

Lover and Husband.

IN TWO INSTALLMENTS—PART II.

CHAPTER I.

Well, aunt, what does he say? I really am dying to know.

'He says, my dear, that he has much pleasure in accepting my invitation, and that he will come to us next Thursday. Don't you think we might get up a dinner-party for Thursday evening? The time is certainly very short; but, under the circumstances, I feel sure people would forgive that.'

And sinking gracefully back amongst the cushions of her chair, my aunt surveys me with a glance which is positively radiant.

In silent amazement I, Coronilla, Sefton, have listened to her.

What can she mean?

To what invitation is she alluding?

'Aunt,' I begin slowly, 'will you explain what you mean?'

'My love, I certainly thought you knew. Did I not tell you?'

'Did you not tell me what?'

'That I wrote to—Sir Gordon Alverstone the day before yesterday, inviting him to come and stay a fortnight with us.'

'Aunt!'

After this one horrified ejaculation, I become silent.

Not because I have not anything more to say, but simply through sheer inability to say it.

I am literally dumb with astonishment and wrath.

My aunt has invited Sir Gordon Alverstone to stay with us a whole fortnight—fourteen miserable, dreary days—and he has accepted her invitation.

Surely it is enough to make me angry.

I have been looking forward with dread to my meeting with him, even when I supposed that he would only stay a couple of days at the hotel in Yerbury, our nearest town.

'How could you be so unkind? I gasp at last.

'Unkind? my aunt repeats. 'Oh, my dear, I am sure I never meant to be! I did it all for the best. I—I thought that, if he stayed here, you might learn to—like him.'

'I never shall. I couldn't care for a man I didn't respect, and I can't respect a man who can be so despicable as to marry a girl for the sake of her money, as Sir Gordon Alverstone is intending to do. He has never seen me, so I may be as ugly as a toad for all he knows to the contrary.'

'Oh! but indeed, my dear, he does know what you are like. I—I sent him your photograph.'

'Indeed? in a voice of deadly calm.

'Which photograph did you send him?'

'One of the last you had taken.'

'Did he ask you to send it?'

'No, my love. But I thought—oh pray do not look like that! You must forgive me this time, and I will indeed be more careful in the future.'

'Yes; now the mischief is done, I mutter to myself; but aloud I say, as graciously as I can: 'Never mind, auntie, don't worry. It's no use crying over spilt milk. And now about your dinner party suggestion. How many people shall we invite?'

'Well, let me see, evidently charmed that her plan has met with my approval. 'Twelve, including ourselves, would be just a nice number, I think. Suppose we ask the Bagbotts?'

'Yes, Mr. and Mrs. Bagbott, writing their names down. 'Who next?'

'Sir Herbert and Lady Challenger, and their daughter.'

'They make five, Sir Gordon, six, our two selves eight. Now who are the other four to be?'

'Mr. Luttrell.'

'And Captain Davenant—they make ten, so we only want two more, another lady and another gentleman. Don't you think we had better complete our list with the vicar and his wife? You see, we have got the Law, as represented by Arthur Bagbott, Esquire; Sir Herbert Challenger, M. P., will give a sort of political flavor to the soup; and that gallant officer, Captain Davenant, will ably personate the Army, so don't you really think that the Reverend Orasmus Verender and his wife ought to be invited, to shed upon us the light of their countenances? We oughtn't to leave the Church out in the cold.'

'Certainly not, my love.'

'All right; then the matter is settled. Here is the list. I will put it on your writing table, and then you will know where it is when you want it. Now I am going for a walk, and, kissing my hand to Aunt Kate, I run out of the room.

But I do not enjoy my walk a bit, for truth to tell, I am in anything but an amiable frame of mind.

I detest the very name of Alverstone.

Why has my father betrothed me to Sir Gordon merely because he is the son of an old friend?

He is fifteen years older than myself—I am eighteen—and I have never seen him, thanks to his globe trotting propensities.

The arrangement was entered into between our respective families when I was only six months old, and when my father died, two years ago, he begged me to promise that I would become Sir Gordon's wife as soon after my eighteenth birthday as he might wish me to.

Having given my promise, I will redeem it, but I am looking forward with positive dread to my future, and when Thursday morning all too quickly dawns, I would

willingly give all I possess in the world if I could exchange identities with the poorest girl in the village.

Swiftly the hours of this never to be forgotten day slip away.

Eight o'clock arrives, and I find myself being introduced to the man who, for weal or for woe, holds my future in his hands.

Shyly I glance up at him, and, try as I will to prevent it, I cannot keep a deep flush from staining my cheeks, as I meet the gaze of a pair of the keenest eyes I have ever been a lot to encounter.

There is something about them, too, which is horribly disconcerting; therefore I am most sincerely glad when, a moment later dinner is announced.

Captain Davenant is my escort, but, thanks to Aunt Kate, I find that my seat is opposite to the one occupied by Sir Gordon—a discovery which does not cause me much satisfaction.

And as the dinner progresses, my resentment increases for as often as I furtively glance at my vis-a-vis, so often do I encounter his disposing gaze—a gaze which appears to be largely tinged with amusement, while I am perfectly convinced that the lips, hidden by his dark moustache are twitching with a smile, though what there is in the situation to amuse him I really fail to see.

At last Aunt Kate bows to Lady Challenger, and we ladies retire to the drawing room.

But I am not long left in peace even here, for the gentlemen soon put in an appearance, and then Sir Gordon coolly crosses to where I am sitting, a little apart from the others, and sinks down upon the lounge by my side.

'Miss Sefton,' he says calmly, 'your aunt has been telling me during dinner about her flowers.'

'Indeed,' I murmur, in a tone of the most studied indifference.

'She is particularly proud of a Charmanthe Dame cactus, and said that you would, perhaps, be kind enough to take me into the conservatory to see it. Will you?'

What unexpected diplomatic powers Aunt Kate is developing! they fairly astonish me.

If anybody had told me that she could be so clever, I would not have believed them.

But I am not going to be caught by such diplomacy; therefore, keeping my eyes fixed steadily upon my fan, I allow a moment of silence to elapse, then answer, with Arctic coldness—

'Excuse me, Sir Gordon, but the cactus will show to much greater advantage in the daytime, and my aunt will be able to explain its beauties better than—'

'Which means, I suppose, that you refuse to grant my request?'

'You are right, it does,' still keeping my eyes fixed upon my fan.

A low, amused laugh is his only answer, which has the effect of making me feel perfectly raging.

Oh, how I detest him!

He is even worse than I thought he would be; so, though I am in a general way a talkative little person enough, I now maintain an obstinate silence, until he presently breaks it by very coolly asking me what I am thinking about.

'You,' I answer, infusing as much contempt into the word as I possibly can.

'And I was meditating about you,' Sir Gordon returns quickly.

'Really, I am honored, I rejoin, with a sarcastic smile.

'Yes; I was thinking that you are very like your photograph,' he goes on. 'I would have known you anywhere; though, to tell you the truth, when I got your picture I was awfully surprised. For some reason, I had imagined you were dark, and—'

'That I squinted or had only one eye. What delightful anticipations you must have had all these years!'

Oh, no; you are entirely mistaken! My anticipations during the past years have been anything but delightful, but during the past few weeks they have been—'

'Even worse,' I cut in sharply.

'No, pardon me, you are again mistaken; they have been very pleasant.'

'Then I am afraid you will find the awakening from this a severe shock. I trust you will survive it.'

'Thank you, I trust I shall. To have one's dreams rudely dispelled, to discover that one's ideals are of the earth, earthy, must indeed be a cruel disappointment, and one which no man would willingly court. But if such a catastrophe should happen to me, I hope it will not end in my utter downfall.'

'What a loss the world would sustain if anything did happen to you!' I murmur ironically.

'Ah, yes, wouldn't it? However, let what will, I shall at least have one consolation: you—dropping his voice to the softest of whispers—have given me your sympathy.'

I am literally too angry to speak.

How dare he treat me so?

At this juncture Mrs. Verender favors us with a song.

I am passionately fond of music, and I feel as if I could sit forever, harkening to her rich, liquid tones.

I completely forget where I am, and who my companion is.

Presently Mrs. Verender rises from the

piano laughingly declaring that she is exhausted and can sing no more.

Then, still forgetting who Sir Gordon is, and all about him, I turn and address him.

'Hasn't she a magnificent voice? I exclaim enthusiastically, with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes.'

'She has indeed,' Sir Gordon agrees, with a smile. 'You are clearly very fond of music, Miss Sefton; may I ask if you sing, too?'

But this question restores my truant memory, and I suddenly recollect that it is Sir Gordon Alverstone, my detested fiancé, to whom I am talking.

Instantly I freeze into a sort of human iceberg, and it is not until he repeats his inquiry that I condescend to answer it.

'What a superfluous question!' I retort mockingly. 'Of course, I sing; everybody does nowadays.'

'Then, will you not give me the pleasure of a song? I would much like to hear you.'

'People in this world, Sir Gordon, do not get all they want; raising my eyes calmly to his face.

'Which means that you, for the second time this evening, refuse to grant my request.'

'How clever you are! But you are again right. I do refuse, and will always refuse to do anything and everything you may ask of me.'

'How awfully good of you to give me this warning! I shall know now exactly what to expect, and shall be able to save myself further humiliation. Pray accept my deepest gratitude, and—'

'Will you go away and leave me alone?'

I interrupted angrily, my patience at last exhausted. 'Surely you have annoyed and insulted me sufficiently for one evening!'

'Annoyed and insulted you? Sir Gordon reiterates, looking at me keenly; and then a gleam of amusement flashes into his eyes and he laughs. 'Now, upon my honor, that was too cruel of you. You might have let me down easier than that, for, do you know—sinking his voice to a confidential whisper—I have been flattering myself that you found my society and conversation eminently agreeable.'

What reply I might make to this audacious statement will never be known, for, to my great relief, I am spared the necessity of making any by Captain Davenant approaching me, and begging for a song.

With a gracious smile I rise to my feet and asking Cecil Davenant what song he would like, I let him lead me to the piano.

It is close upon midnight before all our guests have taken their departure, and Aunt Kate, Sir Gordon, and myself are left alone; then, with a little sigh of mingled relief and satisfaction, my aunt sinks into her favorite chair, and I, too, obey her summons to take over the events of the evening. I know from experience; but I am here to discuss them, so I hid her and Sir Gordon a hasty 'good night' and retire to my own room.

CHAPTER II.

Rat-tat-tat!

'Come in!' I call out lazily. Whereupon Annette, my maid, makes her appearance with my bath water. 'What o'clock is it?' stifling a yawn.

'Half past eight, Miss Nilla,' the girl answers; so, springing out of bed, I proceed to make my toilet.

But, though I hurry, breakfast is half over when I enter the morning room.

'You shockingly lazy child!' is my aunt's greeting. 'You don't deserve to have any breakfast, does she, Sir Gordon?'

'But you will give me some, all the same,' I declare confidently, bestowing upon her my usual morning kiss.

Then I turn to the other occupant of the room, and greet him with a chilly little bow.

'And what are you going to do this morning? Aunt Kate inquires presently.

'Nothing,' is my prompt answer.

'What a delightful employment!' Sir Gordon remarks. 'May I be permitted to join you in it?'

'I am afraid you would not find it so interesting as I shall,' I return evasively.

'Oh, but I shall, I assure you!' he declares. 'I love to do nothing.'

'Then you and Nilla ought certainly to be able to spend a very agreeable morning,' Aunt Kate interposes, with a smile.

'Fixing such tastes in common, you say?'

'But I am going to read,' I interrupt hastily.

'I thought you said that you were going to do nothing?' Sir Gordon laughs.

'Perhaps I did,' I retort indifferently, 'but inwardly I feel as if I could turn and rend him; but you see, I have taken a woman's privilege and changed my mind.'

So saying I rise from the table—for by this time we have finished breakfast—and march out of the room.

Going into the drawing room, I hunt for 'Her Bitter Foe,' the novel I am at present reading.

Some time elapses before I find it, for it has been carried into the library and stuck in a bookcase; but when at last I have discovered it, I steal out into the garden.

Thank goodness neither Aunt Kate nor Sir Gordon is visible, and then the question presses itself—Where can I go to be safely hidden from them until the luncheon bell rings?

I finally conclude that I will seek refuge beside the miniature lake at the bottom of the pleasure grounds.

It is a particularly secluded spot, and is a favorite haunt of mine; but as Aunt Kate is not aware of this last fact, she is not very likely to look for me there, so thither I go, and seating myself beneath the spread branches of a large ash tree, I open my book and am soon absorbed in its pages.

How long I am left in peace I do not know—probably for about an hour—and then I suddenly hear the sound of approaching footsteps, and, glancing up, I behold Sir Gordon.

'So I have found you at last,' he remarks coolly, and without any more ado, he flings himself down upon the grass beside the log on which I am sitting.



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I remain mute and fix my eyes upon the novel in my lap.

But Sir Gordon is apparently one of those people who do not take hints, for he makes no movement to leave me.

On the contrary, he settles himself still more comfortably by my side, and proceeds to stare at me with the unflinching look of a marble statue.

For the space of three whole minutes I bear his gaze, then—

'I wish you would go away!' I exclaim crossly. 'I want to read.'

'Then why don't you read?' Sir Gordon asks calmly.

'How can I, while you are staring at me like a—like a Chinese idol?' with a frown.

But Sir Gordon only laughs a low, amused laugh, and suddenly catches one of my hands in his.

With an almost frightened gasp, I endeavor to wrench it from him, but holds it fast.

Then, raising himself upon his elbow he looks me steadily in the face, with eyes which seem to pierce me through and through.

'How dare you?' I demand passionately. 'Let me go! Do you hear me?'

'Oh, yes, I hear you,' he answers. 'Then let me go this instant!'

'Why should I? You belong to me and I am here to claim you. In another month you will be my wife.'

Yes, I belong to him!

The very wind, as it plays amongst the leaves of the tree against which I am leaning, seems to whisper that I am fast bound.

'Nilla, look at me!' Sir Gordon commands, alter a minute's silence; and though I tell myself that I will not obey him, yet, in another moment I find that I am slowly, but none the less surely, raising my downcast eyes to his face. 'Do you think I love you?' he asks softly.

'No, I am sure you do not,' I answer with great promptitude.

'Then why am I going to marry you?'

'For my money, of course,' with a withering glance.

'It is false!' he exclaims hotly. 'It is not! I retort with equal heat. 'I say it is! Listen—say, it is of no use struggling; I am stronger than you, and hear me you shall.'

'I will not,' and with a quick movement, I jerk my wrist out of his clasp and spring to my feet.

But before I have taken two steps towards the house, Sir Gordon is once more by my side, his hand upon my arm.

'You are a foolish child,' he remarks quietly.

'And you are an unmanly coward,' I retort, anything but quietly.

But he only laughs, and, if possible, I feel more incensed than ever.

'It is indeed a fortunate thing for me that hard names break no bones,' he says lightly; 'but remember this: for every unkind epithet you now bestow upon me, I will have revenge. When I was first told of the tie between us, I rebelled against it every bit as much as you can do, and would have severed it then and there, but, to please my father, I promised not to move in the matter until you were eighteen.'

'As you are aware, I kept my promise, and you neither saw me nor heard from me until the morning of your eighteenth birthday, when your aunt received my letter, telling her I had just returned to England, and hoped to come down here and make your acquaintance. My determination still was to set you free; but, when your aunt answered my letter, she sent me your photograph. That photograph fixed your fate. Before your pictured face my determination melted away, and I swore that you should be mine. Instead of coming here to give you your liberty, I have come to cage you, my bonnie wild bird. Give you up? Set you free? A thousand times, no! I love you, with a love such as few women gain—with a love which will hold you as long as life itself shall last.'

'But I don't want your love. I—I won't have it!' I cry in scared, bewildered tones.

'Ah! but you can't get rid of it,' Sir Gordon returns, with a masterful smile, 'any more than you can get rid of me.'

'There is a moment's pause; then sinking his voice to the softest of whispers, he goes on—

'Little one, will you not come to me of your own free will? Heaven knows that I do not wish to be harsh with you; but, if you will not yield to me quietly, I must conquer you by sterner measures, even though I tear my own heart in twain during the process.'

'Oh! what shall I do? What can I do?'

With dazed frightened eyes I stand and gaze at him, my face growing whiter and whiter, my whole frame quivering with indignation and a something else which I cannot define.

Lower yet Sir Gordon bends over me, and then, suddenly loosening his clasp of my arm, he snatches me to him with a strength which is almost painful, drawing my head down upon his breast.

Oh, how I hate him!

A very volcano of hatred is seething within me, and though I do at last lapse into his arms, it is merely because my physical forces are exhausted, not because my spirit is subdued.

'Ah! quiet at last,' Sir Gordon remarks coolly, when I have ceased struggling. 'You foolish child! What was the use of trying your strength against mine? And now, see what I have brought you'—and, holding me easily with one arm, he thrusts the other hand into his pocket, produces a small leather case, and, opening it, takes out a magnificent half hoop emerald ring. 'Well, do you like it?' he asks, as he slips it upon my finger. 'What! still obstinate? As I do not answer, 'Never mind'—with his calm, aggravating smile—'you will make me happy before long. I shall receive a rich payment one of these days for all the trouble you are administering to me now,' and stooping, he lays his first kiss upon my lips.

'Let me go!' I cry, finding my voice at last; and slowly he unclasp his arms from about my shrinking form and steps back.

'Thank Heaven! I am free once more, and I turn and flee.'

Nor do I halt until I have reached the house and my own room, where I flung myself face downwards upon the bed, and burst into a paroxysm of angry, convulsive sobs.

CHAPTER III.

'Happy is the bride the sun shines on.'

Many times in the course of my life I have both heard and repeated this well known saying, and how persistently does it ring through my brain now, as I stand in front of the flower decked altar of the quaint old church of Yerbury, beside the man who will so soon be my husband.

Am I going to be happy?

In the beautiful sunshine with which the church is filled an emblem of my future life?

I fear that is not, how far can I be happy tied to a man I thoroughly dislike and fear?

At last the solemn service comes to an end, the words are spoken which unite Gordon Alverstone and myself in indissoluble bonds until death do us part.

With trembling fingers I sign my maiden name for the last time, and even as I do, the white haired vicar addresses me by my new title.

Lady Alverstone!

How the name makes me start and flush.

What an odd, unfamiliar ring there is about it!

And then I find myself walking down the aisle of the crowded church upon the arm of my newly made husband.

To me the wedding-breakfast is somewhat of an indication, but it finally comes to an end, and, followed by Aunt Kate, I go upstairs to exchange my bridal dress for a dark-green cloth travelling dress.

Then, amidst a shower of rice and good wishes, to quote from the local press, we depart for London, Dover, and the Continent.

It is a long and wearisome journey from Yerbury to Dover, and I am more glad than tongue can tell when it comes to an end, and I find myself in one of the comfortable private sitting-rooms of the Lord Warden hotel.

'Tired, Nilla?' my husband inquires.

'Tired to death,' I answer, somewhat ungraciously.

'I am sorry, but you will feel better when—'

The rest of his sentence I am not destined to hear, for, at this moment, a waiter makes his appearance, bringing Gordon a telegram, which has been awaiting our arrival since