

THE MASTER OF NUTSGROVE.

CHAPTER XIV.—CONTINUED.

On the night of the sixteenth Armstrong is standing under the drawing-room chandelier, anxiously working his large bony hands into a pair of evening gloves of treacherous texture, and about half a size too small for him, when his womenfolk rustle in, fully equipped for conquest.

"Do you like me, Tom?"

He looks down at his wife standing before him in the bridal finery which she refused to wear at the altar, her fair white shoulders shining through folds of delicate lace, a necklet of pearls—his wedding gift—encircling her pretty throat, a bunch of pale pink roses loosely hanging from her rough brown hair.

"How fair, how bright, how young you look, my love, my love!" he thinks, with a sort of hungry pain; while her gray eyes meet his with the strange expression they always wear now, half wistful, half defiant, and a little scared as well, an expression which he sometimes feels, with a pang of impotent remorse, that no act, or word, or wish of his can ever chase thence again, even if he laboured as manfully as he is now doing to the end of his days.

"Do I like you," he repeats softly—"like you, Addie?" Then, with a quick return to his usual self-possessed matter-of-fact manner—"Certainly, my dear; your dress is very nice indeed."

"Rapturous commendation!" she answers, with a light vexed laugh.

"Now, Addie, clear away; it is my turn, please. What have you to say to me, Mr. Armstrong?"

"You?" he cries, staggering back, and shading his eyes as if overcome by the vision. "Who are you, pray—the Queen of Sheba—Cleopatra?"

"Miss Pauline Lefroy, at your service, exemplifying the old proverb of 'Fine feathers make fine birds.' Now, honestly, what do you think of my feathers, Tom?"

Pauline steps forward, giving her train a brisk twitch, and poses under the chandelier, her lithe, stately figure draped in clouds of silky gauze, her masses of dusky hair piled high on her head, interwoven with chains of pearls, her lovely gipsy face sparkling with the glow of excitement and anticipated pleasure.

"Oh she doth teach the torches to burn bright!"

Her beauty hangs upon the cheek of Night As a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear," quotes Armstrong dramatically. "Will that homage to your plumage do, fair sister-in-law?"

"Yes, it sounds like Shakspeare or Milton. Shakspeare, is it? 'Her beauty hangs upon the cheek of Night like a—' What?"

"Like a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear."

"It is a fine idea, strongly put—better than being told flatly that I was nice, like a bit of well-fried beef-steak. And you think I shall do?"

"By Jove, yes," thinks he, in startled admiration, "I rather think you will, Miss Polly! What a splendid specimen of womanhood you are to be sure! Strange I never seemed to take in the power of your comeliness until to-night!"

He glances at the two sisters standing side by side—at the girl, lastly, who, in a ragged cotton dress, without even the ornament of ladylike neatness, without one word or smile of attractive intent, chained his senses in one luckless moment and robbed him of his peace for ever. He shakes his head; it is of no use going over the old story again; the mischief is done, and there is an end of it.

"She is not beautiful, my little Addie; she is but a pallid spring-blossom beside the tropical color of her sister," he thinks bitterly. "Fow men, I suppose, would waste a glance on her when they could feed on the other's beauty; and yet she is

all I want—all. My life would be full if I had her. Oh, the irony of fate to think that what is by law my own, my very own, what no man covets, I cannot grasp—to think that she, the delight of my eyes, the one love of my life, must live under the same roof with me, and yet be as far apart as if the poles sundered us! And we are drifting farther day by day; we cannot even be friends. I have more in common with her sisters, even with her cub of a brother, than with her. A wall of constraints is rising hourly between us. We cannot talk together five minutes without falling into an uncomfortable silence of tripping over matter we agreed to bury. I wonder how it will all end? By Jove, I should like to have a peep at our position, say, this day ten years! Please Providence, the boys will have struck out lines for themselves ere then, and some fellows will have induced the girls to quit my fireside too, if—if I see fit to make it worth their while. Miss Pauline, with five or six thousand pounds, would be a prize many men would like to secure; Lottie too would have a chance under the same conditions; there would be only Addie and I to drift into autumn together. By Jove, I would like to know how it will end! Hang it, my glove is gone at last!" he exclaims aloud, in dismay.

"I thought as much, Tom. I hope you have another pair, because the most skilful needle-and-thread in the world wouldn't bridge that chasm. Oh, I see you have another pair! Now, will you concentrate your powerful intellect on my train for a minute? I'm going to walk slowly from the piano to the window, and I want you to tell me if you can detect the faintest outline of steel or wire, the merest suggestion of string or tape anywhere."

"No, Pauline, on my honor as a British merchant!" he answers solemnly. "I can detect not one trace of the inward mechanism of your dress. It is veiled to me in darkest art. You are inflated in a manner wonderful and fearful to behold."

"I believe you! That is what I call the perfection of a fan-tail; Armine is the only dressmaker in Kelvick who can work them like that," remarks Pauline complacently. "I flatter myself there won't be another train surpassing mine in the room. And fancy, Tom—Addie wanted me to appear in a home-made muslin or grenadine, with a blue silk sash and blue ribbon in my hair, like a school-girl going out to a suburban tea-party! Wasn't I right to resist? Haven't I your entire approbation?"

"Certainly; I think the most extreme measure would justify the end you have achieved, Miss Lefroy," he answers, laughingly.

"Well, one end you have certainly achieved, my dear sister," says Addie ruefully. "You have certainly crushed my poor dress, put me out of the field altogether, which is rather hard lines, considering I'm a—bride and all that. Nobody will look at me when you are near."

"Then I must keep well out of your way, dear," she answers sweetly. "Ah, here comes the carriage at last! Where's my fan, bouquet, handkerchief? Oh, dear if I should get myself crushed or squeezed before I arrive! Tom, I engage the front of the brougham; you and Addie must sit together at the back. It's wrong to separate those whom Heaven has joined together, you know."

"Pauline," cries Addie, sharply, "I wish you would not make those flippant remarks: they're extremely unbecoming!"

Pauline raised her saucy eyes to her brother-in-law's disturbed face, and asks innocently:—

"Am I flippant, Tom? Have I said

anything wrong? Tell me—do you want the back all to yourself?"

"I want neither the back nor the front, my dear," he answers placidly. "I'd rather not be brought into close contact with the mysteries of your dress, I'm going to enjoy my cigar on the box-seat."

"Are you? I dare say you'll like it better than being squashed between us," asserts Pauline lightly.

"You are going to do nothing of the kind," interposes Addie, with flaming face. "I will not allow it. Going to sit outside for a seven miles' drive on a snowy night in January, just to save a few wretched flowers from being crushed. Pauline, I'm ashamed of you!"

"My dear Addie, don't get so hot about it; it was my own suggestion, not your sister's. I do not mind the weather in the least. It's not a bad kind of night for the season of the year, and I have a famous overcoat lined with fur, and my cigar."

They are all three standing in the porch. Addie suddenly walks back into the hall and begins undoing her wraps, they follow her in quickly.

"What are you doing? What is the matter?"

"I am not going to the ball, Pauline; I should not like to crush your flounces, dear," she answers, with sparkling eyes. Pauline crimsoned.

"Addie, how—how spiteful you are!" she cries angrily. "You know I did not want your husband to sit on the box-seat; he suggested it himself. There is plenty of room for us all inside. Oh, come along, Addie; don't be so nasty and spiteful!"

But she is not to be propitiated; she shakes off her sister's protesting hands, and moves away up-stairs.

"I am not nasty or spiteful, Pauline; but I do not feel inclined for this ball. I feel a headache coming on. Mr. Armstrong will take you there without me."

Pauline remains motionless; and casts an appealing look at her brother-in-law.

"Tom, go after her—see what you can do. I should only make matters worse."

After a second's hesitation, he follows Addie up the stairs, and lays his hand gently on her shoulder.

"Addie, come back; I won't go to the ball without you. Come back!"

"What nonsense! You can go very well without me. I don't care for it, I tell you."

She speaks sharply and sullenly enough; but a few hot tears trickle down her cheeks as she turns away her face from his scrutiny.

Before he knows what he is about, he takes her handkerchief, and wipes them away softly, whispering beseechingly—

"I will do what you like, sit where you like. Come, my own dear little girl—come!"

She puts her hand on his arm.

"You will sit inside with us?"

"Of course, if you wish it. I would not have proposed the box-seat if I had known you would not like it, Addie. I never thought of the weather. Why, I have slept out of doors in Canadian backwoods in three times as severe weather as this, and I'm alive to tell the tale—ah, scores of times!"

The drive is an uncomfortable one for all three, though Pauline, anxious to move the impression of the scene, rattles "nineteen to the dozen." Her sister speaks not a word, and Armstrong is too wrapped up in sombre anxious thought to respond.

Clearly as one would read an open book he can now read the page of his little wife's troubled life—can read the meaning of flushing cheek, quivering lip, tearful eye—can see the passion of revolt that stirs her sensitive being—can feel how her pride, her delicacy, is daily, hourly outraged by the condition of their lives—and his heart yearns over her.

"If," he thinks, with an impotent sigh, "I had chosen the other sister, it would have been different; her coarser, more selfish nature would have adapted itself

to the circumstances without a pang. She would have accepted without murmur, or protest the best I had to give, would have put her hands into my pocket and spent my money with the freedom and insouciance of esteemed wifehood, would never have disturbed my equanimity by one of those piteous pleading looks, half-pain, half-defiance, that thrill through me with a foreboding of coming tragedy. I wonder how will all end? Why will she not accept the inevitable, and give me peace at least? Peace is all I ask from her. If she would take things as her sisters and brothers do, I should in time become reconciled to my fate, should learn to feel towards her as I feel towards them; but she will not—she will not. She will go her own way, and keep my heart in a ferment, watching her every movement, straining my ears to catch every tone of her ever-changing voice."

He looks with a sort of admiring impatience at her, as she sits by his side, her eyes closed, the trace of tears staining her flushed cheeks, and something tells him that it will always be so between them, that she will never harden, never learn to eat his bread with the easy unconsciousness of her kindred, never suffer him to despise her, and thus emancipate himself.

Armstrong is an epicure in sexual sentiment. He can love no woman whom he cannot esteem. The loveliest face shielding a venal soul has no attraction for him; and women for the possession of whose frail fairness men in his rank of life have bartered the hard-earned wages of years, have abandoned home, wife, and children, to him are as innocuous as the homeliest-featured crone. Having always been a comparatively successful man, in his many wanderings he has been waylaid by harpies of various nationalities, experienced in attack, but honeyed speech or multi-glance has never charmed a guinea from his pocket or a responsive smile from his granite lips—and through no sense of moral or religious rectitude, but simply because he cannot value the favor of any woman in whom self-respect does not govern every other feeling, sway every action of her life. The woman he loves shall be a lady to the core, pure-minded, dainty, sensitive, and proud. In his wife he recognises these qualities, and worships them accordingly; and yet, with the perverse selfishness innate even in the best of mankind, he would fain see her stripped of them all in order to shake himself free from her thralldom, and heal up the wound she has unwittingly dealt his pride and self-esteem.

He knows if she can but lover herself in his eyes by some act of meanness, folly, or ingratitude, her downfall will be permanent, and he will regain the even tenor of his life, and be his own master again.

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"Here we are at last, Addie; wake up—wake up! How lovely the house looks blazing with light! Listen to the music; they must have begun dancing. Oh, Tom, get out quick!"

However, when they appear on the gay and crowded scene. Miss Pauline's effervescence somewhat subsides. A feeling of diffidence, of timidity almost, seizes her. She half shrinks behind her brother-in-law's broad shoulder when one of their hostess's sons appears, a smiling partner in tow. However, it is Mrs. Armstrong who is borne off first; and then Pauline steps a little forward and sends her roving eye round the room with success. A little later Addie returns breathless, with eyes sparkling with excitement and pleasure.

"I've had such a lovely dance, Tom; I never thought I should like it so much or keep in step as I did! Where's Polly? How is she getting on?"

Armstrong points across the room, where Miss Lefroy, with her deer-like head erect, stands surrounded by a group of young men eagerly seeking to inscribe her name on their cards.

"She's getting on fairly for a beginner,