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The Mystery of Rutledge Hall

"The Cloud With a Silver Lining"

CHAPTER XLV.

In silence he waited. Ah, how cruel he was! Sidney thought pitiously. He must know what it was she wished to say to him.

"Stephen," she began again tremulously, and once more the faint voice faltered.

"What is it?" he said.

"Can you—will you forgive me?" she whispered, leaning heavily against the table, and looking at him in piteous appeal.

"Forgive you?" he echoed. "Forgive you what, Sidney?"

At the tenderness of his voice, reproachful though his intonation was, she broke down, and the answer came with sobs she could not repress.

"Ah, you know—you know!" she cried passionately. "My doubt of you, the suspicion you yourself called horrible! And yet—and yet—it was its own punishment! Ah, do you know what I have suffered in the terrible thought—so much more terrible, too, when I thought that through me punishment would come to you? Stephen, I think if you could know—Ah, I cannot plead!" she said, falling suddenly upon her knees, and holding out her little trembling hands to him. "I have no words, no excuse, save that I was mad—no plea for pardon, save that through it all I loved you."

"You loved me?" he questioned.

"You do not believe me," she sobbed. "I deserve that you should not; yet it is true. Oh, Stephen, I never loved you more dearly, more entirely than on that night! I could have killed Frank for accusing you; but when I looked back—Oh, yes, I know that I was mad! No one but a mad woman would have believed you—guilty—and—"

He had raised her from the ground and supported her on his arm, as he looked down gravely upon her tear-dimmed eyes and trembling lips, which pleaded so incoherently and yet so well; but there was no tenderness in his clasp, he merely gave her the support she needed, and without which she must have fallen.

"What have you seen in me to lead you to such a belief?" he asked her, seeing she could not speak. "That I might have caused the death of Mr. Rutledge by an accident is certain; but that I should have concealed the fact and let another man suffer for

my cowardice is not; it seems to me a crime so dastardly that I could not believe it of my worst enemy. She, poor soul, was afraid, and hardly thought, in her terror, of the misery she was causing others. Had she done so, I—"

He paused, remembering that even on her death-bed Sidney Rutledge's eyes had gleamed fiercely with hatred of Sidney. Would she have spared her suffering if she could?

At the pitying tone of her husband's voice as he spoke of the unhappy woman who had caused all their misery a faint red tinge came into Sidney's face, a pang of the old jealousy struck her heart.

"You can make excuses for her," she said unsteadily, "and yet you make none for me! Oh, my husband, how can I make you believe that I never for one moment ceased to love you? Ah, won't you try?"—as she spoke, she raised her tender earnest face for a moment to his—"won't you try to forgive me, and then perhaps some day—you may even love me—a little—some day—not yet perhaps—but one day in the future?"

"That day dawned many a year ago, Sidney," Stephen said, tenderly; "and, my darling, when this night comes life will be over for me."

Close in his arms now, pressed to his heart so that she could feel its fierce passionate throbs against her shoulder, she raised her head and looked at him with wistful wondering eyes, "redolent in their joy, passionate in their enduring love. On his face there was a light of tenderness she had never seen there before. Without a word she placed her white arms around his neck, and her whole frame thrilled as his lips touched hers.

And thus, on their real wedding-day, the cloud was lifted from the lives of Stephen and Sidney Daunt; and that cloud, heavy as it had been, had, like other clouds, its silver lining. The trouble through which they had passed had but increased their love for each other, and had deepened and strengthened the characters of both husband and wife.

A few months later, when the roses had faded and golden autumnal tints were clothing the woods with varied and gorgeous beauty, Stephen Daunt

and his wife visited the pretty, peaceful little cemetery on the outskirts of Paris, and stood for several minutes in meditative prayer before a grave bearing the initials S. R.

It was about this time, too, that they received a letter from Agnes Burton, telling of her engagement to Frank Greville.

No matter what the future may bring to them, they will always remember the unhappy woman who rests in the grave with the initials S. R. on the stone, and whose peerless beauty had been in truth a Fatal Dowry!

THE END.

Lord Wharton's Niece
— AND —
The Heir to Regna Court

CHAPTER II.

Mrs. Lexton gave a feminine little shudder.

"It isn't of any consequence, Claire," she said.

"I suppose he is not particularly pleasant looking; but I have got used to him, and his countenance doesn't impress me as it has impressed you. Use is everything."

"Who is Mordaunt?" asked Mrs. Lexton. "His clerk?"

"No; his son," replied Claire, indifferently. "I have seen very little of him. He has just come from Oxford, I believe."

Mrs. Lexton gazed at her companion in a half bewildered way; she remembered her a girl, all legs and wings, stopping over an exercise book in a cheap seaside lodging, and the change, not only in Claire's circumstances, but in her form, face and manner, confused the timid woman.

As they re-entered the house by a door opening into the back hall a bell rang somewhere above them.

"That is the dressing-bell," said Claire. "You will not need to make an elaborate toilet, Mary; we are, of course, quite alone. Can you find your way down to the drawing-room—see, this is it—oh, shall I come and fetch you?"

When Mrs. Lexton came down, she found Claire awaiting her in a drawing-room of vast proportions, and decorated in dull white and gold, with furniture and hangings of amber and sea-blue. The room was magnificently striking; but Claire was still more impressed as she stood by the window, looking at the falling sun. Her maid had, perhaps in honor of the visitor, clothed her in a plain, but rich black silk, the soft texture of which draped her graceful figure to perfection. The maid had also fastened a diamond ornament in the dark hair, and placed a red rose in the bosom of the dress. Claire was quite unconscious of the effect she produced—indeed, she scarcely knew what she wore—and she came forward, quite simply, and drew her friend's arm through hers as the butler announced dinner.

The dining-room was not particularly large, but it was famous for its old oak and its pictures and plate, and impressed Mrs. Lexton, even more perhaps than any other part of the house had done. The dinner was not an elaborate one, as dinners go nowadays, but its courses seemed endless to the faded woman, for whom a chop or a sole had hitherto amply sufficed for her principal meal, and the noiseless ministrations of the stately butler, and the two tall footmen, made her for a time nervous and constrained, but, aided by Claire's quiet and perfect self-possession, Mrs. Lexton succeeded in dispelling her feeling of shyness, and the two friends talked freely, and enjoyed their meal. But all through it Mrs. Lexton's wonder at the change in Claire remained with her.

When they returned to the drawing-room, Claire took her by the arms and gently forced her into a deep-seated chair.

"Now you shall rest, Mary, and I will play to you," she said. "I must have tired you out with my talking."

Mrs. Lexton leaned back in the luxurious chair with a sigh of content, and Claire went to the piano. As she played softly, she was thinking of the past, which the presence of this middle-aged cousin of hers had brought back so plainly. She had been left an orphan in Mary Lexton's charge, and had been brought up by her until the day Lord Wharton had suddenly remembered his very distant relation, Claire Sartoris, and had sent for her.

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