

"Tell Him I Loathe Him."

CHAPTER XXXII.
Husband and Wife.

"BECAUSE I was so great a coward, Etienne! You are a man. You are braver and stronger than I, and can endure life, while it would have worn me out body and soul! He—Lilford Loyd—Mostyn—will not try that again—
'Again? Curse him! I will search the world over for him until he has paid for this! He—
'Don't! It is my wish that you should not, Etienne! Promise me, dear! Promise and kiss me!'
He bent his head. His lips met hers, a low sob drowned in the car-
cass, and then the door opened to admit the Sister of Mercy and Colonel Childes.

There was a slight pause, then the sister answered very gently:
'Virginia Beaufort.'
'And now you are a sister! Does my death come too late to help him? Tell me that it is not true. Tell me that you have taken no vows which will prevent your being his wife.'
'I have taken no vows,' answered Sœur Mathilde so thoughtfully, 'except to help poor Paris in her affliction.'
'Then it is well! returned Be-be, with a note of relief. 'Will you take me to my father?'
'I will try.'
'And you will come again?'
'Yes.'
The small fingers released their hold, and Sœur Mathilde passed noiselessly from the room.
Erle Childes' eyes were fixed upon Bebe, filled with tears.
'Poor little girl!' he murmured, passing his hand across her brow gently. 'Won't you tell me how this occurred?'
'Etienne will tell you when I am—at rest,' she answered, putting out her little wavering hand to the Frenchman, who took it tenderly between his own. 'You must love him for my sake, Edwin. But for him I should have been in the Seine, perhaps, now. You will forgive me, Edwin, when I tell you that I have loved him as you loved—her!'
For a moment the husband's face crimsoned, then blanched to a dead whiteness. He fixed his piercing eyes upon Etienne Millet as if to read his very soul. The Frenchman extended his hand proudly.

The latter hurried to the bedside, his countenance pallid as marble.
'Bebe! he gasped. 'My poor little one! How came you here?'
The blind eyes were lifted. Hoarse as the voice was, she had recognized it.
'Edwin!' she murmured. 'Edwin, I am so glad you have come. God is good to me at last. I want you to say that you forgive me for the suffering I have caused you. You must not blame me, for I am dying, and I would not have done it if I had known. You believe that, do you not?'
'Believe it! Poor little girl! Poor little unhappy child! You—Meredith Lansing has told me all. He deceived us both, Bebe, and I was not quite so bad as you thought.'
'You must forgive him for that. Promise me that you will. He thought he was doing right. It is so hard to know!'
'Yes, dear, I understand, and I have fully forgiven him. It was a great mistake, for your sake.'
'Will he not come to me?'
'Why?'
'Because I stammered, Childes, he has been wounded. The Commune—'
'Yes, I know! Etienne saved me from the commune, but he could not from the other one. I cannot live, Edwin—I want to see my father before I die. Take me to him!'
There was such pleading in the weak voice that Childes raised his eyes inquiringly to the face of the sister.

'What can we do, Sœur Mathilde?' he asked.
'I will consult the physician!' she answered softly.
'Whose voice was that?' cried Bebe, half starting up in bed.
The sister was beside her in an instant, pressing her gently back among the pillows.
'If you would live until you can see your father,' she exclaimed, 'you must be very quiet and not excite yourself.'
'But who are you? Tell me that, and I will be quiet, very quiet.'
'I am called Sœur Mathilde.'
'But before! Before you were Sœur Mathilde! What were you then?'
Childes grasped it warmly.
'Thank God, she is my wife!'
'She told me last night. My single sin against you has been in a confession of love which was wrong from me through suffering. She gave her life for me, but your honor she has preserved through all!'
'You forgive him, Edwin?' whispered the child.
'There is nothing to forgive, poor little one,' he answered tenderly. 'I am the one who has erred. I am the one who should plead for pardon. My own life has not been so blameless that I could censure you for a fault which was beyond your power to avoid. I have wronged you, Bebe, but if I could die to save you, I think you know I would. Oh, little one, little one, I am so miserably guilty.'
'Hush, dear. It is too late to regret, eternally too late. God is giving you your happiness in the right way. He knows best.'

CHAPTER XXXIII.
'I Die Content!'
Under the physician's personal superintendence the cot containing the form of Meredith Lansing was brought as gently as possible, and placed side by side with that of Bebe. She who had been for the greater portion of her life called Mignon Moreau was beside him. She had heard the story of her own life, and of Bebe's; she knew who it was that lay upon that couch dying, but she also knew that if she would not shorten her sister's life by a few precious moments, she must say nothing. And how very precious those last moments are to the ones who are left behind.
It was in following his leader in a brave attempt to quell the Communion that Meredith Lansing had been shot, receiving a wound which he

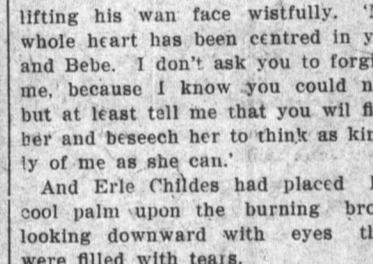
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know from the beginning would prove fatal.
He had asked those who came to his relief to take him to the hospital, where he then was, because he could not die content without a few last words with Sœur Mathilde.
Colonel Childes had been informed at once, and with Charlie Quintard and Mignon had gone there immediately.
'I could not die, Erle, without one kind word from you, my lad,' he said, lifting his wan face wistfully. 'My whole heart has been centred in you and Bebe. I don't ask you to forgive me, because I know you will find her and beseech her to think as kindly of me as she can.'
And Erle Childes had placed his cool palm upon the burning brow, looking downward with eyes that were filled with tears.
'I do forgive you,' he said gently, 'fully and freely. I promise you that living or dead I shall find Bebe, and that I will redeem the past in so far as lies in mortal power.'
And then he was summoned away before the dry sob in Meredith Lansing's throat had died away.
Mignon remained beside her dying father, holding the hot hand in hers. She had not loved him, but with all her tender heart she was sorry for him. They did not speak, but they sat so near Sœur Mathilde entered.
'You see, I have not had time to grant you the few moments you asked. Mr. Lansing,' she said softly, 'The Commune has been so terrible in its destruction.'
'Are there many dying?'
'So many! There are men and women, and even little, unoffending children, who can never recover. But the saddest case, perhaps, is that of a young girl, so beautiful, who was shot in the back.'
'Fataally?'
'Alas! yes.'
'Poor child.'
'She does not seem to feel it a misfortune, but she suffers greatly, bleeding. There are some cases in which death is preferable to life, Mr. Lansing.'
'Do you think I do not know that? Do you think I would recover if I could? I have begged to see you on



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purpose to tell you. There are secrets which make life worse than purgatory. Won't you sit down and listen?
'Not now. I have—come to ask you—if you would care to see this young lady. She is a friend of yours.'
'Of mine? You must be mistaken. I know no one—Stay! Who can it be. Miss Beaufort? No—
He was incapable of completing his sentence, but lifted his eyes to the beautiful face in dumb agony.
'You must be very calm,' she said, laying her hand upon his forehead. 'She must not be agitated by even a single word, for—she is dying, Mr. Lansing.'
'Then it is—Bebe?' he gasped.
For some moments there was absolute silence, then a peaceful smile broke over the suffering face.
'Little Bebe—dying!' he whispered.
'We go together, after all, my little Bebe and I.'
She was the child of his heart, the best beloved after all, and Mignon understood without a shadow of jealousy.
He was not excited when they carried him to Bebe's bedside, but when the attendants put down his cot he reached over and placed his hand upon hers.
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