

she added, surveying the pale girl with much disfavor. "I wonder you care to dream away your days in this wood; it must remind you so of Arthur Beaupre."

The cruel thrust went home. The great gray eyes dilated; and, with a face as white as death, the girl hurried down to meet her future lord.

## CHAPTER II.

"It will be for her good, I believe," said Captain Bruce a little irresolutely.

"It will be for the good of us all, I know," answered Mrs. Bruce, with no shadow of doubt in her brisk crisp tones.

"De Gretton is a gentleman, though so much older, so unsuited to her, perhaps, in many ways," went on the Captain, with nervous incoherence.

"Lord de Gretton is liberality itself, and, as for age, what does that matter? She has lived out her romance with young Beaupre, and is the most fortunate girl in the world to have so splendidly solid a reality to fall back upon."

"Ah, ye! Poor Arthur, if he had been living—"

"Luckily for us he is not," Mrs. Bruce interrupted fervently; "otherwise the way would have been blocked indeed. It would have been heart-breaking, maddening, to see a marvellous piece of good fortune come in the way of an untrained girl like Nora and run the risk of being rejected. No, no,"—shaking her black head with a sort of easy and cheerful resignation—"I was very shocked when I heard of the poor young fellow's death; but now I can see it was all for the best."

Duncan Bruce thrust his hands into his pockets, jingled savagely the keys therein, and relieved his feelings with an impatient sigh. His wife's neck piquet jarred upon his finer taste; but he did not attempt to contradict her. On this occasion, for a wonder, the married pair were really not at odds.

In his inmost heart Captain Bruce was quite as anxious for the marriage as his wife, though he shrank from expressing his wish with her outspoken frankness. He had a conscience, and it pricked him painfully when he saw the betrothed pair side by side and read the eulogistic raptures on Nora's pale, beautiful face. But the pricks were only sharp enough to make himself uneasy and unhappy—they did not stir him to save the girl.

"After all," he would argue plausibly enough, "putting us out of the question, such a marriage is the best thing possible for her. She has loved once—she is her mother's own child, Heaven bless her!—and that once will mean for ever; and left to herself, she would make all the rest of her life a dream of sorrow. My beautiful Nora a poor and sorrowful old maid? No, no! De Gretton will give her loveliness a golden setting; she will have sense to see that, if the new life will give her no ecstatic happiness, it will bring at least enjoyment and content."

So the man, who really loved his motherless child in his own faint half-hearted fashion, swallowed the glittering bait that dangled so temptingly before him, and not only deserted her in the hour of peril, but pushed her forward to her doom.

Perhaps it was hardly strange that, in presence of such strong temptation, Duncan Bruce should prove himself thus weak. Life had never been over-bright to him since Nora's mother died, and it seemed at its very darkest when fate brought Lord de Gretton to Nettleton and across the path of Nora Bruce.

It is not easy at the best of times for a man with a small income and an extravagant family to keep his head above water; and when times are bad the inevitable submerged rocks come ever at hand. Mrs. Bruce was no active, energetic woman, a thrifty housekeeper, and a manager of notable talent; but, as she herself said, poor as the Bruces were, they were the principal people in Nettleton, and that consideration demanded some expenditure in dress.

This translated, meant that Mrs. Bruce had a daughter to marry, and that Nettleton adjudged a Cavalry depot, in which she hoped to find a happy hunting ground for Nora and Cristina.

The step-sisters were hardly likely to prove rivals, she thought, as she surveyed them with a critical appreciation of their widely differing charms. Nora was decidedly the handsomer now; but here was a beauty that was long in ripening, and she was younger than Miss Singleton by fully

four years; so that for a while the thin, dark, passionate looking girl contrasted disadvantageously with her light haired, light-eyed, lily-skinned step-sister. But there were some who even in these early days discerned a rare and splendid promise in the gipsy-looking child, and prophesied a day in which Cristina's chill regularity of outline would pass unnoticed in the glow of Nora's ripened beauty.

Among the first to make the discovery was Arthur Beaupre, a blue-eyed, handsome young Lieutenant of Hussars, who had been one of Miss Singleton's most favored and constant partners, until gray-eyed Nora came upon the scene, when he transferred his attentions, with startling and unflattering rapidity, to her.

Cristina was not slow to note his defection; and she resented it, in her cold silent fashion, bitterly enough. She never, even to her more than sympathetic mother, opened her lips upon the subject; but her crystal clear, pale blue eyes glittered with an angry fire as they followed the young and well-matched pair about the room, and in her inmost heart she registered a vow to be revenged, a vow that was kept consistently in the bitter days to come.

Arthur Beaupre was more than a pleasant partner, he was an eligible paragon, as the prudent Cristina had been careful to inform herself before she accorded the full sunshine of her smile. The eldest son of a rich merchant and landed proprietor, young, handsome, and a general favorite, he had been the mark of each man-carrying "mamma," and his marked devotion had been the proudest feather in Cristina's cap of conquest. To lose him to any one would have been hard indeed, to lose him to Nora was unbearable. She had never loved her step-sister overmuch; she hated her from that moment with a fierce and virulent hatred that was not for one second softened, that even exulted cruelly in her bitter and quick coming grief.

And yet even the hardest might have been melted by that brief tragedy of love and death. Hardly had the pretty summer idyl been lived through, hardly had the young man told his love and won from the shy sweet girl his lips the faltering confessions of hers, hardly had Captain Bruce's consent been asked and given to the marriage that would give to his brilliant child as fair a lot as he could have desired for her, when, like a thunderbolt out of a summer sky, there came upon the scene of tranquil happiness the news of the South African troubles, the sudden summons to the seat of war.

One day Nettleton gossiped at afternoon tea, on the croquet-lawn, and in the tennis-court over the news of Nora Bruce's engagement and the girl's astounding luck; next day the gossips had fresh food for conjecture, in the departure of the 4th Hussars, and young Beaupre's chance of ever coming back to "the girl he left behind him."

By the lovers themselves the news was very differently received. Arthur Beaupre was too deeply in love not to admit that the summons was at least inopportune, but too true and ardent a soldier to find it wholly unwelcome. The excitement of the coming fray thrilled through his quick young blood and set his blue eyes aflame with a different fire from that which had brought a hot rich glow to Nora's cream-smooth cheek.

"You must not fret, darling; you are a soldier's wife, you know," he said, with proud and fond authority. "We shall thrash these niggers sooner than they think, and then I shall come back for my reward."

He looked so gallant and bright, so full of high hope and courage, as he stood there in the morning sunshine, loath to speak the farewell word, and yet eager to depart, that Nora could not bear to damp his spirits with the black shadow of her fear. She gulped her sobs down with an heroic effort, and looked up with pale bravery into his face.

"Heaven keep you, Arthur, and send you back to me!"

"Till death us do part." Remember that, Nora. Only death can come between us now."

They clung together for a few brief moments, the dark shadow of a cruel destiny hovering over them the while. Then, with a sharply-indrawn breath that was all but a sob, Arthur Beaupre tore himself away, and Nora knew that she was alone.

"Nora looks wretched," said Mrs. Bruce, making her pettish complaint to her silently observant child. "Really we are the most unlucky family that ever lived! The dress-maker's bill has just come in; it will make your father more miserable and discontented

than ever, and really is enough to turn every hair on my head gray. Yet see how our campaign has ended! You are altogether unprovided for!"

"I cannot ask men to marry me," Cristina said coldly; but the rebellious blood ran under her transparent skin and warned Mrs. Bruce to let that part of the subject rest.

"Well, well, I did not say you could, child; I wish you would not interrupt so ridiculously. Nora was the person we were discussing; and I do say that it is rather hard the only result of all our trouble and expense should be an engagement that may come to nothing after all."

"Nora must take her chance with the rest of us," Cristina said coldly. "Life cannot be all sunshine even for her."

All sunshine! Even as she spoke the bitter jealousy-prompted words, ill news was flashing over land and sea, the news of an engagement in which our arms had suffered a defeat, in which our foes had been savagely cruel; and first on the long list of the dead was the name of Arthur Beaupre. Mrs. Bruce was selfish and unsympathetic, but not inhuman. Even she shed a few tears when she thought of the young life cut short at its brightest, and of all the innocent hopes that must perish with it. With a little hysterical cry she threw down the newspaper.

"Poor, poor Arthur, and poor Nora too! Who is to break the news to her? I cannot."

"I can," Cristina cried through her teeth; and, looking up, Mrs. Bruce saw that her daughter's face had grown deathly white and her eyes had a cruel steely glitter.

"Can you, Cris?" she asked doubtfully. "I am sure you are very good and brave. But how strange you look child, almost—"

"Almost as though I cared," Cristina supplemented, with a reckless laugh. "Could I care for a man who threw me over and slighted me for—Nora?"

The last word was uttered in sheer surprise, for Nora stood within the doorway, whiter than her white dress, and with a dreadful look of frozen horror in her dark gray eyes.

"Arthur," she cried, in a long agonized

wail that seemed to wound her slender throat in passing, for she clasped it with such a strange pathetic gesture and her pallid lips moved so stiffly—"Arthur! What is it?"

Without a word Cristina Singleton placed the newspaper in her hand. There was no mercy in the hard revengeful woman's thought, but the act itself was merciful. To break the news in any tender feminine fashion would only have been to prolong Nora's agony; to strike straight home was wisest and most kind.

There rang through the long room one wild heart-broken cry, the echo of which lingered uncomfortably for many months in Mrs. Bruce's ears, and then Nora Bruce fell to the ground face forward, like one stricken to the heart.

"You have killed her!" the step-mother cried, with mingled fear and anger; but Cristina only shrugged her shoulders with insolent contempt.

"Better for her perhaps if I had. She may live to wish that death had come in such a merciful fashion, and you may wish it for her too."

The words were spoken in the heat of passion, with only such meaning as passion gives; yet Cristina Singleton lived to feel that some spirit of malignant prophecy had descended upon her that day, and made her the mouthpiece of a cruel, overhadowing fate.

For long weeks Nora Bruce lay between life and death, and those who watched her never knew which way the scale would turn. But youth and strength conquered even the wish to die, and slowly but surely the "angel with the amaranthine wreath" withdrew.

But in withdrawing he left the strange apathy that made the girl a mere automaton in the hands of those around her. Life held for Nora no possibility of happiness now; she could only, she thought, become or less wretched; and it was easier to yield and make her father happy than to dash his last hopes and live on in misery at home. And so it chanced that Albert Grant, Lord de Gretton, in the 57th year of his age, became the accepted husband of Nora Bruce, then barely twenty-one.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

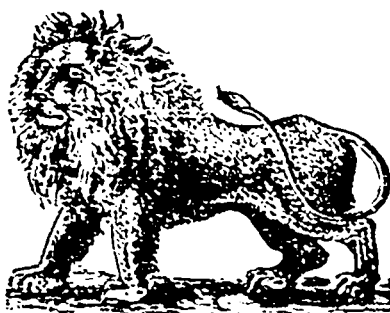
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