

SELECT STORY.

Bought With a Price.

[CONCLUDED.]

Chapter XXV.

WHAT CAME OF A JEALOUS WOMAN.

SIR Neville and Lilly were seated in their lodgings near the country goal, gloomily pondering on the tidings that day imported to them by the Governor of the prison.

Estelle, notwithstanding her desire for death, was yet to live.

The crisis of the fever was long passed, and she was out of danger.

The next day she was removed from the infirmary and very soon to set sail, with other convicts, for the penal settlements in Australia.

If I could but spare her this horrible disgrace! groaned Sir Neville, the association with those wretches will be a torture beyond endurance to my poor darling.

Lilly could do nothing but weep despairingly.

Not a shadow of hope did there appear for Estelle.

A gentleman to see you, sir, suddenly announced the servant of the lodging-house.

Sir Neville was about to peremptory deny himself to all visitors, but he was too late. The visitor was so urgent that he had followed the servant to the door of the room.

You will forgive me this intrusion, Sir Neville, when you learn the object of my visit, said Thomas Longman, Esq., the magistrate of Walberton, if I mistake not I bring you good tidings.

Anything connected with my unfortunate cousin, my dear sir? Is that villain found?

Better even than that. Your cousin will be acquitted. The true murderer has confessed! I hold here a disposition, properly authenticated, of his having committed the murder of which your cousin was accused as an accomplice.

Then the hon Herbert Montgomery has been heard from.

There we have all been wrong. The Hon Herbert has been as blameless in this matter as your cousin. The true murderer was the valet, Jacob Gunning.

Thank God, Estelle is cleared! came from the lips of Sir Neville.

Lilly had rushed from the room and locked herself in her own, to give herself up to the ecstasy of the joy which overwhelmed her.

She waited for no details. Estelle was saved! That was all she cared to hear.

The sudden breaking of the clouds which had appeared so dense but a few moments before almost dazzled her.

The disposition made by Jacob Gunning, just previous to his death, was this:—

He had known the hon. Herbert Montgomery to have in his possession a considerable sum of money.

Having some scruples at robbing one who had been a good patron to him, he had conceived the idea of transferring the money to the custody of the squire, his then master, the robbery of whom would be no compunction to him.

To ensure this, he had instructed Betsy Cornish the woman who had since become his wife, and who had ended by murdering him, to entice the squire to play, on a certain night, with the hon. Herbert, his guest. She was also to give him some dice, which he was to use without fail, if he wished to win.

These were loaded, though that was unknown to the squire.

The result answered his expectations. His master won several thousand pounds, and soon after retired to his room.

He had chosen that night, knowing that the hon Herbert intended to leave the Hermitage, at an early hour, accompanied by his master's wife. He meant to have fixed the guilt of robbery on them.

He and Betsy Cornish had waited, watching the old well, the trysting spot of the two lovers, as he thought then, to make sure that they were gone.

As it turned out afterwards, it had been better had he watched his master's room.

After seeing the coast clear, he and Betsy Cornish had crept up a secret entrance to his master's room, intending only to rob him. In case of accidents, he had secured a razor belonging to the hon. Herbert.

They had no sooner entered the room than the squire began to show signs of waking.

His had not been the only visit to the room that night.

The second visit had thoroughly roused him.

Whilst he was searching about for the notes and gold he had seen him win that night, the squire suddenly sprang on him.

A struggle ensued, and ended in his cutting the squire's throat to ensure silence.

He never doubted the money was still there. What, then, was his rage, to find he had been counterplotted!

He had committed a murder, and gained nothing by it.

The money was gone!

The honourable Herbert had been before him.

Betsy Cornish had stood in the doorway, a witness to the murder, and aided him afterwards in arranging matters so as to transfer the guilt upon the two who had left the Hermitage.

It was no unusual thing for him to wear the cast-off clothes of the hon. Herbert, and he had happened to have them on this night.

He and Betsy Cornish were the only ones connected with the murder.

A free pardon was issued from the Crown, and Estelle was restored to liberty.

The same cell in which Estelle had been confined now held Betsy Gunning.

A few months later and this implacable enemy to Estelle expiated the murder of her husband upon the scaffold, where she had so hoped to gloat over the death of her victim.

Chapter XXVI.

THE HONOURABLE HERBERT MONTGOMERY MAKES A SIGN.

My dearest Lilly, wrote Mrs. Hamilton to her daughter-in-law, at this time you will, I am sure, be happy to return home to your little one, who is, I can assure you, boisterously well.

Please give my hearty congratulations to your cousin on the public testimony given to her innocence. No one can better sympathize with her than the mother of one who has been placed in a similar cruel predicament.

I have little doubt that, ere long, her fair fame will be also cleared of the foul slander attached to it through the treachery of the hon. Herbert Montgomery.

Till then, will you beg your cousin to become my guest at the Dower House. By doing so she will confer a benefit on an old woman, whose feelings have all forsaken the parent nest, and whose days are somewhat lonely.

I think my plan will suit her present delicate state of health better than her returning with you to the Priory. There she could hardly have the rest needful to her, for you, the wife of a popular politician, can hardly ever be said to be 'en famille.'

Dear mamma, how good she is! Nothing could more thoroughly establish Estelle in the world's estimation of her. Once under the protection of Mrs. Hamilton, and no tongue will dare breathe a slander against her. I trust Estelle will consent to go. She will hardly refuse, for even she must know how great a boon Mrs. Hamilton's recognition will be. People are just now feeling sympathy for her, but that will not last long, and then they will look coldly on her for eschandre attached to her so-called clemency. She is also aware that Mrs. Hamilton's guests are always 'sans reproche.' It is not everyone who can receive an invitation to the Dower House.

Neville, too, saw that Mrs. Hamilton's recognition of Estelle was, beyond measure, the best protection she could have, at least till he had succeeded in forcing the villain who had done her the injury to proclaim her innocence.

I placed myself in a false position. Estelle would say, when Lilly tried to prove to her that she was entirely innocent of evil. How could I expect that my mercenary compact would be a protection to my fair fame? My betrayer no doubt looked upon me as fair game—a woman void of delicate scruples; one who had not hesitated to sell herself to the highest bidder. I was Bought at a Price, and deserved my fate.

They were still in the lodgings near the goal whither Estelle had been taken by Neville as soon as she was at liberty. Estelle will accept this invitation. It will be better for you than coming to the Priory, much as I should like to have had you. But as mamma says, we are never sure of a quiet day. Our house is a kind of rendezvous for all my husband's political friends. He is ever being sought after to consult upon some knotty point.

I should be ungrateful indeed my sweet cousin, to refuse so great a privilege. I will joyfully accept the inestimable boon offered me by Mrs. Hamilton.

It behoves me for your sake, Lilly, to get rid of some of the pitch which so defiles me.

Thus Estelle at last became Mrs. Hamilton's guest.

Mrs. Hamilton was right. As Lilly's guest, Estelle's fame would have been torn to shreds, and society would have refused to readmit her into their ranks.

It wanted some one of greater prestige than a young matron, like Lilly, to shield her cousin from the darts of slanderous tongues.

No one could more effectually do this than Mrs. Hamilton.

I mean her to marry Neville, Mrs. Hamilton said to her self, if I find her worthy of the honour. From what Lilly has told me, I think she is likely to become so. The ordeal of suffering through which she has passed will have purged her character of the worldliness which so encrusted it.

Neville was still at work hunting for signs of the hon Herbert, who, ever since his flight from the schooner, seemed to have passed out of sight and left no trace behind him.

Some weeks had passed since the confession of Jacob Gunning, when a foreign letter was rather mysteriously conveyed to Sir Neville Campbell as he was one day entering his chambers.

The bearer looked like a foreigner.

He thrust the letter into Sir Neville's hand and then hurried off as rapidly as possible.

The letter ran thus:—

"No doubt you consider the writer of this a villain capable of any monstrosity. Believe me, if you can, when I swear that only this day have I become aware of the peril in which your cousin has been placed. When I escaped in a boat from the schooner, I had no thought of harm happening through her possession of those ill-omened notes. They were given into her care for security alone against the cupidity of any of the sailors on board.

On reaching my present haven, I was made aware that the squire had been found murdered the morning after I had left the Hermitage. I learned no details nor I dared not ask for any. I believed that I was the murderer—that the potion with which I meant only to drug him, had proved fatal. Only this day have I dared to look at an English paper, and then how great was my relief and remorse! The incubus of murder is off my mind, but my horror was great when I found how near my treachery had brought your cousin to a felon's death. In this paper I read of Jacob Gunning's confession, also the release of the supposed criminal—your cousin.

I write now to you that I may make what reparation is in my power, though I cannot hope that my base villainy will ever be forgiven by you or the victim of my treachery.

In a desk of mine at the Hermitage you will find duplicates of all the letters received as from you to your cousin. In Captain Albany's possession will be found your seal and crest—stolen from you, as you are no doubt aware—with which the letters received their authenticity.

My accomplice, Captain Albany, can also take you to the expert employed by him to forge your handwriting. It was for the purpose of following your movements and posting your letters from whatever town you happened to remain in, that the captain was absent from me at the time when I carried off your cousin.

Pray publish this letter, as also the forgeries, that your cousin's innocence of complicity in my robbery and flight, may be everywhere known.

In excuse for my villainy to her, I can only urge that I madly loved her. I longed to rescue her from the brutal, despicable wretch that owned her. I found her too pure and chaste to listen to my proposal to fly with me; but I would not be foiled.

Her beauty made me mad to possess her. Then I formed the design of making her believe I was your deputy, that you were rescuing her from her husband. I told myself that when she knew the deceit that had been acted, she would be wholly in my power—her fame blasted; and that she would succumb to circumstances, and receive my love.

The messenger who will bring this letter will take precautions that he is not followed. I must ever shun England, or be branded as a thief. Of that crime I hold myself innocent. The money was mine, taken from me by knavery. I had no time for fair play, therefore used stratagem to obtain my own. I shall never return to England, and shall probably be never heard of more. Forgive me if you can.

HERBERT MONTGOMERY.

Sir Nevill Campbell lost no time. Captain Albany, finding so much was known, was glad to purchase his liberty by making a clean breast of his share in the treachery; the expert also confessed and recognized the letters found in the honourable Herbert's desk, as written by him.

So Estelle was entirely cleared. Her sad life of suffering excited universal sympathy, and never, in the days of her reigning belle, had society been so eager as now to extol her beauty.

But how acted Sir Neville Campbell? His cousin's name cleared from all stain, he made no further move in her affairs.

To all appearance, he considered Estelle of no more interest to him.

But Mrs. Hamilton only bided her time.

Chapter XXVII.

THE TWO PLOTTERS.

"LILLY, this will never do. You and I must plot to bring these two inextricable people together.

I may do that, mamma, dear; but how are we to arrange it while Estelle secludes herself at the Dower House?

We will both be your guests, and be sure you invite Sir Thomas Montville to meet us.

Why, that hypochondriac man!

He is troublesome, I know, my dear. But what concerns us most is, he is very much in love with Estelle!

Mamma! You cannot mean that Estelle will accept him?

Quite the contrary, but I mean him to propose. I want Estelle to see that she is still thought worthy of being sought in marriage. I feel sure Neville still loves her, but I am puzzled that he holds so much aloof from her.

Estelle and Neville had not met till now since he had taken leave of her at Walberton, when Lawrence Hamilton had come to take his wife and cousin to Worthing.

The two plotters could read no outward signs of any mutual embarrassment on the part of the two guests in whom their interest centred.

Mrs. Hamilton was well pleased to see that her 'protege' no longer craved for admiration.

There was a graceful dignity about her which held in check the ready flattery which many, who remembered her old love for it, were eager again to pour into her ear, and be the recognized slaves of 'la belle' Estelle.

Neville, what is your opinion of my neighbour, Sir Thomas Montville? You and I are interested in the matter, since he seems resolved to win Estelle for his wife.

Mrs. Hamilton was gratified to note that for once Neville's self-possession forsok him.

The idea was certainly distasteful to him.

He started and turned pale, then muttered something about Sir Thomas having more need of a nurse than a wife.

That is just it, Neville. Sir Thomas has noted her quiet, gentle manner, and thinks it perfect for the nerves of an invalid. He is quite taken with the idea of possessing such a treasure in a wife, and means to propose as soon as he can find an opportunity.

And does Estelle encourage him?

At present she does neither—encourage or discourage him. She listens very patiently and sweetly to his lists of complaints.

Quite enough, Neville thought as he strode impatiently up and down the conservatory.

Dolt that I was, he mused, to suffer myself to be again drawn within the charm of her presence. I might have known that she had ceased to love me. I have told myself so again and again, and yet I could not resist the temptation of once more resolving to meet her now that she is free.

Just then Estelle and Sir Thomas entered the drawing-room, and seated themselves on a sofa directly facing the conservatory, where Neville still was.

He was too far off to overhear the conversation, but he was well aware what would be the substance of it, and he hastened out into the grounds, painfully agitated.

Estelle was wholly innocent of the design of Sir Thomas.

She was utterly overwhelmed when Sir Thomas begged her to become his wife.

He told her how he had already spoken to Mrs. Hamilton, and that she had been agreeable to it if Estelle could only love him.

But that is just it, cried his hearer; I esteem you very much, but I do not love you. Pray do not urge me; it cannot be. You already know how I once wrecked my life by marrying where I did not love.

Sir Thomas saw he had no chance, and he did not breathe a word on the subject to her again.

Estelle and Neville had not been alone once since their meeting at the Priory.

Chapter XXVIII.

BROUGHT TO CONFESSION.

OR some reason, Estelle had rather shunned her cousin.

She rose early, and strolled about the country long before the rest of the household were up.

The morning after her refusal of Sir Thomas Montville, she remembered a book on ferns, which she had seen in the library and had meant to take with her. Opening the door quickly, she had proceeded half-way across the room, ere she perceived it was not unattended.

Sir Neville was there, seated at the table, and had just written a few lines to his sister to account in some manner for his abrupt departure. He was already attired for his journey, and his pale features and the dark circles under his eyes gave token of a sleepless night.

Neville, you are ill and suffering, cried Estelle, utterly forgetting the unaccountable shyness which had overcome her since her meeting Neville at the Priory.

Estelle, I meant not to speak. Tell me are you marrying Sir Thomas for the sake of a home? Do you not know that what I have is yours? Lilly does not want my money. I have already

made my will in your favour. You are not penniless, Estelle, do not accept this man unless you love him.

Neville, what mean you? I marry Sir Thomas. Marry for the sake of a home! Ally myself to a man whom I do not love! Have I not had a bitter experience that a marriage without love produces a life of misery?

But, Sir Thomas proposed to you? And was rejected by me. I told him, as I now tell you, never again will I give my hand, where I cannot give my heart.

Estelle, I cannot longer keep silence. I am decided to know my fate, at once. First, I will confess that never has my affection for you wavered. Even when it was a sin to love you, I could not succeed in driving it out from my heart. My darling, you are inexpressibly dear to me. My love for you is part of my being. It was because I could not bear the sight of your being bestowed on another, that was hurrying me from this house, when you interrupted me. Say, may I stay? Can you recall the love which you once had for me?

Neville, I have never lost it. It has been the bitterest part of my punishment that I could not forget the love I had for you. Neville, you cannot surely continue to esteem me, when you remember that I cast from me your love—loving you all the time as I did—for the mere gratification of being a millionaire's wife. Oh, Neville, I am too vile to ever be your wife.

What Neville did was to clasp Estelle lovingly in his arms.

Mine, mine, he whispered. Mine for life. Never more shall sorrow visit you, if my love can shield you. Dearest—a thousand times dearer—than when I first sought you.

Neville was not to be resisted. Once sure that Estelle still loved him, he soon removed all other obstacles.

Then followed a bright happy half-hour, one of those gleams of unmitigated sunshine which once or twice may appear in a lifetime.

Estelle had never thought such happiness could visit her.

She was, then, the betrothed bride of the man whose love was greater to her than untold gold.

The two plotters were delighted that their scheme had been successful.

They little knew, however, how very near their well-concocted plan had proved an utter failure.

Neville would hear of no delay to their marriage.

He longed, with an indescribable longing, to possess the woman who had suffered so terribly for that fatal error of hers—ambition.

Very soon Estelle's wedding bells again pealed forth, but how different was now her choice!

Estelle had been taught by bitter experience that wealth alone will not purchase happiness.

Again she was

"BOUGHT AT A PRICE!"

But this time it was not for gold, but love, pure and unspotted.

THE END.

THE GOOD AND HAPPY WIFE.—The deep happiness in her heart shines out in her face. She is a ray of sunlight in the house. She gleams all over it. It is airy, and gay, and graceful, and warm, and welcoming with her presence. She is full of devices, and plots, and sweet surprises for her husband and family. She has never done with the romance and poetry of life. She is herself a lyric poem, setting herself to all pure and gracious melodies. Humble houses, old ways and duties, have for her a golden significance. The prize makes the calling high, and the end dignifies the means. Her home is a paradise, not sinless, not painless, but still a paradise, for "Love is Heaven, and Heaven is Love."

No matter how humble one's home is, if the presiding goddess will have it so, everything can be made to bear the appearance of order and neatness.

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