

give a decided answer; at any rate, he had her laid upon the couch, her dress and clothing loosened, and began to strive to restore her to consciousness.

As the blood had ceased to flow from her parted lips, he began to hope that the case after all was not very serious.

That her system had received a shock, nay, a succession of shocks, which would permanently weaken if they did not completely undetermine her health and strength, was, he felt assured, but too evident. Still he thought her life might be saved for a time, and was about to turn to the anxious officers to tell them so, when a choking cough, followed by red drops on the handkerchief applied to her lips, convinced him that her days, if not her very hours were numbered.

The major read the verdict on his face before his lips could frame it, and his own sunburnt visage blanched, and his lips trembled as he saw it.

He must have been twenty years older than that fragile, beautiful creature he claimed as his wife.

Handsome too, with that strong, matured, manly beauty, much more likely to win the heart and fascinate the mind of a young, inexperienced girl, than a man nearer her own age could possibly have done.

But there were hard lines about that handsome face, lines which only pride, passion, and stern, fierce, unyielding obstinacy could have marked there, and though they might be subdued and softened at the present moment by grief, they utterly refused to be completely hid or banished.

Only the housekeeper, the doctor, and two gentlemen remained in the room now with the girl, who had gradually returned to consciousness, though she might never more return to health and strength.

Pillows had been hastily arranged on the couch, and there she lay, covered with a light rug, a bright red spot on each cheek, which simply seemed to make the contrast to her otherwise white face, the more vivid.

She is calm after the terrible excitement, unnaturally so. It may be weakness, or concentration of strength, which will make her indomitable, supreme and master of them all to the very last.

There is a flash and glitter in her dark, deeply blue eye, which speaks of strength and defiance, rather than fear or humility, and she glances steadily around, as though to ascertain with whom she has to cope.

"Doctor," she says, in a low though distinct tone, "how long have I to live?"

"I cannot tell, Perhaps—but you must not excite yourself."

"I want no false hopes," in the same firm, though low voice. "Tell me the truth. Shall I recover?"

"The issues of life and death are in higher hands than ours," was the reply; "but if you have anything to arrange, and worldly affairs to settle, it will be wise to do it quickly."

"I am answered."

And she closed her eyes for a few minutes; she who had shrunk from death with such a coward fear, was nerving herself to meet the king of terrors now.

There was no tear in her eye; she was past tears, no tremor in her voice, for even terror seemed to have deserted her, but the calmness if left behind was more hard, stony and dreadful than the wildest agony could have been.

Her very heart seemed frozen, as though the hand of death were upon it.

"Give me some wine, anything to strengthen me for a time. Prop me up higher; now leave me with—those men."

And now she pointed to the two officers.

"Your husband and his friend?" asked the doctor, wondering at her manner of speaking of them.

"Yes."

The man of science administered a cordial, placed more in a glass near her, and then cautioning her not to excite herself, left the room with the housekeeper.

"Shall I go too?" asked Blackie, feeling that at this solemn moment, husband and wife, long parted, might wish to be alone together.

But Florence answered quickly—

"No, remain. You know part. You had better know all."

The lieutenant bowed, but his companion came nearer to the couch, attempted to take her white hand in his own, and asked, in a tone singularly humble for him—

"Florence, at this solemn moment cannot you forgive me? I have wronged you greatly, but for the sake of our child forgive me."

For the first time since her return to consciousness, she showed something like emotion. She snatched her hand from his, as though he had stung her.

In doing so her eyes fell upon the plain gold ring which Sidney Beltram had wedded her with that morning.

With more of contempt than anger in the action, she drew it off, and flung the ring away from her, then regarded the little hand attentively, as though looking for a mark or stain on it.

Then she looked at the man who had been her husband, at the man whom she had idolized and worshipped as a woman worships but once in a lifetime, the only man who had ever touched that cold, proud heart of hers, and a look of despairing sternness came over her fair sad face, as she said—

"No, Herbert Adair, there is no forgiveness for such sins as yours and mine. You have made me what I am; my sin lies at your door. Not the sin you dream of. I am innocent of

that, but worse—I am a murderess, and I shall curse you for it, even with my dying breath."

Involuntarily her husband started back, then looked at her, thinking her mind was wandering, unable to credit the truth of her self-accusation.

But there was no sign of wandering or insanity in that firmly fixed eye, in that sternly despairing face, and he hid his own in his hands, unable to bear the sight and horror of thought which her words and looks conjured up.

"My moments are numbered," she went on, in the same cold, calm tone, "and though I leave no written confession behind me, I wish to clear up some things in the past before I die. Mr. Blackie, come nearer; he is frightened at his own work," and she glanced at her husband; "but you will listen to me."

The lieutenant obeyed.

This was no time for condolence, but his face was sad and sorrowful, as he took a seat she pointed to at her side.

"It is not a long story, but it is a dreadful one," she said, with a sigh. "Let me see; to-day is my birthday. I am only eighteen, and I am dying. And my baby—no; I must not think till I come to that part of it."

She paused, as though the effort to begin were too much for her, and for the time it seemed as if the struggle between weakness, approaching death, and her own will to overcome them for a few minutes longer was beyond her power.

Leaning back on her pillows, she closed her eyes for a second or two, gathering strength to complete the task she had determined to accomplish.

When she opened them again, Blackie saw that she was stronger, that life had a firmer hold upon her than he thought, and he held the cordial which the doctor had left to her lips, having the satisfaction of seeing her sit up and look at her husband, whose face was still hidden in his hands. Then, in a cold, calm voice, she began to tell them the secret of her life.

## CHAPTER LI.

### FLORENCE TELLS HER STORY.

"It is two years ago, and I was just sixteen," began Florence, nerving herself to perform her self-imposed task, "when I first met Major Adair. I was on a short visit to a school-mate, at whose house we met. Six months later I ran away from school, eloped with him, to become his wife."

"I had no parents to counsel or guide me, and he knew it—look advantage of it. My mother died at my birth, and my father married again; married a woman who, having children of her own, hated my brother and me."

"Not only did she hate us herself, but she poisoned our father's mind against us, and Lionel, my brother, ten years older than I, was high-spirited, fiery, unused to control, though good, truthful, and generous. There is no limit to the evil a bad woman in her position could inflict. She tortured my brother's proud, sensitive nature, goaded him to rash, imprudent acts, made our father believe everything that was wicked and vile of him, and when he was eighteen, succeeded in having him turned out of his father's house, thrown upon the world to shift for himself."

"Poor Lionel! If we had died then, how much better it would have been for both of us." She closed her eyes, seeming for a moment absorbed in her grief.

But there were no tears in them, for the tears in her heart were frozen.

"Child as I was, I loved my brother dearly," she went on; "indeed, we had only each other to love, for my father was so absorbed with his second wife and her children as to have little regard, though, or care for us."

"Thus four years passed away. I heard from my brother sometimes, though he had been forbidden to write to, see, or even remember that he belonged to us. I know he had a struggle to live, for he had been brought up as a gentleman, without occupation or profession, and his education was of very little use to him in fighting the battle of life."

"Four years after he had been driven away I had a letter from him, telling me he had enlisted as a common soldier—enlisted under an assumed name, finding this the only resource from starvation."

"It was a great blow to my pride, and I wept over my brother's letter, angry and indignant also that my father's eldest son, who should have been his heir, was driven to this."

"But I could do nothing except hate my stepmother, the cause of it all, and make her life as unendurable while I was at home as it was possible to be."

"This, of course, recoiled upon myself. She had more influence with my father than I had, and the consequence was that I was sent to a boarding school and not even allowed to go home during the holidays."

"I was about fifteen when my father died. I was not sent for to see him during his last illness; indeed, I knew nothing of it until he was both dead and buried."

"Then the family solicitor wrote, informing me of the fact, adding that my father had provided for me as he had done for his younger children, leaving me to the guardianship of my stepmother, whose will and pleasure it was that I should remain at the same school two years longer, having the same allowance for dress and pocket money, and that she hoped when I returned home, I should have learnt to be tractable and obedient."

"The letter wound up by adding that, as I could not touch my portion of my father's wealth

until I was of the age of twenty-one, it would be to my interest, as well as my duty, to submit to the authority of my stepmother."

"I think this letter made me frantic. I know that I vowed I would go home and defy my stepmother, publish her treachery to the world; and then I was ill, and my passion and rage had quite died away by the time I was well and able to walk about again."

"It was for my brother Lionel's sake, far more than my own, that I was so grieved and so angry."

"He had found a soldier's life harder than he had dreamed of, harder than he could bear. My father had not even mentioned his name in his will, and had tied up the money he had left me so that I could not touch it till I was twenty-one, and consequently could not purchase his release."

"There was nothing but submission before me, and my stepmother had her own way."

"It was not very long after my recovery that I met Major Adair, and, as I told you, I ran away from school to marry him."

"We were married—at least, I believe so; we went through a ceremony in a church. I know I never doubted its legality then, and I loved him so devotedly that I would have trusted my very soul as well as my honor in his hands."

"I look back at that time now with wonder and contempt at my own infatuation, but the delusion vanished, as, had I been wiser in the world's ways and wickedness, I should have known it would."

"Even in my own happiness, I did not forget my brother. My husband was liberal to me with money and gifts, and I soon saved enough, not only to purchase his freedom, but to pay for his passage to New Zealand, where he wished to go, believing he should become very prosperous, and also to leave him a few pounds with which to make his new start in life."

"To accomplish it, I disposed of nearly all my jewellery, much of it my husband's gifts, never dreaming that he would blame me."

"I should have told him all about my brother, but I thought it would be a blow to his pride and mine to know that one of his own men, one of those in his own regiment, was my brother."

"Besides, there was no necessity for his knowing, until the future had redeemed the past; so Lionel and I both agreed, and to spare them both I kept the secret."

"My brother was free, and my husband saw our meeting; saw me embrace him for the last time before going upon his long journey, from which I had a dim foreboding that I should never see him return."

"He saw me weep, heard me promise never to forget him, and thus, unconscious of my husband's eyes being upon me, we parted."

"I don't know what followed; even now it seems too horrible to think or remember."

"I must have fallen asleep after my brother went away, I think, for I was aroused by my husband in a voice of fury upbraiding me for my infidelity."

"I could not answer him, could not believe myself awake, until he startled me by telling me that I was not his wife, that the ceremony we had gone through was a sham, and that I, after all, had only been his mistress."

"At first I was mad. I sprang at, and would have killed him if I could, but he struck me, knocked me down—see, I have the mark of his ring on my temple now. Yes, that man, that gentleman," and she spoke and pointed at him with such scorn, that he could not help uncovering his face and looking at her, "felled me to the earth, as he would have felled an ox, me, the woman he had sworn to love and cherish, the mother of his unborn child."

"What followed, I cannot tell you; I don't know. When I awoke to a sense of my condition, I was alone, overwhelmed with grief and unmerited shame."

"My first thought was of self-destruction, but when the moment came, I could not kill myself."

"Neither could I remain where I was. I had no money, for, as I told you, I had given all to my brother."

"My first thought, when suicide failed me, was to go to my brother. I knew he would not spurn me, and go with him where my name and disgrace would be alike unknown."

"But it was too late, the ship in which he sailed had gone, and I was left in the world alone."

"Almost penniless, and utterly homeless, I wandered about the country, sleeping in barns, always intending to drown myself, or meet death in some form or other, before the event I now most dreaded came."

"But I could not die. A power which I could not overcome held me back at the last moment, and thus I wandered on until one afternoon, early in November, with the dead leaves falling and rustling about me, I lay down in a hollow or dell, near a large town, feeling tired, ill, and wishing to die."

"Then, my child was born. Its cry aroused me. Death would not take me, therefore I must live."

"I don't know why I did it, except that I was mad—that I did not know what I was doing, though I seemed calm enough then, but I thought as I could not die for the sin of its father, my boy must, and I wrapped it up in a petticoat, which, cold as I was, I took off from myself, and then I buried it! Yes; buried it alive, and above ground, for there were fresh cut sods about, and with them I covered him up, though he would cry so that it made my heart ache."

"But what could I do? Poor baby; it had no father, and I hear its cries in my sleep so often, and have been afraid to die, because I was afraid to meet him."

She covered her eyes with her hands now, and leaned back on her pillow, exhausted and overcome with the effort she had made.

Exhausted, too, with her feelings, for calm and passionless as she had seemed to be, it was evidently only by the greatest possible amount of self-control that she could command her voice or restrain her sobs.

Silence had succeeded her last words, silence broken by sobs.

Not a woman's sobs, for, as I have said, she had no tears to weep, but the sobs of a man, a soldier, of one who had lost all that could make the present or future worth living for.

"Talk not of grief till thou hast seen the tears of warlike men."

The sound was so strange, the grief and agony revealed so intense, that Florence uncovered her eyes, looked at him in wonder and amazement, rather than sympathy, and turning to Blackie, she said—

"One would really think that he had loved me."

"Loved you!" repeated Herbert Adair, turning his tear-stained face towards her. "No woman was ever loved better than I loved you."

"It was because I loved you so that I became harsh, bitter and cruel when I believed in your worthlessness and infidelity," said the major; "and when I learnt that my rival was your brother, that he had gone away, then I sought and tried to find you, to implore your forgiveness, to tell you that the assertion I made about our marriage not being legal was untrue, and to implore you to return to me."

"But I could not find you, could obtain no trace or clue to tell me if you were living or dead, when three days ago I heard you were in Oldham, and about to be married."

"I hastened down there to stop the marriage and claim you as my wife, but by the time I reached the town you had disappeared."

"Oh, Florence, surely what you tell me of our child cannot be true?"

"Not true!" and she repeated the words scornfully and bitterly. "Do you think I should have invented such a creditable story? No, it is true enough."

"Merciful Heaven! what would I not give for it to be false?"

"More than once I turned back to save it, to take it in my arms, warm it against my breast, and live or die with it."

"But the very fiend itself tempted and terrified me that night. I remembered that my child had no father; that it would be a living disgrace to me. To live in the future seemed impossible without it, and if I clung to it, there could be nothing for both of us but death."

"I don't tell you this to excuse my conduct; there could be no excuse for it; if I live, I shall pay the penalty; they will hang me for it. I would not mind that if it would restore the life of my child, but it will not, it cannot. No, there is no pardon, Herbert, for you or for me, and I—I do not ask it."

She closed her eyes and turned wearily on her pillow. Her work was done; life's joys and sorrows, compressed into so short a time, had it seemed reached their end.

Once more she was aroused by a hand taking one of hers, gently, almost timidly, and a voice, not that of her husband, saying—

"Did the baby die? Was it impossible for it to be saved?"

The question, the doubt, the tone startled her.

There was something in it which seemed to give hope, even while it asked if there was none, which acted like an electric shock on her frame.

She sat upright, would if he had not restrained her, risen to her feet, and clutching Blackie, who had spoken, by the hand, asked as though her life hung on the reply—

"What do you mean? Tell me. Surely you would not trifle with a dying woman like this."

"Don't excite yourself, and I will tell you all I know, all, I should say, that I have heard. It was a curious story, told to me as such, but I paid little or no attention to it at the time, little thinking it could concern anyone I knew."

"A story about my baby! Quick! Why will you torture me so? I could not find it; I went to look in the very spot, but it was gone. Quick—tell me—this suspense is worse than death!"

"You must be calm before I begin," said the lieutenant, firmly.

"Calm! I am calm—I will be calm—only for Heaven's sake make haste!"

"A friend of mine, an artist, living in Manchester, but often going to Oldham, told me a curious story about a dog. Don't be impatient. This dog was sent from his home in Oldham to Manchester to sit for his portrait."

"At the first opportunity he escaped, made his way back to Oldham in the middle of the night, roused his master to let him in, but instead of being satisfied, made such a row that his master, to satisfy him, dressed, went out, followed him, and discovered a baby, half buried, but alive, which the dog must have previously found."

"The man took the child home, and having just lost his only son, determined to adopt him, one in its stead. It is now, I believe, living and in good health. Can it, do you think, be yours?"

"Yes, it must be; there could not be such another inhuman wretch as I. My child alive—saved! Oh, merciful Heaven! I thank thee. Oh, go and fetch him; let me hold him in my arms one moment before I die."

The floodgates of her heart were open now