



CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

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THE CRUMPLED ROSE-LEAF.

CHAPTER I.

Picture to yourself the most charming of morning-rooms, in the most picturesque and comfortable of country mansions...

One—the elder of the two—lay back in a lounging-chair where the morning sun streamed in most warmly, lazily pulling and fondling the delicate ears of a greyhound...

Rosamond, my dear, said the seated lady, presently, do you know I have just been thinking you are the luckiest creature in all the world?

That of enabling me to see a flaw in what looks perfect to all other eyes, perhaps, answered the lady by the window, in rather a doleful tone.

The other gave her chair a sudden wheel, that enabled her to see the face of her companion. It was a face fair to look upon, of that order of beauty seen often in the pictures of one of the greatest of living English painters...

A flaw in your lot, my dear? the elderly lady went on composedly. No; that would indeed require the most powerful of mental microscopes to detect.

Nonsense, Harriet! and the sweet face turned towards her half smiling. Nevertheless, two large tears were quivering between the heavy brown eye-lashes.

What! crying, Rosamond? My dear child, is there really something wrong? exclaimed the elderly lady in a very different tone...

Oh, Harriet, I'm a miserable woman! and with this tragic exclamation, Miss Rosamond Barrington threw herself down on a sofa...

Harriet Beauchamp looked on stupefied; then she rose, and going to seat herself beside her friend, drew that pretty golden head on her kind breast...

My dear Rosy, to think of my laughing and talking nonsense when you had really a trouble; I shall never forgive myself. But tell me what it is.

But ah, Harriet, perhaps you'll not allow this to be a real trouble: and yet it is the most real and the worst!

My poor pet, what can it be? Your gallant old guardian would put his hand in the fire, or go out in an east wind, or do any other unheard-of thing, sooner than be angry with you...

Oh, no, no. Then what can it be? Miss Beauchamp considered, bending her dark brows in great perplexity.

Rosamond wept on. It can't be; no, it can't be anything about Jack?

There was no answer beyond the tightening of the two pretty arms around Harriet's neck.

Has Jack done anything? My dear Rosamond, don't cry so; and don't—if you can help it—keep me in suspense. You know how dear that cousin of mine is to me.

She paused in great agitation. Her distress spoke so plainly in her voice, that Miss Barrington sat up, and hastened to say—

He has not done anything wrong, of course not. How could you think it of him a minute, Harriet? But—but I have thought for sometime, and now I'm sure, that Jack does not care one bit about me—there!

Rosamond! Jack not care for you. Well, that is the very wildest caprice that ever entered the head of a spoiled beauty.

Rosamond turned away her head. It is not anything he has done, she began, and then stopped.

But something he has left undone. Ah, Rosamond, that is a much more serious matter, for now all sorts of intangibilities come into question.

I can't tell you any one thing, Rosamond burst out impetuously; they are so many, and so little, you would laugh. I know you would, if I were to put them into words...

Well, Rosamond, if I am not to hear your reasons, I can't judge of their value. But I must say one thing, and that is, that whatever you may like to imagine, I am quite sure that John Walsingham loves you as a good, true-hearted gentleman...

Asked to be his wife! Yes, there it is, cried Rosamond; Jack never did ask me to marry him, at least not as men ought to do.

But the miserable woman! instead of abandoning herself to tears, as on the first occasion of her announcement of her condition, started from her seat, and paced the room to and fro with a crimson face...

There's Jack, said Miss Beauchamp, going towards the window whence the sound came nearest. Rosamond stopped and looked irresolute, but she came no nearer to the window.

Well, sir, good-morning? Ah, Harry, the top of the morning to you my dear. Where's Rosamond?

Here. Do you want her? Of course. What a question to ask an adoring lover? Tell her to show her face at the window...

Rosamond, he wants you, Miss Beauchamp said, looking back into the room. Miss Barrington walked slowly to the window, and and looked down on the gentleman who waited on the lawn below.

Rosamond, I have come to tell you it's the sweetest morning of all the year. Will my gracious lady permit her slave to order the horses, and go with him for a delicious canter over Barton Downs?

Not care about riding to-day? Why, my child, it's a day of days for a gallop. There's the sweetest breeze over the downs, and the larks are singing like—like mad; and—He broke off with a laugh.

Yes, but I can't ride to-day: thank you. Won't you, really? Well, then, I think I'll take a run over and call at the Dacres; you know I ought to have gone ever so long ago.

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Well, then, I'll off. Here, Countess! Sweet-lips! lie, lass! Good-bye, ladies, till dinner-time! and whistling his dog around him, the easy lover strode away over the dewy lawns towards the stables.

Miss Barrington looked at her friend.

Yes, that is how it is, she said bitterly. He does not care whether I am with him or not. He'll go over to Harper's Court, and ride with Flora Dacres, and be just as content with her as he would with me.

Because that easy fashion of loving is not Horace Vaughan's, but it is Jack Walsingham's. My dear Rosamond, men don't love after any one pattern, but after their natures.

Then I can't be content with Jack's fashion; I prefer to be something more than just a woman, like other women, to the man I marry, exclaimed Miss Rosamond with swelling indignation; and I shall tell Jack so, and set us both free.

CHAPTER II.

It's the most confounded, the most extraordinary caprice that ever entered into a woman's fancy.

So spoke Jack Walsingham, as, with his hands thrust into his pockets, and his back to the fire, he confronted the sympathising faces of his cousin, Miss Beauchamp, and his friend, Horace Vaughan.

Confounded—is it unfounded, Jack? asked Miss Beauchamp quietly. Unfounded! why, of course it is. Haven't I looked all my life to marrying Rosie?

Yes, that's just it; she thinks it's mere habit—the knowledge that you were always meant for one another, and not real, actual love on your part.

Real, actual love! what does the child mean? At least I can say this—if I do not know real love for Rosamond, I never knew it for any other woman.

Did you tell her so? Of course I told her so; but all I could say was so much wasted breath. I believe the poor little thing has taken it into her head she is doing a generous thing by me in giving me up, and that's half the meaning of the matter.

He looked so comically perplexed, that Miss Beauchamp was moved to say: I should like to know whether you really care, Jack?

Really care, Harriet? Well, I must indeed have been wanting in much, if you entertain that doubt. I suppose I have not, of course I can't have been a very adoring lover; I have been so accustomed to think of Rosamond as belonging to me, that I've been careless in asserting my ownership.

Jack's voice grew husky, and Miss Beauchamp, being a warm-hearted and frank lady, immediately rose from her seat, and putting her hands on his shoulders, kissed him.

Mr. Walsingham returned the salute with a great deal of heartiness. Horace Vaughan stared.

Heyday! I good people; pray, don't put any restraint upon yourselves; don't let me be in your way for an instant, I beg.

My dear old Jack, I ask your pardon with all my heart, said Miss Beauchamp, not in any way regarding her betrothed's remark; I ought to have known you better. But that silly little Rosie must be brought to her senses, for I know she loves you dearly all the while.

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Horace is right; it is the very thing. Jack, you must have a misfortune! cried Miss Beauchamp with great energy.

Bless her heart—do you think she would? Mr. Walsingham said very tenderly. I feel certain she would. I don't doubt that Miss Barrington has formed her idea of how a man in love should conduct himself upon the model of the popular novel hero; and is not that the line of conduct the heroine of the said novel has always adopted, ever since Jane Eyre espoused her maid and blind adorer?

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Yes—adversity's the thing! Miss Beauchamp went on. Remember what the poet says, my dear Jack; Adversity, like the toad, ugly and venomous, wears yet a precious jewel in his head.

Decidly ugly, if it's to come in the shape of a railway smash, Mr. Walsingham replies, dubiously caressing his whiskers. I say, Horace, can't it be something short of that?

Miss Beauchamp looked up at her cousin's stately strength and comeliness. Horace, if you please, I can't have Jack disfigured: not permanently; but a wasting illness might be judiciously employed perhaps. I have heard of such things, and in books.

Faith! I suppose I'm very stupid; I can't say I comprehend. My good fellow, you are stupid, Mr. Vaughan remarked. From the bed of wasting sickness, you can indite a most touching farewell, and beseech a last interview, and who—?

No! I'll be banged if I can, interrupted Mr. Walsingham most emphatically. I could not play with any woman's feelings in that way; I couldn't owe my wife to a trick, Harriet.

My good fellow, you are stupid, Mr. Vaughan remarked. From the bed of wasting sickness, you can indite a most touching farewell, and beseech a last interview, and who—?

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Ah! I thought your impracticable honesty would come in the way presently, said Miss Beauchamp, trying hard not to laugh. Well, Horace, what's to be done?

We must wait in humble hope of the misfortune, since Jack won't allow us to expedite matters; or for that not very improbable event of a lady's changing her mind, answered Mr. Vaughan.

But if I were in Jack's place, it would be long before I would ask Miss Barrington to change it, said Miss Beauchamp energetically.

Would it, my dear? asked Jack, looking at her rather whistfully; and yet you are in love with Horace here, or he thinks you are.

At any rate, he hopes the best, returned that gentleman. But what has that to do with it? Nothing, perhaps; only I was thinking of some old words; Love suffereth long and is kind, Mr. Walsingham said simply.

CHAPTER III.

Rosamond Barrington was seventeen, a beauty and a spoiled child. These facts must plead her excuse for the follies she was guilty of. It not exactly an heiress in the bargain, she was at least endowed with enough money to give her all the comforts, and a great many of the luxuries, that money can supply.

She had never known a trouble, for her mother and father had died when she was too young to understand their death; and as the petted ward of kind General Manners, and under the loving care of his maiden sister, she had never realised her loss.

Then, as if the General and his sister were not of themselves enough to spoil any young maiden, there was the General's nephew and heir, Jack Walsingham, the best-tempered, kindest-hearted, easiest-tempered fellow in the world; always putting himself at the beck and call of the little beauty, ready to think all she did was right, all she wanted reasonable, and perpetually asserting that, do what she would and want what she might, she was the loveliest and dearest little lady in all the land.

Now, it was perfectly well known to these two playfellows that it had been the earnest wish of their respective parents that their orphan children should espouse one another; in fact, they were betrothed from an early age, though no penalty awaited the breaking of the engagement if either party earnestly wished it; far less was any compulsion to be used in its fulfilment.

But neither party had wished it hitherto. Rosamond loved handsome, kind-hearted Jack Walsingham with all her heart, and never more than when she took it into her romantic little head that his easy, unexact affection betrayed his want of all corresponding love for her.

So, when the deed was done, and with all the dignity and composure she could bring to her aid she had declared her firm belief in the insufficiency of Jack's affection to render either of them happy, and consequently her refusal to fulfil the engagement contracted for them—when Jack had heard this with an amazement that but ill qualified him to plead his cause at all eloquently and had finally departed more astounded and incredulous than actually overcome with grief—Rosamond retired to her own room, locked herself in, and cried till she had made herself more really ill than she had ever been in all her life before.

But she had to gird herself up, call up all that faltering pride, gather up the remnants of that troublesome dignity that was not at all natural to Rosie, and encounter the surprise and concern of the kind General, and (far, far worse) the wonder and condolence of his sister. The General saw all the pain in the poor little face when he opened the subject, and though something sore on his favorite nephew's behalf, yet, with chivalrous and delicate courtesy, he contented himself with a few words of regret, and alluded no more to the matter.

But Miss Adamina, poor lady, was scarcely so forbearing; her curiosity and sympathy were both unbounded, and I am sorry to say that Rosamond more than once was moved to sharpness and wrath in putting to silence all questions on a subject that in truth touched the poor little heart too

dearly as yet to render touching to be at all endurable. And so a week went by—a fortnight—a month; spring-days melted into summer ones.—Mannerdale looked its best; the General placidly enjoyed the beauties of his fair dwelling-place; Miss Manners visited her poor, and drove her ponies, and received her circle of friends; and Rosie pined like a bird in a cage, and thought of sweet summer days that were gone forever. For Jack Walsingham came no more to Mannerdale. How could he, indeed?—though, when Rosamond had declared their engagement was at an end, she had said also, something wistfully, that that must make no difference in their friendship of course. But Jack had seen his uncle in London, and had said that on the whole he must drop Mannerdale as his home for a while; he didn't think he could see Rosie as yet with merely friendly feelings; and if he was not to contribute to her happiness in the way he had always hoped, God forbid he should vex her kind little heart by carrying the woebegone countenance of a discontented man into her presence. So Jack came no more.—There are some amongst us who can realise all that bare fact was to Rosie. Some of us? Ah, how many know what it is to miss a kind, cheerful, manly presence out of our daily lives! Ah, the music of that pleasant whistle sounding through all the house, the welcome coming of those light footsteps, the dear familiar voice, the merry affectionate talk, the pleasant care of having some crotchets and whims to gratify and laugh at. Who does not remember these? what woman who has had brother or lover to thank for, pray for, and—part with? Those who have will know what the house was to Rosie when they had all departed. Oh that dreary silence. Oh the loneliness of those long days, when there was no one to look for, and to welcome! Not till he was gone did she realize all he had been.

So the summer wore on, and that spring-day when she had told Jack Walsingham she would not be his wife seemed so far away, removed by such whole years of regret and grief, that it was almost as if it had happened in another existence. Equally true it was that this quiet, sad Rosamond was another creature from the petted, brilliant, light-hearted Rosie that the spring sun had shone on. Neither the General nor his sister ever mentioned Jack's name; and, from shrinking at the thought that they might do so, Rosamond came to pine for the sound of it with a wild, feverish longing that shocked herself.—Harriet Beauchamp, too, had gone to visit her friends in the north, and, though she wrote daily to her friend, was much too indignant on her cousin's behalf to speak of him or of his doings.

But there came a certain Sunday when Rosamond once more saw her old playfellow. It was, I am sorry to say, at church, when, as Rosamond chanced to turn her head, she saw, with a great upward bound of the heart, Jack Walsingham in the very act of entering the church with the Dacres. I fear, though Rosamond immediately bent her eyes on her book, it is henceforth the sacred duty she was there to perform was interrupted by many distracted and rebellious wanderings. Though she never looked in that direction, somehow she seemed to see without looking. Ah, dear, how did she become conscious of the attentive assiduity of Mr. Walsingham in finding Miss Dacre's places in her prayer-book? She was confident she never looked towards Jack; then by what magic was it she was cognisant of his every movement, even to that habitual, thoughtful caressing of his handsome moustache she knew so well. But once—yes, once—when the service was over, Rosie, with an impulse she could not resist, turned one fleeting glance on her rejected lover, and, as if some magnetic influence forced his eyes to meet hers, for one instant the two looked at each other. Jack colored a little, but he looked quite kindly and steadfastly on his first love: while Rosie turned hurriedly away, ashamed and comforted, and vexed and glad at once. Going out of church was only one long sensation of meeting Jack, speaking to him, having her hand in his once more, when they got outside; but somehow the General seemed in a very unusual state of fuss and hurry, and when they reached the gates banded his sister and Rosamond very hastily into the pony phaeton, and drove away.

All the rest of that summer Sunday she waited at home, hoping, longing, sickening. Surely if he did not come on that day, he would the next. He never could be so near and not come to see at least—his uncle and aunt. But Monday and Tuesday went, all the week went, and Jack never came to Mannerdale.

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