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"Love in the Wilds"

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CHAPTER X.
THE TAMING PROCESS.

"The man fiddled on, doing nothing. But the time came when he thought and acted. He loved still, but he dared not, nay, would not—for he would dare all that man may dare—he would not break his vow, and the pact was kept.

"Henceforth the streams divide—one shines on, lighted by wealth, fame, and public favor; the other must struggle o'er the stones, and through the rocks into an ocean of success. Bella, you were the girl; I was the man. Our pact must be kept," and he looked down into her eyes and her white face with a smile, stern and set.

The girl hid her face from it and shuddered.

"Reginald," she said so hoarsely that he had to bend his head to hear her, "Reginald, you will kill me!"

He shook his head.

"No Bella, women do not die of broken hearts, whatever men may do. Still, were it so, the pact must be kept and you know it."

She moaned like a wounded stag and lifted her pale face again.

"I know it," she breathed. "I know it, and you—you would kill me before your eyes if I stood in your way."

"I should," he said, and his face became grand with the intensity of firmness. "I should. Between us, who have loved and love—for you know I love you—there can be no deceit. Our eyes can look through its mask; our hearts can wear none. Three years ago I offered you my love—no weak, flimsy bauble, but love—under these conditions. You would have taken it with worse gladly, thoughtlessly. I set before you as one dealing with life and death the certain future when the break would come. You took it, still with wide-open eyes, with entire knowledge of the consequences. The break has come. We keep the pact. We part, loving still, mark, but saying farewell forever!"

She was calm, unnaturally calm now, white to the very lips, and short of breath. In her eyes was the look of the leopardess when she feels the life blood oozing from the mortal wound. In her heart was a resolution born of despair—despair, for, from

the sentence that had fallen from the lips above her, she knew there was no escape, no appeal.

"You love me still?" she asked, laying her hands upon her heart, clasped till the diamonds on them cut the interlaced fingers. "You love me still?"

"You know it," he replied, meeting her gaze with clear, unshrinking eyes.

"I know it," she said, as if in answer to a last doubt. "You would not speak falsely to me. You love me still, and that must be my consolation. I will clasp it to my bosom like a dove. Reginald, you did not complete your story. You said nothing of the care and love you lavished on the dancing girl. You said nothing of the weary toil you bestowed upon her. You said nothing of the labors which, with a willing hand, you underwent to polish the rough pebble and make it worthy of a place in your heart. For I am but a pebble, polished though I am, to be flung aside, even as you fling me aside now, Reginald. Of all this you said nothing. It was left for me to say. I tell you that though I, who lay here for the last time, am still in outward form that despoiled thing, a ballet girl, within, and she struck her white bosom with her clinched hands, "I have a soul attuned by yourself to your own. You smile; you would smile if I lay in my coffin, Reginald, for your heart is adamant, immovable. I give you proof of what I say. The streams must separate, I say you; 'they shall,' say I. You go through rock to fortune, and the object you have set yourself—Heaven knows what it be; I don't even ask! I stop, and scorning the life you will not render bearable by your love, fall into the silent pool whose name is Death."

As solemn, almost as stern as his, her voice breathed out the threat, for such it was.

"His face changed not a whit. Cold, composed, and calm it turned to hers. "Bella, you speak the truth, as you think; but you err. I know; and knowing am convinced that you lack the courage. Death is a poet's word and easy to rhyme. To realize it by one's own hand—by one so small, so white, so weak as this—is difficult, nay, 'tis impossible."

Her eyes lighted up with a flash of scorn for one moment, then relapsed into the old, awful look.

"Comfort yourself with that then," she said, "and go your way."

"I will," he replied, "I will—a stormy, dangerous way, Bella, on which you could not go, at least, by my side; and I know no other place would satisfy you. I go my way to success or—You go yours—easy, pleasant, and certain at an end. In both our hearts the barb remains: pluck out yours, as I with might and main shall have to pluck out mine."

She shook her head and silently rose from her position.

He took out his watch and looked at it with a sharp, calculating glance, then raised his eyes to where she stood leaning against the mantel, white still, but as resolute as himself.

Something in the turn of her lips

kept him silent for a few minutes. He was suffering like herself and could not trust himself to speak.

Presently he rose and looked round for his coat. Putting it on and holding his hat in his hand he walked up to her.

She raised her eyes—clear, bright, blue eyes—as calm as his own.

"You are going?" she said, in a low, deathly voice.

"Yes," he said.

"Forever?" she asked.

"Forever," he replied, solemnly.

She drew near him and held up her face, as she had held it up a score of times.

"One kiss—the last."

His lips quivered for the first time, but the well-trained face did not betray him.

He bent his head.

With a low cry of inexpressible agony she threw her arms round his neck, devouring every inch of his face with her greedy eyes, and caressing his neck with her poor, fond fingers.

Then, as he gently but firmly unclasped them and withdrew from her embrace, she turned and stood upright, with her eyes fixed upon him as he walked toward the door.

As it closed behind him she seemed to wake from the stupor of despair and, with a low cry, sank into a chair.

As she did so a sealed packet lying on the table caught her eye.

Anything, the slightest morsel pertaining to him, was precious to her. She caught at it and tore it open. A score of bank-notes fell fluttering to the floor.

She gazed at them and turned the envelope over. Not a word—simply the money.

"Oh, cruel, cruel!" she cried, flinging herself down upon them and rocking herself in the agony of her grief. "Oh, cruel, cruel!"

Thus she sat for five minutes, then she sprang up and went to one of the small cabinets. The wild outburst of grief had been supplanted by the old, unnatural calm.

The notes lay on the floor; she tramped on them as she returned from the cabinet with a small vial in her hand.

Some chocolate remained in the cup. With a low cry of half-mad delight she caught it up.

His lips had touched it. Even in death she should share with him.

Quickly, as if to give herself no time for hesitation, she emptied the vial into the cup and raised it to her lips.

"The pact is kept!" she cried, and drained the draught to the dregs.

One moment more and the costly toy fell with a dull crash upon the Turkey carpet. Another and the more precious human toy had followed it.

Forsaken and destroyed they lay side by side, to be thrown, with all other broken china and broken lives, to the dust whence they came.

And the destroyer? Relentless, un pitying, even to herself, he had gone on his way.

Woe be to those whose fate may cast them across his path, for he who had no mercy for himself can have none for them!

CHAPTER XII.
A CANDID CONFESSION.

Fear is the last of ills. In time we hate that which we often fear.—ANTONY & CLEOPATRA.

Captain Dartmouth returned to the Dal's much sooner than he was expected.

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Both the squire and Grace were astonished to see him. They were just sitting down to dinner when he entered in his cool, languid way and bid them good-evening.

"Hello!" said the squire; "back already, Reginald? You soon got your business over."

"Yes, sir," was the reply; "very quickly. It was an affair of a very few minutes," and he smiled grimly as he thought of the broken heart he had left and the dull, dead pain in his own.

"Well, I'm glad to see you back. Grace and I were missing you—weren't we, Grace?"

"No, I was not," said Grace, coolly. "Shall we put the fowls back? They'll be spoiled."

"Don't ruin them for me," said the captain, taking the rather uncivil remark with his usual indifferent politeness. "I have had half a dinner, and will finish the rest when I come down. Pray go on, sir."

"All right," said the squire; "I'll tell James to keep the mutton down till you come," and turning to the butler he gave the order.

Reginald Dartmouth was not long in exchanging his traveling-suit for an evening one, and sauntered into the room again in a few minutes as carefully dressed as usual, and looking, if anything, more serene and careless.

"Have some fowl or some mutton?" said Grace.

He would have fowl, he said, and she cut him a wing.

"Well," said the squire, "you don't look any the worse for your flying journey. Here's to your health!" and in the old-fashioned way he lifted the glass with a bow.

"No," said Reginald, bowing also, "I don't feel any worse, either. Any news, sir?"

"None, save that Grace has thrown the pony," and he looked over with a shake of his head at the culprit.

"Is that all?" said Reginald, significantly. "Is that the only piece of mischief, Miss Grace?"

"Yes, that is all," she retorted. "And pray, what mischief have you been doing since you have been away?"

He smiled almost sweetly.

"Mischief?" he repeated. "None. I have been seeing to some business that ought to have been got through long ago, Miss Grace. And so you have thrown the pony? Is he hurt seriously?"

"No," said the squire; "I don't think so."

"I must look at him to-morrow," said Reginald, and he held his plate for come mutton.

The pain at his heart was as bad and as intense as ever, but he could eat. Some men, especially those of Reginald Dartmouth's caliber, could enjoy their dinner if they were to be hanged ten minutes later.

After dinner he lighted a cigar and strolled out upon the terrace.

The moon was just creeping above the trees. Grace was in the drawing-room, the squire in the easy-chair, drifting through the land of dreams.

Reginald knew that he should be in the drawing-room, but for the moment he felt unequal to bearing the rough, uncultivated rudeness—for it was little else—of the girl he had set himself to marry. His heart was too full of the pleading voice and sorrowful eyes he had left behind him for evermore, and he gave way to the only weakness he had ever felt in his life, and, leaning over the terrace, gazed at the cloud of smoke and continued to harden his heart.

While he was in this position a foot-step sounded behind him, and turning, he saw Grace.

(to be continued.)

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