

wife. I know not how she deceived me so terribly, but you know, and I have sought this interview to hear the story from your own lips. Will you tell it to me, darling—Miss Leyton, I mean,' he added hastily, as he saw a shadow of pain flit over her face.

'I will if I can,' she faintly answered. and summoning all her strength, she repeated to him what Miss Porter had told her, except, indeed, the parts with which she knew he was familiar.

'The plot was worthy of her who planned it,' he said bitterly; then, as Rosamond made no reply, he continued—'she told you, I suppose, of our married life, and painted me the blackest villain that ever trod the earth. This may in part be true, but, Rosamond, though I may never know the bliss of calling you my wife, I cannot be thus degraded in your sight and offer no apology. I was a boy—a self-willed, high-tempered boy, nineteen years of age, and she aggravated me beyond all human endurance, seeking ways and means by which she could provoke me. I loved her at first—nay, do not turn away incredulously. Heaven is my witness that I loved her, or thought I did, but 'twas a boyish love, and not such as I feel for you.'

'You swore at her,' said Rosamond, unable to reconcile love with an oath.

'Once, only once,' he replied. 'I blush to own it, for it was not a manly act.'

'You struck her,' and for the first time since he had been in that room the brown eyes rested full upon his face.

'Yes, Rosamond,' he answered; 'I own that, too, but she goaded me to madness, and even raised her voice against my sainted mother, who had borne so dastardly a son as I?'

'And Riverside?' said Rosamond. 'Did your uncle die deceived?'

'Never—never,' Mr. Browning exclaimed, starting to his feet. 'I told the whole truth, or I would not have lived here a day. Rosamond, I have greatly sinned, but she has not been blameless. She insulted me in every possible way, even to giving you her wedding ring, and then, lest I should not see it, wrote to me "to look upon your finger. 'No wonder you thought me mad!'

'Her wedding ring! Could she do that?' said Rosamond.

'Yes, her wedding ring. It first belonged to Susan, who gave it to me for the occasion, and two weeks after I had it marked with Marie's name and the date of our marriage. It is broken now, and I would to Heaven I could thus easily break the tie which binds me to her, and keeps me from you! Oh,

Rosamond, Rosamond, must it be? Must I live my life without you, when I need you so much—when my heart longs so to claim you for its own?'

He covered his face with his hands, and Rosamond could see the tears droppings slowly through his fingers. Terribly was he expiating the sin of his boyhood, and what wonder is it, if, in his agony, he cried, 'my punishment is greater than I can bear!'

Rosamond alone was calm. She seemed to have wept her tears away, and the blow which had fallen so crushingly upon her had benumbed her heart, so that she now did not feel as acutely as the weeping man before her. Very soothingly she spoke to him, but she offered no word of cheer—no hope that all would yet be well. 'They would bear it with brave hearts,' she said, 'and he must be reconciled to his wife.'

'Never—never,' he exclaimed. 'The same roof cannot shelter us both, and if she chooses to stay when she is better, she is welcome to Riverside, but I cannot share it with her.'

Neither said to the other, 'it may be she will die,' for such a thought had never intruded itself upon their minds, and yet Marie Porter's life was numbered now by days. The heart disease, from which she had long been suffering, was greatly aggravated by the strong nervous excitement through which she had recently been passing. Stimulants of a most powerful kind had created a kind of artificial strength, which had enabled her to come to Riverside, but this was fast subsiding; and when bent over the motionless form of Rosamond, and feared that she was dead, she felt, indeed, that death would ere long claim her as his own. The sight of her husband, too, had well-nigh been more than she could bear. For nearly nine long years she had not looked upon his face. His hair she remembered, too—his soft, dark, wavy hair, through which her fingers had sometimes strayed, in the far back days at Holly Wood, before she was his bride. He would not be greatly changed, she thought; and when, on that fatal night, she heard his coming footsteps, she pictured him in her mind much as he was that winter-day, when, standing in his sister's door, he bade her a long good-bye. Nearer and nearer he had come—faster and louder had beaten her heart, while a cold, faint sickness crept over her.

'Open the window—I cannot breathe,' she gasped; but ere her request was obeyed, Ralph Browning had fainted on the threshold, and she had asked that she might die.