

Kate Coventry!

CHAPTER XXI.

(CONTINUED.)

And why should the world make this dead set at poor Mrs. Peony? She is good-looking, soft-hearted, and unaffected; she laughs when she is pleased, and cries when she is touched. She is altogether frank, and natural, and womanly. Can these be good reasons for running her down? Heaven knows! but run down she is, just as the hypocritical Lady Straightlace is cried up. Well, we must take things as they are, and make the best of them. So Frank and I walked on through the pleasant fields in the darkening twilight, and I for one enjoyed it excessively, and was quite sorry when a great bell sounding from the house warned us that it was time to return, and that our absence would too surely be the subject of remark should we linger out of doors any longer. I never knew Frank so agreeable; on every topic he was brilliant, and lively, and amusing. Only once, in some casual remark about the future, there was a shade of melancholy in his tone, more like what he used to be formerly. Somehow I don't think I liked him so well in his best spirits; perhaps I was myself changed in the last few weeks. I used often to think so. At first, during that walk, I feared lest Frank should touch upon a topic which would have been far from unwelcome a short time ago. I soon saw he had not the slightest intention of doing so, and I confess I was immensely relieved. I had dreaded the possibility of being obliged at least to give a decided answer—of having my own fate in my own hands, and feeling totally incapable of choosing for myself. But I might have spared my nerves all such misgivings—my cavalier never gave me an opportunity of even fancying myself in such a dilemma till just as we reached the house, when, spying Mrs. Lumley and Miss Molasses returning from their stroll, he started, colored up a little, like a guilty man, and acted as though he would have escaped their notice. I was provoked.

'Don't desert your colors, Captain Lovell,' I said, in a firm voice; 'Miss Molasses is looking for you, even now.'

'Unbecomingly,' muttered Frank, biting his lip, and looking really annoyed, 'O Miss Coventry! O Kate! give me an opportunity of explaining all.'

'Explain nothing,' was my reply; 'we understand each other perfectly. It is time for me to go in and dress.' So I marched into the house, and left him looking foolish—if Frank ever could look foolish—on the doorstep. As I hurried along the passages, I encountered Lady Scapegrace.

'What's the matter, Kate?' said she, following me into my room; 'you look as if something had happened. No bad news, I trust, from Aunt Deborah?'

I burst into tears. Kindness always overcomes me completely, and then I make a fool of myself.

'Nothing's the matter, I sobbed out, 'only I'm tired and nervous, Lady Scapegrace, and I want to dress.'

My mistress slipped quietly out of the room, and presently returned with some *sal de Indes* and water; she made me drink it every drop.

'I must have a talk to you, Kate,' said she, but not now; the dinner-bell will ring in ten minutes, and she, too, hurried away to perform her toilet.

As I got older, I take to moralising, and I am afraid I waste a good deal of valuable time in speculating on the thoughts, ideas, and, so to speak, the inner life of my neighbors. It is curious to observe a large well-dressed party seated at dinner, all apparently frank and open as the day, full of fun and good humor, saying whatever comes uppermost, and all outward seeming laying bare every cranny and every thought of their hearts, and then to reflect that each one of them through their separate life, secretly distinct from the others, is engaged in a different kind of

time over-head-and-ears in love with Frank Lovell, and ready to do anything he asked her at a moment's notice. There was Frank himself, gay and *debonnair*. Outwardly the lightest-hearted man in the company; inwardly, I have reason to know, tormented with misgivings and stung by self-reproach. Playing a double game—attached to one woman and courting another, despising himself thoroughly the while; hemmed in by difficulties, and loaded with debt, hampered by a bad book on 'The Two Thousand,' and playing hide-and-seek even now with the Jews, Frank's real existence was very different from the one he showed his friends. So with the rest of the party. Old Mrs. Molasses was bothered by her maid; Mr. Lumley puzzled by his beetles; his wife involved in a thousand schemes of mischief-making, which kept her in perpetual hot water; all, even honest Cousin John, were sedulously hiding their real thoughts from their companions; all were playing the game with counters, of which indeed they were lavish enough; but had you asked for a bit of sterling coin, fresh from the mint, and stamped with the impress of truth, they would have buttoned their pockets closer than ever: ay, though you had been bankrupt and penniless, they would have seen you further first, and then they wouldn't.

So we flirted, and talked, and laughed, and adjourned to the drawing-room, where, after a proper interval, we were joined by the gentlemen, who, in consideration of the day, consented for that one evening in the week to forego their usual games of chance or skill, such as whist, billiards, and cockamamoo. But the essential inanity of a fashionable party requires to be amused, so we set round a large table, and played at 'letters,' sedulously 'shuffling' the handsome ivory capitals as we gave each other long jaw-breaking words, the difficulties of which were much enhanced by their being misspelt, but which nevertheless formed a very appropriate vehicle for 'what the world calls 'flirtation.' I can always find out other people's words much quicker than my own, and whilst I was puzzling over 'contipede,' and teasing Mrs. Lumley, who had given it me, for the initial letter, I peeped over the shoulder of my next neighbor, Miss Molasses, and made out clearly enough the word she had just received from Frank Lovell: she would not have discovered it for a century, but I read it at a glance. I just looked at Frank, who blushed like a girl, took it back, vowing he had spelt it wrong, and gave her another. Did he think to throw dust in my eyes? There is a stage of mental suffering at which we grow naturally clear-sighted. I had arrived at it long ago. Watching every action of my neighbors, I had yet ears for all that was going around. Sir Guy, occupying a position on the hearth-rug, with his coat-tails over his arms, was haranguing the clergyman of the parish, a quiet, meek little man, who dined at Scamperley regularly on Sunday, and appeared frightened out of his wits. He was a man of education and intellect, a ripe scholar, a middling preacher, and a profound logician: but he was completely overpowered by coarse, ignorant, noisy Sir Guy.

'Driving—how?' said the Baronet: 'we're all fond of driving' here, Mr. Waxy; there's a young lady who will teach you to handle the ribbons. Gad, she'd make the crop-eared mare step along. Have you got the old mare still? Devilish good old mare!'

No child of man is too learned, or too quiet, or too humble, to feel flattered at praise of his horse. Mr. Waxy blushed a moist yellow as he replied—

'Very good of you to remember her, Sir Guy—doyle and safe, and gentle withal, Sir Guy; but I don't drive her myself, Sir Guy,' added Mr. Waxy, raising his hands deprecatingly—as who should say, 'Heaven forbid! I don't drive myself, sir; no—no—my lad assumes the reins; and notwithstanding the potency of your Scamperley ale, Sir Guy, we manage to arrive pretty safe at our destination.'

'Quite right, Mr. Waxy,' vociferated Sir Guy. 'Did I ever tell you what happened to me once, when I took it into my head to drive my own chariot home? Look ye here, sir, I'll tell ye how it was. I was unmarried then, Mr. Waxy, and as innocent as a babe, day or night. Well, I had been to a *batte* at

he took his departure immediately; and of course, directly there was a move, the ladies went to bed.

'Come to my room, Kate,' whispered Lady Scapegrace, as we lighted our hand-candles: 'you can go the short way through the boudoir: I want to speak a word with you.'

CHAPTER XXII.

'Kate,' said Lady Scapegrace, as she shut the door of her snug dressing-room, and wheeled an easy chair before the fire for my benefit—'Kate, you're a foolish girl; it strikes me you are playing a dangerous game and playing it all wrong, moreover. I can see more than you think. Do you know the difference between real diamonds and paste? Not you, you little goose. But you shall, if I can teach you. Kate, have you ever heard me talked about? Did you ever hear any good of me?' I was forced to answer both questions—the former in the affirmative, the latter in the negative.

'Do you believe I'm as bad as they give me credit for?' proceeded her ladyship.

'No, no!' I replied, taking her hand and kissing it; for I really liked Lady Scapegrace. 'Let them say what they will, I won't believe anything bad of you at all.'

'I have had a strange life, Kate,' said she: 'and perhaps not quite fair play. Well, the worst is over now, at any rate. I don't much care how short the remainder may be. Kate, did you ever hear I was a murderer?'

'No, no!' I repeated, taking her hand once more; for I was shocked and half-frightened at the expression of her countenance. 'I never heard anybody say more than that you were odd, and a flirt, and perhaps not very much attached to Sir Guy.'

Lady Scapegrace shuddered. 'I owe you a great deal, Miss Coventry,' she resumed—'a great deal more than I can ever hope to repay. I consider that you once saved my life, but of that I make small account; you have done me a far greater kindness—you have interested me; you have made me fond of you: you have taught me to feel like a woman again. The least I can do in return is to watch you and warn you—to show you the rock on which I made shipwreck, and beseech you to avoid it. Kate, you've heard of my Cousin Latimer; would you like to see his picture?'

Lady Scapegrace rose, walked to a small cabinet, unlocked it, and produced a miniature, which she placed in my hands. If the painter had not flattered him, Cousin Latimer was indeed a handsome boy. There was genius on his wide, bold forehead, and resolution in his firm, well-cut mouth; his large dark eyes betrayed strong passions and keen intelligence, whilst high birth was stamped on his fine features and chivalrous expression of countenance. Poor Cousin Latimer!

'Look at that, Kate,' said Lady Scapegrace, in low chilling tones; 'the last time I saw him, that was his very image. Thank God, I never beheld him when those kind features were cold and rigid—that white neck gashed by his own hand! O Kate! 'tis a sad story. I have not mentioned it for twenty years; but it's a relief to talk of it now. Surely I was not altogether to blame; surely he might have given me time; he need not have been so hasty—so desperate.'

'Listen, Kate. I was one of a large family of girls. All my sisters were beautiful; all were vain of their charms. As I grew up, I heard nothing talked about but conquests, and lovers, and captivation. I thought to dazzle and enslave the opposite sex was the noblest aim of woman. Latimer was brought up with us; we called him 'Cousin,' though he was in reality a very distant connection. Poor boy! lay by day I could see he was growing more and more attached to me. Latimer always brought me the earliest roses. Latimer helped me with my drawing, and did my commissions, and turned the leaves when I played on the pianoforte, and hung over the instrument when I sang. In short, Latimer was my slave, in body and soul, and the consequence was, Kate, that

ran away from her a year afterwards. One of these officers, a captain in the regiment, was an especial flirt of mine; he was a good looking, agreeable man, and a beautiful waltzer. I recollect the night as well as if it was yesterday; the officers arriving in their uniforms—my father standing behind us, proclaimed aloud his pride in his six handsome daughters—Cousin Latimer claiming my hand for the first dance, and my refusal, notwithstanding my long promise, on the plea that I was engaged to Captain Normanton. Poor boy! I can see his pained, eager face now. 'You do what you like with me,' he said; 'but you must dance the next.' I laughed and promised.

'Captain Normanton was very agreeable; he was the most dashing-looking fellow in the room, and I liked the vanity of parading him about in his uniform, and showing my sisters and others the power I had over Cousin Latimer. Once more the latter claimed my promise, and once more I threw him over. I glanced triumphantly at him as he watched me from a corner; and the more he gazed the more I acted at him, as if I was making violent love to my partner. Somehow, without looking, I saw every shade of Latimer's countenance. Once or twice I had compassion, but there was the excitement of vanity and novelty to lure me on.

'For the first time in my life, I knew how much it was possible for men to care for us; and I could not resist torturing my victim to the utmost. Fool that I was! Cousin Latimer came up to me once more. Though annoyed and hurt, he mustered a good-humoured smile as he said, 'For the third and last time, will you dance with him?' 'But you don't waltz half as well as Captain Normanton,' I replied; 'I like him best;' and away I whirled again with the delighted hussar.

'The instant I had spoken, I felt that I had gone too far. I would have given anything to unsay those foolish words, but it was too late. When I stopped, panting and breathless, after the dance, Cousin Latimer came quite close to me. I never saw a face so changed; he was deadly pale, and there was a sweet, melancholy expression in his countenance that contrasted strangely with the wild gleam in his eye. He spoke very low, almost softly, but in a voice I had never heard before. He only said, "God forgive you, dear!—you try me too much." I never saw him again, Kate—never.

'When I heard what had happened, I was laid up for months with brain fever; they cut all my hair off; they pinioned me; they did all that skill and science could do, and I recovered. Would to God that I had died! I do not think my head has ever been right since.

'Kate! Kate! would you have such feelings as mine? Should you like to live all your life haunted by one pale face? Would you wish never to enjoy a strain of music, a gleam of sunshine, a single, simple, natural pleasure, because of the phantom? Be warned, my dear, before it is too late. I tell you honestly, I never forgot him; I tell you I never forgave myself. What did I care for any of them, except poor Alphonse—and I only liked Alphonse because he reminded me of the dead. Do you think I was not a reckless woman when I married Sir Guy?'

'Do you think I have not been punished and humiliated enough? Heaven forbid, my dear, that your fate should resemble mine! I read your feelings far more plainly than you do yourself. You have a kind, generous, noble heart deeply attached to you; don't be a fool, as I was; don't throw him over for the sake of an empty-headed, flirting, good-for-nothing rouse, who will forget you in a fortnight. Strong language, Kate, is it not? But think over what I have told you. Good-night, dear. What would I give to yawn as honestly as you do, and to sleep sound once again, as I used to sleep when I was a girl!'

I took my candle, and kissed Lady Scapegrace affectionately as I thanked her, and wished her good-night. It was already late, and my room was quite at the other end of the house. As I sped along, devoutly trusting I should not meet any of the gentlemen on their way to bed, I spied a figure advancing towards me from the end of a long corridor.

panions, and the light from his candle showed me my only chance. A covered shower-bath stood in the corner of the apartment, and into that shower-bath I jumped, closing the curtains all round me, but, as may be easily believed, taking very particular care not to pull the string. Scarcely was I fairly ensconced before Frank Lovell made his appearance; and I saw at once, through a hole in the curtains, that he was the lawful occupier and possessor of the apartment.

Here was a predicament indeed! If the emergency had not been so desperate, I must have fainted. 'Good gracious,' I thought, 'if he should lock the door!' Frank, however, seemed to have no such intention; I believe this is a precaution gentlemen seldom adopt. On the contrary, he proceeded to make himself thoroughly at home. Lighting his candle, he leisurely divested himself of his coat, waistcoat, and neckcloth, unfolded his person in a large loose dressing-gown, leaned his head on both hands, and gave a deep sigh. Apparently much relieved by this process, he took up his hair-brushes, and after a good refreshing turn at his locks and whiskers, and a muttered compliment to his own reflection in the glass, that sounded very like 'You fool!' he unlocked a small writing-case, and producing from it a little bundle of letters, tied up with a little pink ribbon, selected them one by one, and read them over from beginning to end, kissing each with devout fervour as he replaced it carefully in its envelope. I would have given a great deal to know who they were from; their perusal seemed to afford him mingled satisfaction and annoyance: but he sighed heavily again, and I saw he had a long lock of hair in his fingers, which he gazed at till the tears stood in his eyes. He kissed it, the traitor! and fondled it, and spoke to it, and clasped it to his heart (men are just as great fools as we are). Whose could it be? Not mine, certainly, for I never gave him such a thing. Miss Molasses? No; hers was black, and rather coarse; this was a silky chestnut. Could it have belonged to Mrs. Lumley? Hers was very much of the color and I often thought Frank rather *eprix* with her. Nonsense! that lively lady had not an atom of sentiment in her composition; she would just as soon have thought of working him a counterpane.

I was so interested in my discoveries, that I forgot altogether my own critical position, the impracticability of escape till Frank had gone to sleep, the chance of arousing him as I went out, or, more alarming still, the awful possibility of his lying awake all night. When morning dawned, concealment could no longer be preserved, and what to do then? I meditated a bold stroke—to rush from my hiding-place, blow out both the candles before my host had recovered his surprise, and then run for it. There was I on the eve of this perilous enterprise. Thrice my courage failed me at the critical moment. The fourth time I think I should have gone, when a knock at the door arrested my attention, and Frank's 'Come in' welcomed a visitor whose voice I well knew to be that of Cousin John. The plot began to thicken. It was impossible to get away now.

'Lovell,' said John, in an unusually grave voice, 'I told you I wanted to speak a word with you, and this is the only time I can make sure of finding you alone.'

Frank was busy huddling his treasures back to the writing-case.

'Drive on, old fellow,' said he, 'there's lots of time; it's not two o'clock yet.'

'Lovell,' proceeded John, 'you are an old friend of mine, and I have a great regard for you, but I have a duty to perform, and I must go through with it. Point-blank, on your honor as a man, I ask you, are you or are you not engaged to be married to Miss Molasses?'

Frank colored, hesitated, looked confused, and then got angry.

'No intimacy can give a right to ask such a question,' he replied, talking very fast and excitedly; 'you take an unwarrantable liberty, both with her and me. Who told you I was going to be married at all? or what business is it of yours whether I am married or not?'

John began to get heated too, but he held