

From the Hands of Her Enemy.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS.

CHAPTER V.

As Vere Tempest passed the door of his cousin's private sitting room, on his way to fetch his skates, he heard voices.

'Lady Emma he knew was not there, and no one was allowed in her sanctum without her special permission. He involuntarily stopped.

Magda's voice!

He caught the words—

'I will do your bidding. I will tell him, but not yet. Oh! not yet.'

The anguish in the beloved voice cut the listener to the soul.

To whom was she speaking?

Alas! the answering tones were those of the man, who, in his heart of hearts, he likened to Satan.

'That is all I wish.'

He heard no more.

The door, which had stood ajar, was shut.

Something forbade him to enter, and he went down to the abandoned library, and waited for Magda.

At last he heard her light step in the hall.

He appeared in the doorway, and drew her in.

She was dressed in her skating costume, and her silver mounted skates hung over her arm—a pinched, frightened look was upon her face.

She hastily turned her face aside, as though avoiding her lover's earnest gaze.

'What is there between you and Crawford?' He held her from him, and looked into her face.

She shrank from him as though he had dealt her a blow.

Had it, indeed, come to this?

'Oh, tell me all, beloved! I've been on in tones of horror with suppressed emotion.

'You have met this man, before; he has some hold over you. He knows some little girl's secret, and, villain that he is, trades upon it. That is all, is it not? Speak, darling, tell me the truth! Good heavens, you surely do not fear me! I will shield you—I, your own lover. Speak, speak! My God, Magda! You don't love him, do you? Don't say it! Oh, Magda, Magda!'

The anguish with which these last words were uttered cut as a knife into the heart of the unhappy girl.

You are right, Vere. I love him—no, no, I hate him! What am I saying? Don't notice me. I don't mean anything I say. I am unnerved—unnerving.'

A great impulse of pity mingled with Vere's love as he saw her thus, and he would have taken her in his arms, but she pushed him from her, and her beautiful eyes had in them the look one sees in a hunted animal.

'No no!' she cried. 'Don't touch me. I—I am not worthy—not in one single way. You do not know me, Vere. I am not the Magda you think I am; but I want to tell you one thing—one thing you must believe. I cannot marry you. Tell them here—in the house—what you will. I must go away. Oh, Vere, don't look at me like that! I cannot bear it, and burying her face in her hands, she burst into bitter weeping.

'Where did you meet him?'

Vere Tempest's voice was very stern.

'I have never met him—never—never,' came from the pale lips brokenly, slowly.

'That is a lie!' replied Tempest coldly.

He had braced up his manhood to meet the blow.

'Good-bye, Magda. You have deceived me bitterly. May God help you if you are indeed in the toils of this man.'

Turning, he left her standing as one turned to marble.

The party from Trelawney Court were evidently having a good time of it.

The ice was in perfect condition; the ladies were looking their best in the most captivating skating dresses, displaying perfectly shod feet, gliding hither and thither over the carefully swept surface of the lake.

Pretty Mrs. Norton was in her element; she was, far and away, the best skater there—except Adrian Crawford, who ran her very close indeed.

The two were the observed of all observers.

This suited the fair Edith well.

She was in the habit of being noticed and admired wherever she went, and flirtation, with her, was as the breath of life; so she embarked in one with the graceful, distinguished foreign looking, man who today seemed nothing loth to play up to her.

'There, that's what I call the perfection of skating!' exclaimed Emma Trelawney to her cousin, as they stood together by the bank, watching the couple wheeling in and out, cutting figures, waltzing together—in fact, performing every possible feat upon skates.

Vere turned sharply away, and a muttered imprecation escaped his lips.

'Why, Vere, is anything the matter? I inquired Lady Emma in surprise. 'What is wrong?'

Looking in the handsome face, she was suddenly struck with the expression upon it.

'What a different face it was since the morning!'

All the life and happiness seemed to have died out, leaving in their place nothing but sternness and misery.

'Tell me, dear Vere,' she continued, laying her hand upon his arm affectionately. They were like brother and sister, these two. 'Can I help you in any way? Have you and Magda quarrelled?'

He broke into a short, bitter laugh.

'She will not give me the chance of a quarrel,' he said. 'Our engagement is at an end.'

'At an end?' repeated Emma in dismay; 'but—but it only took place on—'

'Saturday. Exactly,' interposed Vere; 'and this is Tuesday. Time enough and to spare for a woman to change her mind—'

'But I don't understand!' pursued the bewildered Emma, who could have cried with vexation—all her well laid plans upset! 'What is the reason? There must be a reason. And when did it happen—the breaking off, I mean?'

'About an hour ago,' was the curt reply; 'and the reason is this.'

He made a wide sweep with his arm around the lake.

Emma's eyes followed it.

What could he mean?

She saw nothing but the skaters gliding about in couples, or singly, as fancy dictated; and then—her glance fell on Crawford.

He was standing, smiling into the little widow's face; but his eyes were directed slightly towards them.

A sudden light broke in upon her.

Was it possible that Vere could be jealous of that man?

What utter nonsense!

A man Magda had never seen in her life! Still, it might be—

'You are not, surely, jealous—of him—of Crawford?' she asked, with quick impulse.

'Jealous! Oh, no; it is something more than that. You, at any rate, had better know the truth at once. She—Magda—has thrown me over for him. You were right, Emmie; they are affinities! With a wild laugh.

Emma uttered an exclamation of thorough surprise not unmixed with horror.

'You must be mistaken. Why, she hardly knows him,' she said.

'Then she has deceived you, too. I thought as much. I did not think you would have done me such a bad turn as to ask him here, knowing—'

'No; oh, no! Vere, dear boy, I am glad you don't think that. The match I had so set my heart upon! Oh, dear me! what on earth am I to tell people?'

'Nothing at present; let things develop themselves. I shall go away—telegram—urgent business—you know the style of the thing—'

'Oh, dear, dear!' sighed Emma. 'And you both seemed so happy. I can't understand it. You say Magda has met him—Crawford—before? She never told me. Ah! I do think it means of her. I shall speak to her, I shall—'

Vere interrupted.

'Say nothing, do nothing. Henceforth, Magda and I are as far asunder as the North pole from the South.'

He set his lips together with determination, and Emma knew that he had been very hard hit.

'You—love her still in spite of all!'

She smiled with conviction.

'Yes; I love her still, and would save her if I could.'

'Can you? Oh! do you think you can? It is all my fault, Vere, although you are too generous to tell me so to my face. If only I had never asked him to the Court!'

Emma wailed conscience stricken.

'It was a mistake, certainly,' admitted Captain Tempest. 'You see, you knew nothing whatever about the man; such rashness is always a mistake. But there it ends—so far as you are concerned, at this event. You forget Miss Norton was already his friend.'

'She is deceitful! I can never forgive her, never! She has ruined your life, Vere,' cried Emma with rising wrath.

Vere Tempest smiled.

'Don't take it to heart so, little cousin, and don't be too hard on—on her yet. We don't know all. That man has her in his power. It is not love she feels for him.'

'No,' said Emma, brightening up; 'she seemed to have almost an aversion to him. Hush! here he comes with Edith Norton. I shall be very stiff to him, and I hope he shall have the good sense to leave the Court at once.'

'I don't see why he should,' replied Tempest. 'He has only cut me out with the lady—legitimately.'

'Ah! it is legitimately!' queried Emma, with a shake of her blonde head.

'I don't like your lake one bit,' said Mrs. Norton vivaciously, skating up to her hostess, and executing an intricate pas de seal in front of her. 'It's gloomy and weird. Fancy it on a wet, windy day! Ugh! it gives me the shivers!' with an affected little shrug of the shoulders.

'You haven't seemed to think so up till now,' remarked Jack Leslie, who hovered near them. 'You appeared to be having a good time with that—with Crawford,' jealously.

'So I have,' retorted the fair widow brightly. 'A splendid time. He's far and away the best skater here. Why—where is he? Looking round in some surprise.'

'At the other end of the lake with Miss'

Durer. It's no good, Mrs. Norton, you may as well take a turn with me; you don't know how improved I am this year. Do try me,' Leslie added persuasively.

'Well, I will,' replied Edith Norton, 'if it you are very good.'

CHAPTER VI.

Vere Tempest kept his word, and at breakfast next morning his seat was empty.

He had had a telegram, Lady Emma explained from the head of the table, and was sorry to leave without bidding them all 'Good-bye.'

As she said this, she fixed her eyes on the colorless face of Magda Durer, whose eyes were intent upon her empty plate.

Adrian Crawford was suave and smiling as usual.

'Good-byes' must be in the air, I think,' he remarked. 'I also am obliged to tear myself away today. Letters of importance. Lady Emma, I am so sorry; I had so hoped to have remained another two days, at any rate.'

Lady Emma muttered something. She was not an adept at deceit, and she was dreadfully angry with this fascinating foreigner.

'Well, you won't lose much,' exclaimed Mrs. Norton. 'No skating! Look at the weather—with a glance at the leafless trees, which were blown hither and thither as though by a hurricane.'

'I must say, you are not very complimentary, Edith,' pouted her ladyship. 'I had such a capital plan for passing the day. Now I shan't tell you. A! can't skate like you!'

Edith jumped up, kissed the pretty hostess, and made her peace.

'You dear!' she said. 'The weather doesn't matter a bit where you are. Now, Mr. Crawford, you must wait and hear what this plan is. You needn't go till evening, need you?'

She looked up archly into the dark, handsome face.

Crawford shook his head.

'I'm afraid—' he began.

'There is no need to decide now,' said her ladyship, rising abruptly. 'Mr. Crawford can have a carriage to take him to the station at any time he wishes.'

Everybody remarked on the want of cordiality in her tones, and Sir George, who had the soul of hospitality, looked annoyed; besides, it was so unlike Emmie.

'My dear,' he whispered to her as they crossed the hall, 'you were not very cordial—hardly polite.'

'And I don't feel either cordial or polite,' his pretty wife snapped. 'He has upset all my party, and I shall be glad when he's gone—yes, glad!'

Sir George said no more.

He knew he should hear all about it in good time.

It was a miserable day; a quick thaw had set in, the previous evening, and the lake was nothing but an expanse of teasing water and lumps of slushy ice.

The gaunt trees rattled their leafless branches, and the reeds rustled and shook as though with an ague.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon, and already growing dark.

The clouds were scudding across the leaden sky, and wild gusts of wind swept and tore at everything.

Crawford had declined the offer of a carriage to convey him to the railway station, saying that he should enjoy the walk.

'Tastes differ,' said his hostess with a shrug of the shoulders, and thought no more about the matter.

At four o'clock exactly he reached the lake on his way to the station.

Under the bare trees Magda Durer was waiting for him.

He went up to her; he had expected to see her there.

'You understand? You will leave by the eleven-fifteen train to-morrow. Tell me no. I will meet you, and then—'

He kissed her cold lips, and repeated—

'You understand?'

She bowed her head silently.

She drew her sealskins round her, and turned her face to the Court.

As she passed round the lake, she remembered the old legend concerning it, which she had often heard—that when one was to rest beneath its treacherous bosom the calm waters were stirred by a sudden dark shadow, which took the form of the Angel of death.

She stood gazing, fascinated.

As she looked, the surface of the lake became troubled, and from east to west the solemn lake held Magda Durer and her secret.

The night closed in rapidly, black and tempestuous.

Inside the Court all was warmth, brightness and gaiety.

Lady Emma had unfolded her little schemes for the entertainment of her guests, and her ideas had 'caught on' wonderfully well.

She would have nothing less than a masquerade; and to day, being so stormy, she was devoted to selecting suitable characters, dresses &c.

A big chest in one of the galleries running round the hall was pillaged, and was found to contain all manner of suitable and unsuitable apparel, and the delighted party were in deep discussion as to the best ways and means of utilizing the rich old brocades and velvets so as to adapt them to their purpose.

'It is a thousand pities that handsome Mr. Crawford has gone,' sighed Edith Norton, holding at length a turquoise blue embossed velvet against her pretty face.

'He was such a picturesque being himself that he was bound to be an artist at heart.'

Marian Lester, to whom this was addressed, laughed.

She was a wholesome minded, healthy English girl, and one of the few of her sex who did not resemble Crawford.

'That is so like you, dear Mrs. Norton,' she said. 'Appearances go for everything with you. I fancy, if you could fathom Mr. Crawford's art, you would be considerably astonished, perhaps shocked.'

'What do you mean, Marian? I don't believe you like Mr. Crawford,' replied Edith, with wide open eyes.

'No; I do not. Candidly, I dislike him. I have no sympathy with adventurers and charlatans,' said the outspoken girl.

'That is what Captain Tempest calls him; but then we know the reason of his animosity. Magda! Why, where is Magda! Haven't you seen her all the afternoon. Emmie! Emmie, dear! where is Magda?'

The little widow turned to her hostess, who answered quickly, a shade passing over her smiling face—

'Magda is in her room, lying down with a nervous headache. She has been there all the afternoon, and begged me not to have her disturbed till she rang.'

'Strange! I put in the Rev. Arthur Herbert, who, at the moment, was looking very unocular indeed in a cavalier hat and plumes. I am certain I saw Miss Durer cross the park about half past three o'clock.'

'Impossible!' interrupted Emma. 'She has never left her room; but it is time she came down—ow. I will go up myself with a cup of tea, and insist on her choosing her character at once.'

'She would look lovely as Mary, Queen of Scots,' said Sir Willard Stone, who had not given up hopes in spite of all.

'Yes,' returned Mr. Herbert; 'here is a tragic fate. There is tragedy in every line of it.'

'Oh, do stop such morbid talk! You give me the horrors. Just listen to the wind! What a gale!'

And Mrs. Norton shivered affectively, and was quite ready to be assured by Captain Leslie.

Emma Trelawney was already relenting towards her friend.

She had deemed it only right and just to Vere to show her marked displeasure at Magda's capricious conduct, and had been so she told herself, too angry to 'have it out' with her as yet.

Magda's duplicity respecting Adrian Crawford rankled in her mind, so she had acquiesced coldly in her friend's desire to be alone.

'But I will go to her now,' she said to herself, as, tea in hand, she made her way towards the culprit's bedroom. 'She will tell me all I have no doubt, and this abominable mystery will be cleared up.'

As these thoughts floated through her mind she knocked softly on Miss Durer's door.

No answer.

She knocked again, loudly.

Still no answer.

'She must be dead asleep! thought Emma, opening the door; the room was in utter darkness.

She switched on the electric light, and found that the chamber was unoccupied.

The bed was neat and smooth, and all was in perfect order.

With a sudden inspiration Emma flew to the wardrobe.

Magda's sealskins and plain felt hat were missing!

Then Mr. Herbert had been right; he had indeed seen Magda.

Such a night! such a tempest!

What new and horrible mystery was about to be developed.

Emma turned pale, and, with trembling limbs, hurried downstairs.

'George!' she cried, seizing her husband by the arm, regardless of the astonished looks of visitors and servants. 'Magda has gone! She is not in her room!'

So saying she burst into tears.

'Gone!' was repeated on all sides, in different tones of astonishment and horror.

Arthur Herbert seemed to be the only one, save Sir George, who kept his head; besides, had he not seen her last?

'She was hurrying across the park to—'

he paused.

'Not—towards the lake?'

Sir Willard's eyes spoke his terrible suspicion.

Mr. Herbert bowed his head, and a silence, strained and shocked, fell upon all.

A search party was immediately organized, and sent into the wind and rain they went to seek Magda.

Needless to follow them; suffice it to say that in two hours' time they returned, bearing with them a small sealskin muff, inside of which was a 'tiny handkerchief, with the name "Magda" embroidered upon it, also a plain felt hat.

Gloom, silence, and sorrow fell upon Trelawney Court, for all felt that the solemn lake held Magda Durer and her secret.

CHAPTER VII.

Two years had passed away, and still the mystery of the lake remained unsolved. It hid its dark secret well.

The body of Magda Durer was never recovered. There were various theories advanced to account for this, the prevailing one, and really the most feasible, being the extraordinary depth of the water and the strong current, which prevented to a great extent, the dragging of the lake.

Trelawney Court was shut up, Lady Emma declaring that she could never bear the place again—at least, not till years had obliterated the memory of that awful tragedy.

Captain Tempest had rejoined his regiment, and had spent most of the time in India.

Now, however, he was home again on long leave, and had but to-day landed at Southampton.

He did not know how glad he was to be in England again until his foot touched his native shore, and, as he sat in the train en route for London, he felt, in spite of the past, that it was good to be once more amongst his own kith and kin.

It was a very grave saddened face that looked out on the flying landscape—bare and still wintry with the bleakness of an early March.

Vere had never got over the loss of Magda.

It had added years to his appearance, traced lines about the handsome, deep-set eyes and sprinkled the glossy brown hair with grey.

It was the uncertainty of her fate that so troubled him.

Sometimes he could not bring himself to believe that those cold cruel waters held all that had once been so dear, so sweet to him—and yet what room was there for doubt?

The muff, the little handkerchief, which even now lay above his heart, given to him by his cousin Emma as a last relic of the woman he had adored; the hat!

No, it was all only too true!

Still he wished he could banish the idea that for her perhaps, had been reserved a fate worse than death.

When these thoughts came he would take himself sternly to task.

Had he not done so, the idea would have become a monomania with him.

He never mentioned it to any one.

They would only have called him a fool. Magda, to save herself from a hideous fate, to rid herself of a power more terrible than death, had preferred the latter, and flung herself into the lake to which was attached so gruesome a legend.

This was what they all thought, and should be the one to doubt?

In two hours' time he was sitting beside a glorious fire in Sir George Trelawney's comfortable substantial town house.

His cousin Emma, prettier than ever—so he told her—if a shade stouter and more matronly—a fact which was fully accounted for by the presence on the hearth-rug of a fine chubby boy, aged eighteen months—was seated opposite to him, one eye on him the other on Master George, the son and heir of the house of Trelawney.

'It is good to see you again, dear Vere,' she was saying, and to show you George—is he not a beauty? and she caught the child to her.

Vere's praise satisfied her.

It was genuine, for George was a singularly fine specimen of his kind; at the same time Vere sighed.

He had had dreams and hopes of a home—of a wife and children—and Magda, always Magda, as the household angel.