

# A Broken Vow;

—OR—

## BETTER THAN REVENGE.

### CHAPTER IX.

The possibilities of getting money, the letter to pursue her campaign, and indeed to allow her to live at all until that campaign was ended, had narrowed themselves down to one figure in the mind of Olive Varney—that of Aunt Phipps. Aunt Phipps, like everyone else at that time, was but an instrument in the hands of this desperate woman—to be used for a certain purpose. She had been useful already in enabling Olive to get into the house where Lucy Ewing lived, and to get in, moreover, under circumstances which introduced her intimately to the girl. Now she must be of use again, if anything could be squeezed out of her.

Olive Varney argued, as she went along towards Westminster, that the old woman must be possessed of funds of some kind, however slight, to enable her to live in even so poor a place as the house of the clockmaker. Selfishly enough, Olive argued that Aunt Phipps had no very great object in living at all, and no very deep desire to live; she could at least be useful to other people. More than that, had not Olive already performed a service for her in acting as her messenger to young Christopher Dayne, although, of course, she carefully ignored the fact that she had acted as something more than a messenger.

To those who would blame her, let it be pointed out that at this time Olive Varney was swayed by many varying emotions. She had come suddenly from under the dominion of a father whose creed had been one of vengeance and bitterness, and who had trained his daughter to be vengeful and bitter also. The only memories that crowded upon her and held her to her purpose were two: one, when as a mere girl she had been made to kneel upon her mother's grave and make a vow that she did not understand; the other, when as a grown woman she had stood beside the death-bed of her father and had made that vow again, in loyalty to him. After that, events had crowded upon her so rapidly that she had, as it were, been swept along upon a tempestuous tide that, carrying her she knew not whither. And there was that in the woman that made her stand out above mere circumstances of time or place or money; she would have braved anything and everything to achieve a purpose, good or bad, without counting the possibility of coming to starvation in the process. It was only when the actual necessity was forced upon her, and made apparent to her pride, that she began to look about to find funds.

Coming to the clockmaker's miniature shop, and plunging, as it were, at once into that sea of noise that for ever went on there, she found the old man seated behind his counter, hard at work. On a little wooden tray before him lay any number of wheels and springs of one sort or another, while in his hands he held a gutted clock case. Tagg looked up when he heard her enter the place, and, recognizing her, nodded as if to give permission for her to go upstairs. As she paused, with a vague politeness, to look at his work, he held up the clock-case, and looked at the wheels and springs which lay before him.

"So like something human," he said, half as if to himself. "So many springs and wheels, that make up the thing they call a brain, that works all else. Sometimes a careless workman makes a little slip—puts a wheel awry—and then nothing is ever right. All inside is good, and well made; but a little hitch comes at a vital moment, and the poor human machine goes wrong. Then they call it by hard names, and shut it away—and forget the mistake that was made at the beginning."

"You like your work?" asked Olive, looking at him curiously.

"Yes—because it is good to call something to life in this world—to make something," he responded. "To see the dull little wheels and springs and cogs—meaningless in themselves—and then to put them all together, piece by piece and bit by bit; and then with the touch of a key bring them all to life. There is the moment of accomplishment—the moment when it moves and lives under your fingers."

Olive went on up the dark stairs, past all the clocks that hung in corners or stood ghostlike against the walls, until she came to that upper floor. She knocked and waited for an answer; receiving none, she ventured to open the door, and was met on the threshold by Aunt Phipps herself.

The old woman peered out at her for a moment, and then, recognizing her, made way for her to enter the room. As Olive walked in Aunt Phipps closed the door, and standing like that, with her hand upon it and the other hand upon her breast, spoke quickly:

"Well—have you seen him?" she asked in a whisper.

"Yes—I've seen him," replied Olive, looking at the frail little woman steadily.

"And you gave him the message? You

told him that his fortune was gone?

"Yes—and he has taken it very nicely," replied Olive again, casting about in her mind as to what method she might best employ to rouse the old woman's sympathies. "I do not think she added honestly enough, 'that he the sort of sit down under any disaster and cry about it. He is rather a fellow, I think, Mrs. Phipps.'"

"Yes, I thought he would be," said Aunt Phipps, coming away from the door and beginning to cry softly. More the pity; more's the shame that Phipps should have robbed him as he did. However, my dear," she added, smiling a wintry smile, and beginning to dab her eyes, "I'm glad you've broken the ice, as it were, and smoothed the way for me. I shan't be afraid to go and see him now—to let him know that your old aunt, who never saw him, is sorry and didn't have any hand in taking his fortune away from him. I'm much obliged to you, my dear, for being such an interest in me and in my troubles; poor Phipps would have been grateful if he'd lived. Yes, it will be nice to see the boy—nice to know that he doesn't think I'm to blame. I'll bring it from his own lips before another has gone."

Olive Varney stood aghast. She had not intended this at all; had not meant, of course, that the real Aunt Phipps should ever come into the business at all. She saw in a moment that the woman must be stopped at all costs; must be held silent and kept in her place until such time as it was no longer necessary to use her name. After that she was welcome to her nephew and to make what explanation she could.

"You mustn't do that," said Olive earnestly. "When I told you that your nephew took the matter nicely I did mean that he had any forgiveness in his heart for you or your husband desires to see nothing of you."

"But surely, if he understands that it wasn't my fault—" began Aunt Phipps.

"He is naturally very bitter at being left in an impoverished condition,"

Olive said. "So far as I can see, he has a debt, despite all his hard work, in love"—Olive Varney forced herself to say that, because it might further the present scheme—"and is therefore likely to have any very kindly feelings towards those who have robbed him."

"Oh, dear—oh, dear—if only I had had the sense to keep alive!" cried Aunt Phipps, using the bladed handkerchief vigorously. "A liant man, my dear—with a way with him—but with no regard. It really was not nice of me to get out of the way and leave you to face all this kind of thing. In and in love! Bless the dear boy, shall we do for him?"

Olive Varney watched the old woman closely; whatever she was prepared to do, out of her scanty resources, for Christopher, she must of necessity be aided by the aid of her chosen instrument, which was just what Olive desired by any possibility Aunt Phipps be made to help that nephew. If help could pass through the old woman, while the old woman kept her hiding-place, all might be well. Olive waited to see what the old woman would say.

"There was a little more than a hundred pounds—that I kept in case of emergency," muttered Aunt Phipps, doubtfully at her visitor. "It cost much to live here—and I'm really extravagant like poor Christopher, eat so little, that a few shillings will keep me alive. If a poor fellow would help the boy—and get him out of debt—or bring his love to him—I might spare it, perhaps. I kept it for a rainy day; but I'm sure are pretty much alike to me, or shine."

Olive said nothing. She would do anything further to make the woman one way or the other. Aunt Phipps cared to be foolish, and spend her last coins in that way; that was her affair; money came from somewhere, and Olive thought that time would have stolen it from anyone who had the power that she might not have. What she had vowed. She watched.

Aunt Phipps began with her fingers to loosen her bodice; she drew out a little packet, and dabbed her head many times over the forehead. She presently drew from this couple of sovereigns, and held them towards Olive Varney. "I suppose it's right," she said, as she forced the packet—"though what I shall do if it's gone I can't think. But I'm getting near the end of life. My boy is just beginning; we must bring him and his love together—mustn't we? Phipps was positively laughing even while she dabbed her forehead with her handkerchief, at the thought of being able to help that smug fellow. "He shall bless his poor old aunt yet. Take the money."

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