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"Flowers of the Valley,"

OR
**MABEL HOWARD,
OF THE LYRIC.**

CHAPTER XIII.

"OH, HEAVEN! IT IS TRUE!"

This beautiful place, this Knighton, with its wide acres and farms and woods, it was hers no longer. Whose was it? As the question rose to her mind, a crimson glow poured over her face.

Mr. Barrington had said that if the will could not be found, all—everything, house, and lands, and money—would go to Heron Coverdale!

Heron Coverdale—the man whose life she had saved, the man whom she had met and spoken with, and whose face and voice still haunted her!

It was his now, and he would be master here. He would know that the girl he had spoken with was herself—know the story of her shame! Strange as it may seem, this was the hardest thought of all! That he, who had treated her with such respect and reverence, should know that she was without a name, and under a cloud of shame, was unendurable!

What would he say—think? He was lord of Knighton now, and he would perhaps want to offer her money. This thought stung her like the cut of a whip, and she sprang to her feet and fell to pacing the room, wringing her hands.

The door opened, and Felice entered. She stood looking at the beautiful girl in her agony for a moment in silence; then she stretched out her hands humbly and pleadingly.

"Forgive me, Miss Iris!" she murmured. Iris turned and confronted her with a wild gaze.

"Is it you? Forgive you! For what? What wrong have you done me? You were forced to speak the truth! It was time. I have been a living lie too long—too long! But—and her hands worked together—"why did you not tell me before—why was I kept in ignorance? Oh, Heaven, if I could only die!"

Felice's lips quivered. "You would never have known but for that man!" she said, in a quick, panting way. "I had sworn not to tell you. If my master had left a will, as he said he would, all would have been well! Where is the will?"

Iris looked at her in a dazed, troubled way. "Will! Will! What does that matter? Would it have given me back my name, my honor, my place in the world? Not my father!" she winced and trembled.

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"Felice!" she said. "Felice has said so! She would rather have died than admit it, but I forced her. Oh, it is true—true—true!"

Mr. Barrington frowned. "I say nothing is true until it is proved," he said, solemnly. "And I want you to wait, and—keep up your heart, until I have made inquiries into this strange story. This man, Ricardo, has been arrested on a criminal charge. What reliance can be placed on his account of the affair? None! As your legal adviser, I say that I have every right to treat his story with contempt!"

Iris raised her pale face and looked at him.

"Why have you not found the marriage certificate?" she said, in a low voice. "Why did my father never mention my mother to me? Her name never passed his lips! Why did he turn pale and tremble when this man, Ricardo, came here, and why did he want me not to listen to him? And Felice! She is my mother's sister! And she says that—that what this man told you was true!"

Mr. Barrington's eyes fell. "At least," he said, "will you not wait until I make inquiries before deciding that this story is true? Remember how much depends upon it! If there had been a will—"

Iris rose and confronted him, white and statue-like. "If there had been a will, and I had been left mistress here," she said, "and I had known of—of this, do you think I would have touched a penny, claimed an acre? No! This belongs not to a nameless girl born in shame, but to the rightful owner! I would not have touched a penny of it!"

Mr. Barrington bit his lip.

"You may be right or wrong. I understand and honor your feelings, Miss Knighton," he said; "and I will say no more. I only ask that you will do nothing until I have made inquiries into the truth of this man's story. Will you promise me that?"

"I will promise nothing," she said, almost wildly, "I cannot tell what I shall do! My brain is in a whirl! My heart seems broken!"

Lawyer as he was, Mr. Barrington was at a loss for words. It was terrible to see the effect the blow had had on the proud and beautiful girl.

"Miss Knighton," he said, brokenly: "I was your father's legal adviser, and I am proud to be able to aid, friend! I do hope that you will trust me, and that you will do nothing without consulting me."

Iris shook her head.

"I cannot say what I shall do," she said, despairingly. "I am alone in the world, homeless, nameless—"

"No!" he said, solemnly. "As yet, nothing has been proved."

"To me, all seems proved," she said, bitterly.

"But not to me! It is my duty to discredit everything to your disadvantage, Miss Knighton; and I shall set about taking steps to prove that this man's story is false."

If he had stayed for an hour, there was no more to be said, and he went quietly out. He did so Clarence Montacute passed in.

He came in so quietly that Iris did not hear him, and, thinking herself alone, had thrown herself upon the couch, her head buried in the cushion, and, when he approached her, and gently spoke her name, she started and exclaimed:

"You, Lord Montacute?"

"Yes, it is I!" said Clarence. "Forgive me, Miss Iris, but I felt that I must come!"

She sat with her white face averted from him, her hands clasped in her lap.

"Why have you come?" she asked, in a hard, constrained voice. "I should have thought that all honorable men—and women, too—would have shunned me now."

Poor Clarence's face crimsoned, and his head thrashed. "Oh, how little you know me!" he said, eagerly, sadly. "Shun you! Miss Iris, if you knew! But I didn't come to speak of myself! I came to ask you to come home with me to my mother."

He stopped, for Iris had turned her eyes upon him with a look of despair and bitterness.

"To your mother?" she repeated. "Do you think Lady Montacute would permit me, knowing who and what I am, to cross her threshold?"

His face grew pale. "I think, and I know my mother too well not to feel sure that she would feel honored by your becoming her guest!" he said; then he went on in a tone of deep feeling, from which not even his slurred "r's" and thick "w's" could detract. "Oh, Miss Iris, you know that I don't believe in this stupid story! You know that I shouldn't believe it even if it came with proof, hard to disprove; and this only comes from a vile scoundrel! But if it were proved to be true, do you think it would make any difference to me in my feelings toward you? No! Miss Iris, this is not the time to speak of myself and all I have told you, but I think I have loved you, that I love you most dearly and truly—"

Iris made a gesture as if to silence him, but he went on:

(To be continued)

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