

CUPIDITY AND CRIME.

CHAPTER I.

"We understand that a marriage is arranged between Lord de Gretton of Gretton Castle and Miss Nora Bruce, daughter of Captain Duncan Bruce, R.N."

"There, Nora!" Mrs. Bruce's handsome equine face flushed with triumph as she first read the all-important paragraph cut for the edification of the breakfast-party, and then pushed the fashionable paper across to her step daughter. "All the country knows it now. My dear, dear child, you are a favorite (if fortune indeed!)"

Nora's first impulse was to push away the paper angrily; but she felt that her mother's anxious eyes were on her, and, restraining the impulse, answered with tolerable composure—

"Fortune is tickle, Mrs. Bruce"—she never called her mother's successor "mother"—"she may withdraw her favors still."

Mrs. Bruce only nodded, and her son, Vance Singleton, looked up with a half-angry smile from his coffee-cup.

"Do you think Lord Gretton will back out?" he inquired gracefully. "No fear of that, Nora! You are a pretty girl, and wiser in your generation than I thought you. Fear as he is, I think he has made an excellent bargain."

Mrs. Bruce flashed an angry glance at the unabashed Vance. Nora's pale face shadowed a little, and Christine Singleton shrugged her slender shoulders disdainfully.

"The first effect of your new dignity, Nora," she said, with her faint supercilious smile. "When Vance begins to pay you compliments, you may feel that you are a great lady already."

Vance smiled, and nodded his black head, quite untroubled by his sister's sneer.

"True for you, Nora. You have risen enormously in my estimation in the last few days; and, when Crissie proves a better angler than she has hitherto been, and brings even the smallest of fish safely to land, I promise her a compliment too."

Christine's eyes flashed dangerously, and Mrs. Bruce hastened to interpose.

"How you children do squabble!" she said peevishly. "One would think you took no pleasure in your sister's good fortune. You will hardly let her speak between you. Nora, my dear—with sudden affectionate solicitude—"your coffee is quite cold. Ring for some more, Vance; the child has had no breakfast."

Nora smiled a little bitterly, and quite as scornfully as Christine, whose angry glance she had intercepted. For twelve years nothing in the house had been so little considered, as the comfort of Nora Bruce; but the comfort of the future Lady de Gretton was quite a different thing. Had she been one shade less miserable than she was, she must have taken a cynical pleasure in watching her step mother's transparent manoeuvres, and must have extracted a malicious amusement from the hot coffee, the smoking cakes, the delicate confections, now pressed upon her with such tender care. But, with a broken heart, a shadowed past, and a future from which she shrieks with sickening dread, it is hard to laugh even in bitterness and scorn.

"But that is not the only newspaper-notice Nora has won," drawled Crissie, as she looked up from the bread-and-butter she was cutting fantastically and eating not at all—for, in her new-born care of the bride-elect, Mrs. Bruce had for once ignored her own children. "Did you chance to see the *Univers* last night?"

Nora shook her head indifferently; but Mrs. Bruce colored and bit her lip.

"What nonsense you talk, Christine!" she cried sharply, making a desperate effort to catch her daughter's studiously-averted eyes. "Even if dear Nora's time were not so fully occupied as it needs must be, you know she never cared for society papers as you do."

"Never did care," corrected Christine. "Tastes change—don't they, Nora? She will be a leader of society now."

"That she will," chimed in Mrs. Bruce proudly; and absented to loom larger and more imposing than ever in her smart morning dress and cap of gorgeous velvet. "Oh, Duncan, to think that our dear child should bring us such pride and joy! It is more than we ever could have hoped for—Heaven

bless her!" And, murmuring the pious benediction, she buried her still blue eyes in a film of snowy cambric.

Vance Singleton grinned broadly as he gave vent to a mimic sob; Crissie drew her faintly marked brows together, and glared into her coffee-cup. Captain Bruce sidged uneasily under the pathetic appeal and looked across at his daughter.

"Nora is a good girl," he said a little nervously; and the trouble in his voice and in his eyes made the girl's heart ache, yet gave her at the same time the only grain of comfort she was then capable of receiving. She could, at least, with Lord de Gretton's aid, make life a little easier to him.

So she smiled back cheerily, glad to see the worn face brighten at that smile, swallowed a mouthful of coffee, and turned to Christine with the careless question—

"And what does the *Univers* find to say of me?"

"Nothing that you need mind," broke in Mrs. Bruce hastily, with a threatening glance at her rebellious child.

"Nothing that I shall mind; be sure of that," she answered, with forced boldness, and a cool stare in Crissie's pale gleaming eyes. "I think I can guess the style of paragraph that Christine must delight in."

"Of course you can, that young lady agreed sedately—"the usual delicate badinage of 'May and December'—Our new heraldry is hands, not hearts; you know that sort of thing—awfully amusing, but shocking style."

"Would not you like to be so pilloried, Crissie?" Vance rose and stretched himself as he put the malicious question; and then, without pausing for an answer, he turned to his step-father and said, "I am off to town to-day, sir. No chance of your company, I suppose."

He looked as though he rather dreaded than desired it; but Vance was always civil to the step father to whom he owed so much, which was one reason why Nora kept a soft place in her heart for her rather graceless step brother.

He seemed immensely relieved when the Captain answered with a sort of nervous decision—

"Not to-day, Vance; Lord de Gretton is coming over, and—"

"Oh, ah, so he is!"—with a quick grimace of disgust. "Well, so long as I don't take Nora with me, he will not grumble at my absence."

This was indisputably true, as Lord de Gretton had, in his cold and silent fashion, more than once displayed a stately disapproval of Vance Singleton's little ways.

"Shall you be away long, Vance?" asked his mother.

"Not more than two or three days," he answered carelessly; and, looking up, Nora was surprised to see a vivid flush stain the smooth bronzed skin.

Vance Singleton blushing! Even in her self-absorbed misery she could hardly help smiling at such a phenomenon as that.

He caught the glance, interpreted its wonder and amusement aright, and bit his lip vexedly.

"Good-bye, Nora. I won't forget your wedding present!" he cried, with a revengeful frown; and then whistling a little out of tune to cover his confusion, he strolled off.

Nora was not long in following his example. Her head and heart ached heavily, and she longed with a wild eager longing to be once more alone—alone with her knowledge that her fate was sealed, with the memory of her old sorrow, with her sore and aching heart.

Her hours of freedom were so few now, were diminishing with such cruel speed. In six weeks' time she would be Lord de Gretton's wife; and then—then she must fling all her thoughts forward, must let her fancy only play with the future, and never dally with the dead, dead, dangerous past.

In six weeks' time it would be sin to open the big silver locket that had lain in her bosom so long, to gaze through blinding tears into the brave blue eyes, the frank handsome face that smiled back so kindly, to press her chilled lips to the irresponsible glass, and feel as though she touched the cold cheek of the dead—sin to dream night and day of the hatred and in which her soldier-boy had fallen—sin to remember that one golden summer day in which Arthur Beaupre told his love.

"Oh, Arthur, Arthur, why did you die and leave me here? Life without you is too hard, too bitter!" she had cried in her rebellious pain, and, in the first bitterness of her grief, had prayed wildly and passionately that she too might die.

But the Angel of death had been deaf to her prayers. Does he ever come for our calling? Does he not rather love to follow those who shrink from and fly from him, and set the willing sacrifice aside? A year, and half another, passed away, and found her not only living still, but with unfaded beauty and undiminished charm; for the man whose mere coming threw the small community into a nervous flutter had wooed her for his wife; and she was from that moment, in the estimation of her neighbors, the luckiest, happiest girl, not only in all Nottleton, but in all England too. Happy? Ah, well, they did not know! Tears had not washed the faint roses from her smooth creamy skin, had not dimmed the brightness of the dark gray jetting eyes bequeathed her by her Irish mother; pain had traced no wrinkles on the low smooth brow, nor planted one silver thread in the blue-black brightness of the soft rippling hair. The tall slender form was still erect, instinct with supple, healthful grace. Only her heart was dead.

She was so sure of this last fact that she grew to feel a certain pride and safety in the thought, to look with a certain superior scorn upon the world that could hardly hurt her more. With all the hopes and dreams of youth buried in Arthur Beaupre's grave, she was, at one-and-twenty, as safe from fierce pain as desolate of hope.

It was not a good or healthy frame of mind, but it was that in which Lord de Gretton found her, which rendered her pliant as wax to her father's wish, her step-mother's imperious will.

"It will save your father's life, child," Mrs. Bruce said, her shrill voice quivering with nervous excitement, her sharp handsome face all aglow.

"On, Nora!"—there was real pathos in the look she cast across the shabby room of her husband, with his gray head bent above the rickety old writing-table, and the morning sunlight streaming through the high narrow window finding out every line in his fine worn face, every wrinkle in his poor threadbare coat—"remember what a life it has been for the last twelve years for us all! Don't, my dear sweet girl, that I have loved like my own child—don't forget what lies in your power now—don't condemn us to such an existence forever!"

Nora did remember distinctly enough what those twelve years—the years of her step mother's married life—had been—years of grinding poverty and much pretentious show, years in which she had suffered much more actual hardship than either Mrs. Bruce or her daughter—for Christine Singleton had been persistently put forward at her step-sister's expense—but years that now seemed in the retrospect, peaceful and happy enough.

"Nothing lasts forever!" the girl cried, with a hard bitter laugh. "I thought papa and I were to live alone for ever, Mrs. Bruce; then you came, and all that life ended."

At any other time the retort would have cost her dear, and, as it was, the step-mother's lips quivered; but she forced a smile, and answered snavely—

"As this will end now, you pretty saucy puss—with a marriage! You did not like my coming. Now you were a passionate child even then, and you set yourself against me from the first. But your dear father would have married some one, Nora—he is a man that must be looked after—and as well me as another."

Nora laughed in spite of herself; there was something so supremely absurd in the thought of the impatient woman who had long ridden rough-shod over Nora Bruce laboriously explaining her twelve-year-old marriage to the possible Lady de Gretton of the future.

The laugh appeared to cheer the elder woman immensely; she threw one arm around the girl's shoulders and would have kissed her, but she slipped dextrously aside.

"You look so pretty when you laugh, child; those teeth of yours are like little pearls against your pretty red lips. Ah, if my Crissie had only your attractions!"

She paused and sighed profoundly, as though Christine's future was really too gloomy for contemplation. Nora checked her with irrepressible scorn. Nothing about her seemed meaner than this description of her daughter.

"How your opinions change, Mrs. Bruce! It is not so long since you held up Crissie as a model I might vainly emulate, and bewitched me with the long list of her graces and perfections. Mind, I am not grumbling at that," she added hastily, as the other was

about to interpose—"that was natural enough; she was your own child—I your husband's only."

"But dear to me as my own, Nora. You cannot deny that I have been a good mother, a good wife."

Nora shrugged her shoulders; she felt inexpressibly weary of the whole discussion, of the woman's pertinacity, of her own confused thoughts.

"I do not complain," she said. "As you say, my father would have married some one, and it might have been worse."

It was a grudging admission at best, though it cost no small effort to make; but from Lord de Gretton's cheek once it was more than enough; the step-mother was afflicted almost to tears.

"Thank you, Nora dear," she said, with a grateful whimper. "I know that sooner or later you would do me justice, would see that we always acted for your good—your father and I."

"We were not taking of my father," the other interrupted, with jealous haste; "that is quite another thing."

"But it is your father I must speak of, Nora—your poor father, whose future comfort depends on you. Lord de Gretton could do so much to make him happy and set his mind at ease no said as much last night."

Nora did not answer. Mrs. Bruce suspected her of not listening, though in truth every word she spoke sank straight to the very bottom of her sore heart.

It was all true. Two men's life had been hard and cheerless; much work and little pay had dimmed the bright eyes and broken the brave spirit with which young Duncan Bruce had set forth upon his life-voyage. His lot had been the lot of many another man who, unbacked by influential friends or powerful interest, essays to make his way in a jealously guarded profession. Younger and luckier men had passed him in the race of life; gates at which his patient merit had battered in vain had opened in his sight to golden keys. No wonder that in his early retirement he felt dazed and at odds with all the world.

"Remember, this is the first piece of good fortune that has ever come in his way, child. For his sake you will not refuse it."

Mrs. Bruce was a clever woman in her way; she saw the girl's softened look, and struck while the iron was hot.

Nora walked straight across the room to the table at which her father sat, forlorn and haggard-looking in the brilliant morning sunshine, a desperate purpose swelling in her heart and urging her on to feverish action. She could make him happy with a word; why should she not speak it? It could not injure Arthur now; and for her what did it matter?

"Papa, look at me, please," she said quite coolly and firmly. "Do you wish me to marry Lord de Gretton?"

He raised his eyes at the appeal, then dropped them quickly on the paper, and said in a low tone—

"You must choose for yourself, child. Lord de Gretton has done you a great honor. He has much to offer."

"To offer you, papa?"

His thin face flushed; but he answered promptly—

"Yes; he can give me what I have not known for years—freedom from debt, peace of mind—a little rest before I die."

pushed back his scanty gray hair with such a tired gesture, but looked at her with such a trustful smile, that she hesitated no longer.

"That is enough, papa," she said bending down to kiss him. "When Lord de Gretton asks me, I will say 'Yes.'"

"Heaven bless you, Nora!" broke in Mrs. Bruce, with an effusive gasp.

Her father said nothing; but, as the girl clung to him with sudden passion, she heard him draw a long breath of relief.

Vaguely and dreamily the girl pondered her past, and nerved herself to face the future, the future that stretched so blank and bare before her.

"I can bear it," she cried, with a sort of bitter pathos—"oh, yes, I can bear it, or my heart is dead! But will it be long? I don't know—I hope not! My mother died at three-and-twenty, and she left love and hope behind; I shall go to mine."

She nursed her moody thoughts until Christine Singleton, in an elaborate afternoon costume, came toiling up the steep hill to where she was sitting to remind her that Lord de Gretton was expected.

"And you will be so fit to receive him!"