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A Broken Vow;

—OR—

BETTER THAN REVENGE.

CHAPTER VII.

When Olive Varney had set out for Chelsea with that determination to get into the house wherein Lucy Ewing lived, she had not really contemplated the final fraud she afterwards committed. All that was in her mind was that at No. 3, Greenways' Gardens lived a certain Mr. Christopher Dayne who was expecting news of a certain Uncle Phipps. She had been fortunate enough to meet the wife of that mysterious uncle and to possess herself of certain news which vitally concerned the young man; in some indefinite fashion she meant to trade upon that knowledge and so gain her purpose. It was only when she reached the house and stood in the moonlight before it that she understood how great her difficulty really was.

She had designed, in that indefinite fashion, to go to the place as the messenger of Aunt Phipps, but at the last moment she saw she could gain nothing by that. Whatever message she might give, she must finally yield up the address of Aunt Phipps, and so pass out of the business. She might get into the house, it is true, but there could be nothing to detain her there after her message was delivered. As a stranger she would enter it; as a stranger she must inevitably leave it. Some other way must be found; some other use must be made of this extraordinary opportunity that had come to her.

Certain words used by the feeble Aunt Phipps that night occurred to her while she paced about impatiently before the house, longing only to get a footing in the place itself. She remembered how Aunt Phipps had said that the boy had never seen her; she remembered that Aunt Phipps had refused to go near the house, in dread of the message she must carry. It suddenly occurred to her that in all probability Aunt Phipps never would sum up courage enough to face the young man whose fortune she had innocently helped to dissipate. In other words, no Aunt Phipps would ever knock at the door and demand to see Mr. Christopher Dayne.

But suppose another Aunt Phipps stepped into the breach? Suppose a woman, striving to find her way, under false pretences or under any pretence, into that house, declared herself to be Aunt Phipps, and so gained the right to remain there? Suppose, indeed, that Olive Varney—alive, and full of a dreadful purpose, and yet supposed to be hidden away safely in the grave—suppose that she, primed with the knowledge the innocent old woman had poured into her ears, stepped in and took the old woman's place?

She thought about that aspect of the case very carefully. Discovery must follow sooner or later; but what did that matter? Once fulfilled that which her dead father had laid down for her, and she was utterly reckless of what might follow. Suppose she pretended for the time that she was Aunt Phipps; suppose she came in that fashion directly into the lives of these young people? That would be a power indeed, because she would arrive as a long-expected friend, and yet as an enemy. With a recklessness born of that great purpose in her mind, she determined on the instant to do it.

The chances were all in her favor. In a sense she had Aunt Phipps hidden away; no one knew of her existence even. It would be quite possible for her to be kept quiet by any tale that suggested itself; quite possible, in fact, to tell her that this wronged nephew of hers was so indignant and so threatening that she must not think of facing him. The only point to be decided upon was what message she must give to Christopher Dayne when she should meet him.

While she sat in that little room into which she had been shown and awaited the advent of her supposed nephew, a whimsical thought came to her that she might after all be somewhat young for an aunt. More than that, she wondered in a careless fashion whether it would be necessary that she should show him any particular affection. Such thoughts, however, only grew up in her mind as unimportant matters, to be dismissed in a moment; the main thing was that she had gained her point, and that by a series of extraordinary events she was actually under the same roof with her enemy, and with the right to remain there.

"In such a cause as this I can sink everything—forget everything," she thought bitterly. "I might have come here and met her face to face, and seen her shrink from me in dread; and what could I have done afterwards? Now I come in another character, and this poor little fool believes herself free from prosecution. As for the boy, he doesn't count; he's merely a pawn in the game. What I shall do after this first feeling I don't know; I have been forced through it all—I will be forced to the end. My cause is just and righteous, or I should not have suc-

ceeded even to this extent; I shall fail now."

Meanwhile, at the door of that upper room Christopher Dayne and Lucy lingered. As a matter of fact he was half afraid to go down; now that that wonderful event had happened at last he did not know how to face it. He had got to that point when anything might occur within the next few minutes. He had been in dire straits for money; in his darkest hour this mysterious woman had suddenly found him and was bringing him news of some sort. Coming like that, it could not be the best of news, of course; there was no question of that. That had been the dream of his life; that son-day Uncle Phipps was to step forward and apologize for any delay there might have been, and hand to him that which properly belonged to him. It was only a question of time, and to-night all that waiting was ended. Yet, as this was to change his life so completely, he was half afraid of it.

He had struggled on so bravely in Greenways' Gardens; and yet it had not all been struggle. From that first moment when the face of Lucy Ewing looked out at him from the window of No. 3, something new had entered into his life—something which made that struggle seem worth while. Precious moments like this present one, when he touched her hands and was assured of her sympathy; bright days, when her voice and her looks had assured him that he was some day to be great and famous, and she very proud of him.

"You're quite sure"—he hesitated, and held her hands, and looked deep into her eyes—"absolutely certain that this won't make any difference?"

"Difference? I don't understand, Mr. Dayne," she faltered. "What difference can it make—except to you?"

"I don't mean that," he replied hurriedly. "Only, I saw the shadow of this woman—this Aunt Phipps—just now; and it seemed to fall across the place where I first saw you. You know you brought me to this house; but for you, I should never have come here at all."

"Mr. Dayne—you were looking for apartments," she reminded him.

"And some good chance brought me here. Why, there are thousands of places in London where apartments are to be let; and I might have gone to Highgate or Brixton, or anywhere, you know. Instead of that, something inside me said—'Go to Chelsea' and to Chelsea I came."

"How very remarkable—"

"Now you're laughing at me; but it isn't a laughing matter. But for Fate, why should I have come here at all? Why should I have turned into Greenways' Gardens and stopped right in front of this house? What I want you to understand is that even if this Aunt Phipps has brought me my fortune—it won't make any difference; even if I'm rich you'll still let me live here—and be your friend."

"Odley will want to increase the rent," she observed slyly.

"You won't be serious; I'll buy the house if Odley likes, rather than go away from you," he retorted. "Won't you tell me that nothing will make any difference, Lucy?"

"You are keeping Aunt Phipps waiting," she said, striving to withdraw her hand. "Do you think so little of my friendship, that any change of fortune could change that? This is only an accident—something that might have happened to anyone. Come—you must go down."

He had to be satisfied with that. When he looked back, at the bottom of the first flight, he saw that she had a hand resting lightly against her lips, but that was nothing. It was only his misfortune that he had not looked a moment earlier and seen her kiss her fingers in his direction. Even then he felt inclined to dash back for a moment to get a more direct answer to his question; but he remembered that Aunt Phipps was waiting, and that people who bring good news must be treated politely. So he went down stairs three at a time, in a mighty hurry.

A disconcerting aunt, this; one who sat in the shadows of the room, and held herself so upright, and so looked at him so intently. A youngish aunt, too, of a good figure, so nearly as he could judge, and with a calm, grave, somewhat sad face, which might have been handsome, but for a certain shadow which rested upon it. Christopher stood just within the door of the room and bowed a little awkwardly.

"You are—Aunt Phipps?" he ventured.

She nodded slowly; she felt she had to guard every word and every gesture, and to be on the alert. This boy was but an instrument towards the end she was seeking; behind him, as it were, was the figure of the girl she had taken such pains to reach. She could use him now for her purpose; presently he could be swept aside and left out of the business. For the moment only he was useful.

"I am your Aunt Phipps—wife of your