

The hard woman swept her hand a moment before her eyes, and with that movement swept away the kindly spirit, which whispered, 'Don't undeceive her. Don't quench the light of that bright face, nor break that girlish heart.'

But it was necessary; Marie Porter knew that, and though she repented of what she had done, it was now too late to retreat, and all she could do was to break the heart of the unsuspecting girl as tenderly as possible.

'Why are you so lonely?' she said, 'This is a most beautiful spot. I believe I'd like to live here myself.'

'Oh, yes, 'tis a lovely place,' answered Rosamond, 'but—but—Mr. Browning is not here,' and she averted her crimson face.

'Is Mr. Browning so necessary to your happiness?' Miss Porter asked, and bringing an ottoman, Rosamond sat down at her visitor's feet and thus replied: 'We talked so much of him at the Springs that it surely is not foolish in me to tell you what every body knows. Now, you won't laugh at me, will you? Mr. Browning and I are going to—oh, I can't tell it; but, any way, your fortune-telling is not true.'

'Mr. Browning and you are going to be married. Is that it?' the woman asked; and with a quick, upward glance of her soft, brown eyes, Rosamond replied, 'Yes, that's it—that's it; and oh, you can't begin to guess how happy I am. He is not crazy either. It was something else, though I don't know what, for he never told me, and I do not care to know. The obstacle has been removed, whatever it was, and it has wrought such a change in him. He's so much younger—handsomer, now, and so kind to me. I'm glad you've come, Miss Porter, and you'll stay till after the wedding. It's the twentieth, and he has bought me so many new things. We are going to Europe. Just think of a winter in Paris, with Mr. Browning! But, what! Are you crying?' and Rosamond started as a burning tear fell upon her forehead.

'Rosamond Leyton,' said Miss Porter, in a voice husky with emotion, 'I have not wept in eight long years, but the sight of you, so innocent, so happy, wrings the tears from my stony heart, as agony will sometimes force out the drops of perspiration when the body is shivering with cold. I was young like you once, and my bridal was fixed—' She paused, and stealing an arm around her waist, Rosamond said pleadingly, 'Tell me about it, Miss Porter, I always knew you had a history. Did the man die?'

'No—no. Better for me if he had—aye, and better, too, for you.'

This last was a whisper, and Rosamond did not hear it. Her thoughts were bent upon the story, and she continued, 'Will it pain you too much to tell it now?'

'Yes, yes, wait,' Miss Porter said, 'Wait until after dinner, and meantime, as I cannot possibly stay until the 20th, perhaps you will let me see your dresses.'

Nothing could please Rosamond more, and gay as a little child, she led the way to a large upper room, which contained her wedding outfit. Proudly she displayed her treasures, flitting like a bird from one pile of finery to another, and reserving the most important until the very last.

'There's the dinner-bell,' she suddenly exclaimed, 'I did not think it could be one. Only four hours more—but come, let us go down and after dinner, if you'll never tell Mrs. Peters, nor any body, I'll try on my bridal dress and let you see if it is becoming. I want so much to know how it looks, since Maria put the rosebuds in the berthe. And then your story. I must hear that.'

As they were going down the stairs Miss Porter took Rosamond's hand and said, 'How is this?—Where is my ring?'

Rosamond could not tell her of an act which now that it no longer had insanity for an excuse, puzzled her not a little. So she made some trivial excuse, which, however, did not deceive her auditor. But the latter deemed it wise to say no more just then, and silently followed her young friend into the dining-room. Dinner being over they went up to Rosamond's chamber, the closet of which contained the bridal robes.

'Two o'clock,' said Rosamond, consulting her watch, then bringing out the rich white satin and exquisite overskirt of lace, she continued, 'I shall have just time to try this on, hear your story and get dressed before Mr. Browning comes. How short the day seems, with you here! I told him I'd be sitting in that little box which you possibly noticed, built on the gate-post against the tree.—And he'll be so disappointed not to find me there, that maybe you won't mind my leaving you awhile when the sun is right over the woods.'

'Certainly not,' answered Miss Porter, and the dressing-up process began, Rosamond chatting gayly all the while and asking if it were very foolish for her to try on the dress. 'I should not do it,' she said, 'if you would stay. Can't you?'

The answer was a decided negative, and adjusting her little slipper, Rosamond stood up while her companion put over her head