrayed to be dead—a thousand times better. I had one living soul to sympathise with me—to believe me—it would be different. It's maddening to think how they all love him—how they pity him for being married to me—I who have loved him, and who would have given my life for him."

She paced the room with rapid strides, her mouth firmly set, and a strange wild light blazing in her eyes.

"I cannot live through it," she said presently in a hard voice, destitute of all emotion. I must die!"

She repeated these words three times, and stood cold and motionless. Presently she started, and with a look of terror on her face, cried—

"And leave him free—free to marry Mary Hope! No, no, no; if I die he must die, too!"

She returned to the chair, and with her elbows on her knees, and her sharp chin resting in her palms, she sat thinking for good half hour. Minute by minute her face grew more inflexible, her cheeks paler, the light in her eyes more fierce. Her lips were quite bloodless. When she rose and walked to the window a terrible thought had taken possession of her. Slowly, slowly, but with horrible distinctness, it had come upon her. It had subdued all other thoughts; it had made her its slave.

She would not, she could not live. Her heartless husband had calculated that this systematic cruelty would drive her to destroy herself. Should he triumph? Should her murderer hold his head high among his fellows, and be free to marry an infant's rival, while she lay unwept for in a suicide's grave? Oh never! If he drove her to take her own life, surely by the law of God he was her murderer? Why should he not suffer by the law of man a murderer's doom, and the mark be torn from his face, and the world see him in his true colours!

If she plunged a dagger into her heart, it would be his hand that really guided the weapon.

"To night when the men return," she said slowly, "I will do the deed. I will call the people in, and with my dying breath denounce him as my murderer. No one will believe me now. In death will be justified."

Poor distraught and suffering one! Years of contempt, mockery, and refined cruelty have driven you mad, and you know not what you do!

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

When a man has no desire but to speak plain truth, he may say a great deal in a very narrow space.

Not to know what has been transacted in former times is to continue always a child. If no use is made of the labor of past ages, the world must also remain in the infancy of knowledge.

In order to come at a true knowledge of ourselves, we should consider how far we may deserve the praises and approbation which the world bestows upon us; whether the actions they celebrate proceed from laudable and worthy motives, and how far we are really possessed of the virtues which gain us applause among those with whom we converse.