

# One in a Thousand, BUT TRUE TO THE LAST

CHAPTER XX.

I order the carriage, and dress myself as carefully as I can, yet I cannot hide the haggard misery in my eyes, nor the ghastly pallor of my face. I think, as I take a last look in the glass, that I would follow Lady Derwent's example, and put on a little outside coloring, if I had it. But I do not possess it; and, although I have no doubt there is plenty in Theo's dressing case, I do not care to go into her room for it. Green might put a different construction upon such an unusual proceeding.

I draw on my gloves, and go downstairs. The carriage is waiting at the hall door, and I tell Mawson to stop at the post office, as we go through Idleminster. Another of these long, solitary drives! I am almost ashamed of the servants knowing that I am always alone, and my sister is my husband's favorite companion.

To my disgust, Lady Myers is at home—I had hoped all the way that she might be out—because, though I was resolved to keep my word and come, I am really very uncomfortable and awkward to find myself making my first call alone; when I returned her first visit she was not at home. But now it is too late to draw back. Lady Myers is at home, so the man tells me, and I have nothing to do but go in. I find Mrs. Brancepeth there; and, from the manner in which the two ladies sprang aside and look at each other, I cannot help fancying that they have been speaking about me.

"And is Lady Lasselle still with you?" says Lady Myers, when we have exhausted the never-failing topic, the weather.

"Yes," I answer, faintly.

"Oh, yes; I saw her drive past with Sir Adrian!" says Mrs. Brancepeth. "How much better she looks since she came to Idleminster!"

"Yes," I say, more faintly still.

I wish wildly that I had the presence of mind enough to start a new topic, but I cannot. I cast about for anything to comment upon, but I might as well be dumb, for anything I can force myself to say. At last Mrs. Brancepeth breaks the silence:

"How very sorry you will be to leave!"

"What a pity! The chief would be so horribly disappointed!" he says, with a laugh. "And he's the sort of man who doesn't bear trouble of any kind well."

I am so hurt and indignant that I do not attempt to answer. I look at Adrian for a moment without moving; then I rise from my seat and leave the room. Before I close the door, I hear Theo's scornful, cutting voice saying: "Dear me, your shot has struck home!" So it has, Theo—home to the heart!

It is only in fiction that the sorely wounded in heart cry out. I am no tragedy queen; I do not fling up my arms and shriek out my wretchedness; I do not shut the door with a bang. On the contrary, I close it very quietly, and creep upstairs—lightly creep. I grope along, with my hand against the wall, like a blind woman; I feel faint and sick, like one who has just had a crushing blow on the head. When I enter my bedroom, Lane is there, and I tell her, as quietly as my shaking voice will allow me, to get me a dressing gown, and take off my dress. I make no attempt whatever to unfasten it myself; but when she has wheeled a chair close to the fire, I ask her to put some scent on a handkerchief for me. When she has given me that, she goes on laying out my dinner dress; but, though I am perfectly aware I shall not wear it, I am too stunned to tell her so. Then she asks if she can do anything else for me, and, when I tell her "No," she goes away.

About half an hour later I hear my husband go into his dressing room; the door of communication is ajar, and I call him. I have not done such a thing for more than a fortnight, and he enters, with a surprised face.

"I want to speak to you," I say, with an effort.

"Leave!" I echo. "I don't understand you."

"To leave Idleminster, of course." Then, seeing from my blank face that I am in ignorance of her meaning, she adds: "You surely know that the Chirassiers have received their orders for Ireland, do you not?"

"I think you must be mistaken," I stammer. "I have not heard a word of it."

"Well, the order arrived only this morning. Capt. Cust came to tell Edith just as I left the house this afternoon. Of course, he wants to be hurried at once," with a well-satisfied little laugh.

"I don't think Idleminster suits me very well," I say, for I feel that I am growing whiter and whiter every moment, and give this as an explanation: "at least, I am never really well here."

"You look dreadfully ill," says Lady Myers. "I'm sure in the cathedral on Sunday I expected to see you drop every moment."

I smile, in a sickly sort of way, and presently take my departure, wishing myself anywhere out of the way of all this toil and tumult.

When I reach home, Adrian and Theo have not returned. I notice that Col. Cardylion's card is lying on the table in the inner hall; but I am not sufficiently interested to inquire what time he was here. His visits during the last month have been of almost daily occurrence, for the great woman later is at last as really and truly in love as any young subaltern of six months standing; but Theo will not even look at him. She has eyes for Adrian only; no other man, not even the one who will have power to make her a duchess, seems to have any fascination for her.

When they come back, I am sitting in the drawing room fire, in the chair which Theo always appropriates if possible. She comes in laughing gayly and takes off her crape bonnet, flinging it down upon a sofa. I have no doubt she is perfectly aware how well she looks with all her wavy, golden hair tossed and ruffled.

"That man has actually been here again!" she says, with laughing emphasis on the last word. "Ah, it is something to have won the heart of a man who hates the whole sex, and who will be a duke into the bargain!"

"Were you at home, Audrey?" says Adrian, carelessly.

"No."

"What a pity! The chief would be so horribly disappointed!" he says, with a laugh. "And he's the sort of man who doesn't bear trouble of any kind well."

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"I want to speak to you," I say, with an effort.

He closes the door, and comes to the fire, standing with one elbow resting upon the mantelshelf.

"What did you mean by what you said about Col. Cardylion?" I ask.

"It was only joking," he answers; "and, really, I don't see what occasion there was for you to fling out of the room in that way."

"I did not fling out of the room," I say, coldly; "and, whether you were joking or not, I wish to tell you plainly that there must be no repetition of it."

"Well," he says, in an aggrieved voice, "I do think it's hard lines if I can't make a joke, if I like. You never say anything to Theo."

"Theo is my guest," I say, with cutting severity; "and, as such, I wish to treat her with punctilious politeness. But you must know she did not mean it as a joke, and I don't think you did. I wish you distinctly to understand that, if you ever hint or allude to anything of that kind again, I will go home to my father at once."

"Well, really, Audrey—"

"Really!" I repeat. "If you make the slightest allusion to anything of the kind again, whether in joke or not, I will not stay an hour in the house."

"Well, I really didn't mean to offend you," he says, in a humble tone; "but you're so awfully touchy of late."

I cover my eyes with my hands, and lie back, almost exhausted by the scene. Adrian evidently considers the contretemps is bridged over, for he asks if I have been out this afternoon.

"I have."

"Where have you been? To see Lois, I suppose?"

"I have been where I told you I should go," I answer, "to see Lady Myers."

"Audrey, you have never dared—"

"I know that your lines are hard," I say, wearily; "but what can I do to make them easier for you? I cannot annihilate myself and dying would be of no use. You would be no nearer to your object."

"My object? What do you mean?"

"Oh, you know what I mean!" I say, quietly. "You know, and I know, and what's the use of 'making better' any longer?"

"You are talking in riddles," he says; "I do not understand you; but we are now, and have been for some time, playing at cross purposes, and I do not like it. Make friends with me, Audrey, and let us start afresh."

As he speaks, he holds out his hand to me; but I look past it straight into the fire.

"Won't you shake hands with me, Audrey?" he says, in a more gentle tone that he has used for some time.

"I have."

"Where have you been? To see Lois, I suppose?"

"I have been where I told you I should go," I answer, "to see Lady Myers."

"Audrey, you have never dared—"

"—he begins, but I interrupt him. "Dare!" I say, proudly. "I dare do anything!"

"You have deliberately disobeyed me."

"Yes; I have deliberately disobeyed you!" I echo, with a calmness which startles even myself. "I went to Lady Myers, and there I heard news which, I must confess, startled me—that the regiment has received its orders for Ireland. Is that true?"

"Oh, yes!" he says, gloomily.

"And did you know that when you came into luncheon?"

"Of course."

"And you never told me!" I cry, indignantly. "Have you told Theo?"

He admits that he has, and I continue: "You have told Theo, and kept me, your wife, in ignorance of a matter of such importance as this? And pray, are you going to take Theo to Ireland?"

"She talks of going with us," he answers.

"Oh," I say, with a sneer, "she talks of it, does she? Then, if she goes, I do not! I fancy even Lady Lasselles will hardly face the world's censure so far as to go with you alone."

"You are talking nonsense," he says, hastily.

"Am I? Then let me tell you, Adrian, that, if you do not stop somewhere soon, the whole world will be talking nonsense, also. The gossips have begun already."

"Oh, that is too absurd!" he cries, laughing nervously. "It is hard lines if I can't be good friends with my sister-in-law without a lot of old gossips setting their hollow jaws wagging!"

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