

A CRUEL DECEPTION

OR WHY DID SHE SHUN HIM? BY EFFIE ADELAIDE ROWLANDS

(Continued)

To Lady Augusta she was a mystery, and one that she felt would puzzle her for some time to come.

Just now, however, she was more concerned about the girl's most evident fatigue. She was full of pretty solicitude, but Mrs. Hunter very gently refused all proffered refreshments, and seemed relieved when her hostess turned to a servant, and sent him to inquire if Mrs. Hunter's back was waiting, and, if so, to order it to be sent around to the entrance without delay.

"And some one must see you there. I would go myself," Lady Augusta said, "but"—looking back at the platform where a series of spasmodic squeaks proclaimed the fact that one of the rectory quartette was playing a violin solo—"but I fear I shall be wanting in a moment. I will tend for my husband. Nonsense, my dear, it is no trouble! Of course not, and it is here—Oh, here is Jack—just in time! Jack, come and be introduced to Mrs. Hunter, and then make yourself useful. Ah, Blanche, my dear, so you cannot appreciate poor Gwen's effort?"

"It is something too dreadful!" Miss Glenlee said, in her slowest way, letting her eyes rest on the girlish figure and travel over it coldly, with no diminution of her disapprobation.

She hardly bent her head as Lady Augusta murmured an introduction, and it was a gratification to her to notice how easily her manner had called a rush of color to Mrs. Hunter's pale face. Blanche exulted in this sign of discomfiture, for she could not endure any rivalry with her charms.

"She will see I did not desire an introduction," Miss Glenlee said to herself. Out loud she observed: "I am going to a cooler, more refreshing atmosphere. Augusta, you will find me in the conservatory."

"I will send Hugo to keep you company," Lady Augusta cried. And then, as Miss Glenlee's tall figure and long silken train swept out of sight, she commended Mrs. Hunter once more to her husband's charge.

"Please look after her well, Jack!" she said; and then she held the girl's hand for a moment. "We must be good friends, you and I, my dear," she said, in her warm-hearted fashion. "I shall come and pay you a visit in the course of the next few days."

Trevelyan obeyed his wife more than readily. He attended on Mrs. Hunter with all his most genial courtesy, and looked after her comfort in every little detail.

The back that had brought her from Torre village not being in evidence, he at once called up one of the Torre carriages that Lady Augusta had provided to convey the rector and his brood to and fro, and placed the girl in it, despite her faintly uttered protestations.

"I think you are most sensible, Mrs. Hunter, to fly this scene of dissipation at an early hour, and I am sure you must be tired after your exertions. I will, if you will permit, do myself the pleasure to ride over to your house tomorrow to inquire how you are."

He wrapped a light rug about her and shut the door, and then, as the carriage rolled away, he frowned slightly, and stood on the road step gazing after it. The vision of that pale, girlish face, with its wonderful eyes so eloquent with a sorrow that was not to be denied, pained such a kind, true heart as beat in John Trevelyan's breast. He shook his head a little as he went to rejoin the audience.

"Poor child!" he said to himself involuntarily. "Poor child!"

He scarcely knew why he should bestow his pity so quickly on one who was absolutely unknown to him; but the face is, in nine cases out of ten, so true an index to the heart and character that he felt his first translation of this girl's expression was a faithful one, and that the silent look of

sadness that had struck him, in the very first glance he had given her, was something that would call up the pity and sympathy of all who realized, as he had done so swiftly, the proud, sensitive nature that was enthroned in this slight, beautiful form.

He would have had reason to know how true had been his judgment could his gaze have penetrated through the night, and have seen the occupant of the luxurious carriage lying huddled forward in a crouching mass, her face buried on her arms, a moan of pain coming from the delicate, pale lips, and a shudder passing over the frame.

Headless of the swift action of the carriage, headless of the cold, steady stare of the moon, Alwynne gave herself up to the uncontrollable agony of her heart, and endured a fearless torture that seemed to her worse than the shadow of death itself.

CHAPTER XVIII

The unthought fatigue she had endured, the excitement and the ceaseless efforts she had made to encourage a great and universal success to her concert, repaid Lady Augusta the next day with what was, to her, a most unusual and by no means an agreeable visitor, namely, a bad nervous headache.

Mr. Trevelyan exercised his marital authority without any hesitation.

"Out of the bed you don't stir till you are better, my bird!" he said firmly; and with that he sent the maid about her business, darkened the blinds, and stole away to an inner room to keep guard and care of the erratic little piece of warm-heartedness he called his wife.

Miss Glenlee, of course, expressed all due condolence in such an unusual state of affairs; but, on the whole, she did not feel so much regret as she might at Lady Augusta's enforced absence. She felt she was at least spared much and exhaustive comment on the concert, with which she was less in sympathy than she had ever been, and an eulogy on Mrs. Hunter would also be avoided, which Blanche determined was a state of affairs devoutly to be desired.

Then, again, it left her quite free to do as she exactly liked with her morning; and she immediately proceeded to don her outdoor gear, and then to arrange so that Lord Taunton should see she was desirous of walking or driving, and so have no other alternative but to offer himself an escort.

Everything fell out exactly as she had desired. Lord Taunton, coming into the hall from the library with a budget of letters in his hand, found Miss Glenlee standing, a smart figure in her tailor-made gown and coat, buttoning her gloves in a listless way, at the big hall door.

Having realized this, there was nothing for him to do but to come forward, and as he fitted his position as host, to inquire into Miss Glenlee's pleasure. It certainly was with no feeling of pleasure on his part that Taunton gave orders for a motor car to be sent around immediately, so that he could drive Miss Glenlee to Westchester Station in search of some parcel—fictitious—about which that lady was anxious to make some inquiries.

Blanche was full of gratitude. "So good of you," she declared. "I was just wondering how I should get through the long, lonely drive all by myself." And then she gave a little laugh. "For," she added, quite unconscious she was speaking anything like the truth, "I am afraid I am a very dull sort of individual, Lord Taunton!"

He made some fitting reply, but his manner was quiet, and his voice had a curious, tired sound in it—the voice of a man who had gone through some long and arduous task which has exhausted his strength, physically and bodily. Blanche looked at him, even her dull powers of perception struck by this subtle change in him.

"I think we are growing so primitive here we cannot stand the smallest excitement. Fancy Gus with a headache! It sounds impossible. I almost believe that you are sharing her ailments, Lord Taunton!"

The man roused himself with an effort and passed his hand over his eyes hurriedly, almost nervously.

"I almost believe that I am," he said, just smiling for an instant; then he added a sort of explanation: "I have been very busy all the morning, which has something to say in the matter, no doubt."

Blanche put an expression of solicitude into her expressionless eyes.

"Do you really feel equal to this drive? Don't let me bore you. Perhaps you would—"

But Taunton at once reassured her, and at that moment the car drove up to the door, and all such discussion was ended.

She was quite deceived by Lord Taunton's explanation of a headache. Her perception was not keen enough to see below the surface. The pallor of his face, the strangely worn, listless, tired air that pervaded him, all this was quite comprehensible to her as being the outcome of a long morning's business.

The drive was a dull affair. Lord Taunton did his utmost to make a fair show of conversation, but it was a terribly difficult task.

Exhausted as he was by the violent storm of emotions that had swept over him since that moment on the preceding night when, in the agony of recognition, his heart had almost stopped, worn out by the long hours of mental torture that had composed his night's vigil, overwhelmed by this blow that shattered not only his hopes, but, as it seemed to him, his very life itself. He scarcely knew how he endured the heavy conventionality of Miss Glenlee's presence, or forced his aching brain to reason out a single coherent answer to her dull nothings.

To know that Alwynne was here—here, within a mile of his gates—within touch of his home—the stately home that he had meant to put at her feet, to place ready for her entrance as its queen—here, close to his hand, and yet as far from him as the north pole from the south.

He had made his plans in the long weary night hours. He would go forth again. Once more he would turn his back on his home and on his people, and for the second time become a wanderer to and fro on the face of the earth.

Yes, that had come to him immediately as the one and only thing left him to do. There had been no hesitation in his mind, no faltering.

To live on here—to know of her presence—to see her loveliness—sometimes to remember what she was always—forever! No, no! strong man as he was, this was something he could not endure.

Blanche Glenlee, babbling on in her usual fashion, conversing on this person and on that, all members of her world, would have been considerably astonished could she have known what a tumult of anguished thoughts surged and mingled in the breast of the man beside her. She saw nothing but his calm, quiet demeanor, his handsome face, with its set expression, which she attributed to his headache.

The drive to Westchester was accomplished at last. They had gone very slowly, the chauffeur receiving orders to drive carefully, as Miss Glenlee was so nervous, and once at the station Taunton had volunteered, as in duty bound to go and make inquiries for the missing packet.

Blanche had the grace to color a little as she disappeared, but she found an easy excuse for her deception.

"Madame de Lange is going to send my tea gown tomorrow or next day," she said to herself, "so I am expecting a parcel, after all."

Lord Taunton was gone a long time. He had the whole station ransacked as a sort of mental relief. He flung himself into the trivial business as though his whole soul depended on it; but, despite his efforts, and the efforts of all the spare porters that could be pressed into the service, Miss Glenlee's parcel was not forthcoming.

"Oh, please don't trouble any more!" Blanche cried, when all this was brought to her knowledge. "It is probably delayed somewhere on the road. In any case, it is of no consequence. I really am sorry to give you so much trouble, Lord Taunton."

Lord Taunton said what was proper under the circumstances, and got into the car again.

The little excitement had done him some good but as they rolled homeward the drift of his thoughts returned to the same miserable groove, and the same weary problems beat themselves into his brain.

There was so much that was so incomprehensible, so much that was bewildering, so much he could not possibly solve without some faint clue to help him.

What irony of fate had brought him in contact with this girl? What miracle of influence had let a stream of golden sunshine into his darkened heart for so brief a time, and then have shut it from him again, leaving him more darkened, more saddened than before? Why had they met at all only to suffer such pain as this? Why, on that homeward voyage, had her lovely face flashed into his life, to bring more misery, more disappointment, more weariness of heart and spirit?

So strong and swift had the blow fallen, that it woke within him once more a touch of the old harshness. He thought almost cruelly of Alwynne—even while he knew his cruelty was most unjust. At least she had not fooled him, she had not coquetted or played with him. She had sent him from her coldly and without hope. To blame her was therefore as unreasonably as it was unjust, and yet in his bitterness he did blame her, he said to himself she must have known he did not accept her dismissal as final, she must have known that hope had lived with him, buoying him up, urging him on. He felt she must have gauged his character, have realized he was not a man to speak of such things as love and marriage lightly; that the wish to make her his wife was no momentary weakness, but a desire that was a purpose strong as iron; and thus, knowing all this, she had done him a wrong in forever shutting him away from her, in deliberately turning her back on his love, his hope, his life, and linking herself so speedily with another man, and that other one whom she could not reverse—one, indeed, whom, as far as he could calculate, was up to a week ago a complete stranger to her.

The missing clue to the whole mystery was, Taunton felt now, to be found in Basil Canning's testimony. That the boy knew something—must, indeed, and in all probability, know all—came to him like a streak of light.

Basil should speak. Basil should tell him all, though what benefit such knowledge could be to him he did not for the moment debate.

He was bewildered, angry, anguish stricken, embittered. He hardly knew how he felt for two minutes together.

As they passed through Torre village an uncontrollable influence caused him to lean forward and check the car.

"Will you think me very rude if I leave you, Miss Glenlee?" he asked hurriedly. "I remember I have something I must attend to in the village. I shall be home latest as soon as you are."

Blanche, of course, smiled her consent; but she was considerably annoyed all the time, and her face bore a thoroughly bad-tempered expression as she drove away.

She felt that, despite all her efforts, she was no nearer becoming this man's wife than she had been, and disappointment in any shape or form was a new and disagreeable experience to Blanche Glenlee.

Taunton heaved a short sigh of relief as he found himself alone.

To continue sitting there cooped up in that car would have been to drive him to madness.

He turned recklessly out of the beaten track, and made for a lower part of the Torre Abbey grounds. He walked without any set purpose. He hardly knew which way he went.

The grounds around him teemed with the promise of early summer; the fullness of springtime in all its beauty surrounded him. The old home, with its quaint gardens and acres upon acres of timber and verdant land, had never worn a more glorious look to him, yet the sight did not quicken his heart one beat; and as he sat down at last on an old trunk that lay half bedded in moss and undergrowth, his thought was not of pride in so fair and noble a possession, but a strong, bitter determination to put the seas between it and himself for a second, and for this time also a final separation.

His will was steadfast as he sat there, leaning forward, his hands clasped between his knees. Not another day would he remain at Torre, not another hour more than was possible so near to the woman he had lost.

So he purposed with all the strength of his power, not thinking or heeding in this moment of his sore distress that there existed a Will stronger than his, and a Power more omnipotent, that could and would decree for him a different fate than he planned so easily—a fate that would shape itself before the day was done.

CHAPTER XIX

Taunton sat there for more than an hour. He was thinking over the curious and almost mischievous fate which, while endowing him with so much, robbed him of that which makes every man's life sweet and precious to him.

He went over many things as he sat there. His heart was opened to himself, and he looked back over the past—the past he had tried so hard to, and had at last succeeded, in forgetting.

He realized again the full burden of shame that had come to his proud spirit when his wife's frailty had been made known to him. Standing as he did now in the shadow of a great and sudden sorrow, he was tuned in sympathy with himself, as he had been those three years ago, and yet he knew then, he suffered far more bitterly now.

The best and purest chords in his heart had been awakened by his love for Alwynne; that dead passion could never stand side by side with such a love as she had inspired. He felt, with the destruction of his hopes and the breaking of his dream, as though the warmth of an August sun had been suddenly withdrawn from him, and he was left to shiver in some chill, dark, underground cavern from which there was no escape.

He had allowed himself to hope so securely. Some indefinable influence within him had seemed to spur on his hope. He had never analyzed this influence, or questioned why it should have lived with him so strongly. He had been so content to hope, he had grown daily more and more used to the new-born feeling of happiness which was creeping so surely into his heart.

He felt now that he should have been warned by former experience not to have let hope build so strong a bulwark against the arguments of probability and disappointments. He sighed now and again unconsciously as he sat there, like some desolate, abandoned man rather than the owner and master of so magnificent an inheritance.

He lifted himself at last with an effort and rose to his feet, looking about him in a quiet way that had something inexpressibly sad in it.

"Gus will fret a bit," he said to himself. "Poor little soul, she is so happy to have me back here."

He walked in a dull sore of way through the grass on to the pathway again, looking neither to the right nor the left, conscious dimly of the warmth of the spring noontide sun, of the golden glory of light about him that mellowed the whole world into a harmony of soft yellow and green.

Suddenly he came to a standstill, and the heart that he called dead gave one awful and painful throb,

Strong man as he was, he shivered in that moment.

He had not seen her as she stood in the pathway, barring his progress. His eyes had been bent on the sun-kissed ground at his feet. It had been the love within him that had suddenly given him knowledge of her presence. He passed through a moment of torture too great to be described; he felt that his weakness, his misery, must be written in every trait of his countenance, every line of his figure.

To her he betrayed none of the emotion he felt. His pale, stern, resolute face, his set mouth, his eyes so blue, so keen, so dark, spoke to her only of anger—anger and contempt.

Alwynne was no coward, as we have seen, but she faltered in this moment. She had prayed all night she might see him for one second—only one—that she might speak to him. She must speak to him, she had said, passionately to herself, and so she had wandered into the grounds, wondering, fearing, knowing nothing, hoping nothing, save that she might speak to him just once.

The full strength, the full beauty of the love she had lost forever had been revealed to her in the one moment when their eyes had met the night before—met, and held communion before they had turned aside and grown blind and dark with the mental anguish that had come to them.

They stood for a moment in silence. She was so ill, so drawn and pale, her beauty was dimmed, and there was a curious look in her eyes that he could not understand.

A vivid flash of memory brought back to him the picture of the stormy day on the great Atlantic—of the wind-tossed, rain-drenched girl, with her laughing loveliness and her graceful vitality. He remembered how sweetly her eyes had looked into his, and how her slender form had clung to him as he had drawn her out of the force of the wave that almost buried them beneath its rushing volume of water.

Why did such memory come to him at such a moment? He made an involuntary movement. Alwynne put out her hand, as though to stay his steps.

"Will you listen to me?" she said, her voice almost sunk to a whisper. Then quickly, passionately: "You—you will listen to me! You must! You must!"

He made no answer, looking at her only as though he could never look enough.

"I saw you in the distance," Alwynne went on. "I followed you, I—"

"You want me?" he said, and the sound of his voice was as music in her ears. "You want me? What can I do? Tell me what you want. You know you need never be afraid of me."

The sight of her coming on his long, weary hours of thought robbed him of all other remembrance, except that she was before him—that his hand could outreach and touch her.

To Alwynne, the look in his eyes, the sound of sweetest expression in his words, brought a relief that was almost pain. He did not hate her then, he did not despise her, he did not even misjudge her. He loved her—he loved her!

She turned from him with a sudden gesture, and put her two hands over her eyes. Oh, what an awful, a horrible, a terrible mistake she had made!

Taunton looked at her quietly. His brain grew suddenly clearer; he saw her weakness, he realized he must be strong for them both.

"You want to speak to me, Alwynne?" he said, gently. "Say all you want to say. You know without words I will listen, and, if it is my help you want, that I will help you!"

She dropped her hands suddenly from her face, and turned to him again.

"I know—I know!" she said swiftly. "You need not tell me how good you will be to me. It is the thought of your goodness that hurts me most! When I remember—she paused for an instant—"it is so difficult to speak," she said, when she broke the silence again; "and yet—"

He stretched out his hand to her.

"Come and sit here," he said gently. "You are worn out, poor child!" He led her back toward the old tree on which he had sat himself. "It is not very uncomfortable," he said, letting his voice sound as conventional and easy as he could; "and, see, if you lean back here you will have almost a cozy chair. No, do not move. I will stand. I have been sitting here so long I am glad to stand."

He put one foot on the rugged, moss covered wood and leaned forward on his knee, looking down at her.

She was, after all, only a child, a child of nineteen years, and yet the finger of sorrow had traced a veil over her young beauty, and cast a shadow over the brilliancy of her life's springtime. His whole heart yearned over her as she sat there so pale, with such a look of misery in those grave, gray eyes.

She tried to begin to speak.

"What do you desire of yourself about me?" he asked her gently. "I know all that is in your mind, Alwynne. Do you think I should misunderstand you so easily?" He paused a moment while he saw her lips quiver. "Suppose," he said, letting the faintest of faint smiles flicker on his face for an instant—"suppose I speak for you—shall I?"

She just nodded her head, and her eyes rested on his strong, sun-tanned hand that lay on his knee. How she longed to take it in her two feeble ones, to cling to it, to press her lips to it, and wipe out the bitterness of her heart upon its firm, true grasp! The sight of that hand brought back the scent of the sea and the hours when her love had fought with her proud spirit, and her indomitable sense of justice. Ah, if she could have foreseen. And yet—yet had she not done right in sending him from her? Had she not been true to herself and to him? For the first time she felt as though the purpose that had led her life into so strange, so unexpected a channel had been one great, one terrible mistake—that all the arguments she had conjured up to help her in combating her heart's weakness would fade and melt away when tried by the fire of this man's great love. He loved her, not for her social state, not for aught beyond herself. She did not need his words to tell her this. She knew it now when it was too late.

Taunton paused only for a moment, and then went on very quietly, very gently:

"You wish to exonerate yourself in my eyes, but what wrong have you done me? You were truthful and straightforward to me. You sent me from you. You gave me no hope. If—his voice was quite steady here—"if I let hope creep and grow in my heart, was that a fault of yours? I have myself to blame. And even if it were otherwise, Alwynne, believe me, I could never bring myself to blame you."

He spoke the earnest truth. All the harshness, all the first anger had died away completely. How could he be angry now as he stood looking down at her sorrowful young face, that bore a history in every line, and seemed to him to carry the traces of some great, some terrible mental struggle?

(To be continued)

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