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A Heavy Cost!

CHAPTER XXIX.
The Coquette's Plea.

"I mean to get him safely out of the way, poor fellow, before the wedding comes off," Charley whispered to me a few days previous to their departure; "and by the time we get back he will have got over his disappointment a little. He is rather down on his luck now, dear old man; but he will never be as stupid as to break that great strong, loving heart of his for the sake of a faithless little coquette like Gwendolen Clitheroe."

"Has he seen her since he knew?" I asked, with a secret misgiving in my mind as to whether my brother would really recover from the blow so easily as his friend seemed to hope.

"Yes; and a very pretty and pathetic little scene it must have been from what he tells me, I fancy," Charley returned, in a tone of withering contempt. "Len, poor, foolish, impetuous old fellow, stormed and raved, and did the high-tragedy business to perfection, it seems, while the lady took refuge in one of those delicate little theatrical touches which women of the Gwendolen Clitheroe type know so well how to employ, burst into tears, and begged to be pitied and forgiven, with a look of despairing resignation on her lovely face that happily does not seem to have taken even Len in very greatly, poor, dear old idiot that he is!"

"It is our fate that parts us," she told him.

"It is a pity that she did not think of all that before!" I replied indignantly. "She knew he was poor from the first, yet she made him believe that she cared for him; and,

while seeing how madly he worshipped her, did her best to add fuel to the flame by every means in her power! She does not deserve to be happy!"

"Nor will she be; rest assured of that," Charley replied. "Leave her to time and her own conscience, Lesley; I am much mistaken if these do not bring her punishment."

The marriage, which is creating quite a sensation in Hanbury, is fixed, we hear, for the last week in October; and, meantime, the cool, bright, golden days are dragging along, with their falling flowers and falling leaves, rather heavily to Addie and me shut up in our humdrum little country lodging, with nothing more exciting to look forward to from day to day than those anxiously expected letters from Len and his friend, which arrive with the utmost regularity, and which, filled with delightful little, rosy descriptions of all they are seeing and doing, are growing steadily more hopeful and encouraging in tone with every one.

Of Ernest Warden we have heard nothing, directly or indirectly, since he left. Beyond the fact that he is supposed to have gone abroad somewhere—nobody seems to have any very definite idea where—his departure still remains entirely unexplained.

The old office in which the Wardens have transacted the legal affairs of most of the oldest and richest families in the neighborhood for three generations has passed into other hands, and there is a new name on the bright brass plate on the door of the gloomy-looking old Queen Anne house in the high street, as we pass it in our walks—a circumstance on which Addie makes no comment; but more than once I am conscious of a mist of unshed tears in the sad eyes as they glance toward it. And, meantime, the surprise and excitement occasioned by Ernest Warden's inexplicable departure is beginning to

subside in the newer sensation Miss Clitheroe's approaching marriage is creating—a ceremony which, according to report, is to be performed with a splendor and eclat quite unprecedented in the quiet annals of Hanbury; and the anticipation of which is consequently turning half the feminine heads in the town, but of which we make no mention in our letters to Len.

"What a remarkable piece of retributive justice it would seem if even that lost will should come to light!" I remark one evening, as we discuss the wonderful preparations for Miss Clitheroe's wedding, of which every one is talking, over the fire in our homely little parlor. "Only think, Addie, if Mr. Rutherford's missing will ever turns up, all this wealth and position for which she is throwing poor Len over, and selling herself to a man old enough to be her grandfather, would come to him! Wouldn't it be strange if it should?"

"Yes," she replies, looking at me with that little, indulgent smile with which Addie provokingly receives most of my little suggestions and flights of fancy; "very much too strange ever to come to pass, I am afraid."

"Oh, I don't know about that," I reply thoughtfully, turning the piece of toast I am making in front of the cheery little fire that is getting to feel so cozy and comfortable now. "Do you suppose that all the romance of life is confined to your pet novels? Stranger things than that even happen, sometimes; and I always have had such a strong presentiment that the lost will is still in existence, and that it will some day come to light."

"You fanciful child!" she returns, by no means disposed to share in the belief. "Why, you say it as solemnly as if it were a prophecy; but isn't it time for the postman? Shall we wait tea a few minutes and enjoy it over our letters?"

I am only too willing to agree to this proposal. It is the one event of our quiet, monotonous life, the familiar sound of the postman's knock; but I have a strong suspicion that it is not altogether in anticipation of those frequent letters from Italy for which Addie awaits his coming so anxiously.

I do not say so to her, but I cannot help wondering sometimes why Ernest Warden never writes.

After all, it is as well that he does not, perhaps. There is certainly nothing to be gained by writing; and yet I can see how her heart is hungering for a line—a word, even.

Wide as is the gulf that separates them, I feel that it would comfort her to know where he is, and what he is doing. But not even this small scrap of consolation is vouchsafed to her; and, day after day, as the postman makes his appearance without bringing anything in that familiar hand for a sight of which her heart is secretly yearning, I see the little flash of expectancy that has mounted to her face die out, leaving her paler, more despondent than ever.

But not even to me does she mention her disappointment, bitter as it is. However deep her suffering, she bears it in silence, as, shut up in her

own room, she toils away through cruelly long hours at her writing until heart and brain are both weary, yet always miserable and dissatisfied with the result; while I, not knowing what else to do, rack my brain over the composition of strengthening jellies or some unexpected little delicacy wherewith to tempt the falling appetite of the poor girl, who every day looks more like a fragile shadow of her old sweet self than ever, or write long consolatory letters to dear, old Len that always contain some message for Mr. Denton—good-natured, kind-hearted Charley Denton—for a sound of whose pleasant voice, for a sight of whose handsome, debonaire face I am beginning to long as I did not think it was in me to long for any one.

"There, dear, that's the last," I exclaim at length, springing suddenly up from my kneeling attitude on the hearthrug, with my face almost as well-baked as the bread. "Isn't that a triumph of toast making? Now, Addie, while you butter it, I'll run out to the gate and see if there is any sign of the postman coming up the road."

"Put something over your head! You thoughtless child, you will be catching your death of cold!" she calls after me; and, snatching my shawl from the back of a chair, I throw it over my head and run, laughing, out of the room.

CHAPTER XXX.

While That Woman Lives.

The day has been wet and stormy, but the rain has ceased now, and the stars are blinking feebly in the twilight sky, although the wind still shrieks and moans like some lost spirit thronging the well-nigh leafless trees, as I step out into the little front garden with its gravel path, its tiny green plot, and trimly out laurals that impart such an air of suburban respectability to the prosaic little red-brick house in which our lodgings are situated.

A figure—a masculine figure, though the outline is not very clearly defined in the gloom of the tall elms near the road—stands at the gate, as if about to enter; and, with an all-prevailing idea of letters in my mind, I rush toward him, never doubting for a moment that it is the postman.

"Lesley, is it you, child? They told me you were here alone—you and Adelaide," says a deep, familiar voice, that makes me start as if I had been shot; and, with a sudden catching of my breath, I am looking up into Ernest Warden's eager, dark face.

It is Ernest, sure enough. I decide, with a startled glance into the familiar face under the broad brim of the slouched hat. There is not much possibility, certainly, of mistaking the grand outline of that splendid figure, that, buttoned to the ears in a rough greatcoat, stands so suddenly before me in the stormy dusk at the gate, and my first coherent thought is that I must get rid of him somehow before Adelaide discovers that he is here.

"How is she—how is my darling, Lesley?" he inquires, without releasing my hands from the hard, convulsive grip in which he has caught them.

"She is well—that is, she is better than she has been," I falter, in a hesitating tone. "But, oh, Ernest, what do you want?" I ask, looking nervously up into the handsome, passionate face, handsome still, but, oh, how changed, I think, as the light from the half-uncurtained window falls full upon it. "Why have you come here?"

"Why," he exclaims, with a harsh laugh, "for the very sufficient reason that I could not keep away. What have I done that I should be banished from the presence of the one being my heart yearns for? This separation is driving me mad, Lesley. I cannot bear it, and I will not!" he adds, turning a pair of longing eyes toward the window. "I must and will see her!"

(To be Continued.)

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