

"MONA"

The Irish Bride of an English Gentleman.

(Continued.)

Paul turns his head, and as he sees Geoffrey a quick spasm that betrays fear crosses his face.

"Do not take her away yet—not yet," he says, in a faint whisper.

"No, no. She will stay," says Geoffrey, hurriedly. "I only want to tell you, my dear fellow, how grieved I am for you, and how glad I would undo many things—if I could."

The other smiles faintly. He is evidently glad because of Geoffrey's words, but speech is now very nearly impossible to him. His attempt to rise, to point out the imaginary moonlight to Mona, has greatly wasted his small remaining stock of life, and now but a thin partition, frail and broken, lies between him and that inexorable Rubicon we all must one day pass.

Then he turns his head away again to let his eyes rest on Mona, as though he where else can peace or comfort be found.

Geoffrey, moving to one side, stands where he can no longer be seen, feeling instinctively that the ebbing life before him finds its sole consolation in the thought of Mona. She is all he desires. From her he gains courage to face the coming awful moment, when he shall have to clasp the hand of Death, and go forth, with him to meet the great unknown.

Presently he closes his fingers upon hers, and looking up, she sees his lips are moving, though no sound escapes them. Leaning over him, she bends her face to his and whispers softly—

"What is it?"

"It is nearly over," he gasps, painfully. "Say good bye to me. Do not quite forget me—not utterly. Give me some small place in your memory, though—so unworthy."

"I shall not forget; I shall always remember," returns she, the tears running down her cheeks; and then, through divine pity, and perhaps because Geoffrey is here to see her she stoops and lays her lips upon his forehead.

Never afterwards will she forget the glance of gratitude that meets hers, and that lights up all his face, even his dim eyes, as she plants him this gentlest of kisses.

"Pray for me," he says.

And then she falls upon her knees again, and Geoffrey in the background, though unseen, kneels too, and Mona in a broken voice, because she is crying very bitterly now, whispers some words of comfort for the dying.

The minutes go by slowly, slowly; clock from some distant steeple chimes the hour. The soft pattering of rain upon the walk outside, and now upon the window-pane, is all the sound that can be heard.

In the death chamber silence reigns. No one moves; their very breathing seems hushed. Paul Rodney's eyes are closed. No faintest movement disturbs the slumbers into which he seems to have fallen.

Thus half an hour goes by. Then Geoffrey, growing uneasy, raises his head and looks at Mona. From where he sits the bed is hidden from him, but he can see that she is still kneeling beside it, her hand in Rodney's, her face hidden in the bedclothes.

The doctor at this instant returns to the room, and, going on tiptoe (as though fearful of disturbing the sleeper) to where Mona is kneeling, looks anxiously at Rodney. But, alas! no sound of earth will evermore disturb the slumber of the quiet figure upon which he gazes.

The doctor, after a short examination of the features that are even now turning to marble, knits his brows, and, going over to Geoffrey, whispers something into his ear while pointing to Mona.

"At once," he says, with emphasis. Geoffrey starts. He walks quickly up to Mona, and, stopping over her, very gently loosens her hand from the other hand she is holding. Passing his arm round her neck, he turns her face deliberately in his own direction—as though to keep her eyes from resting on the bed—and lays it upon his own breast.

"Come," he says, gently. "Oh, not yet!" entreats faithful Mona, in a miserable tone; "not yet. Remember what I said. I promised to remain with him until the very end."

"You have kept your promise," returns he, solemnly, pressing her face still closer against his chest.

A strong shudder runs through her frame; she grows a little heavier in his embrace. Seeing she has fainted, he lifts her in his arms and carries her out of the room.

Later on, when they open the paper that had been given by the dead man into the keeping of Dr. Bland, and which proves to be his will, duly signed and witnessed by the gamekeeper and his son, they find he has left Mona all of which he died possessed. It amounts to about two thousand a year, of which one thousand is to come to her at once, the other on the death of his mother.

To Ridgway, the under-gardener, he willed three hundred pounds, "as some small compensation for the evil done to him," so runs the document, written in a distinct and trembling hand. And then follow one or two bequests to those friends he had left in Australia, and some to the few from whom he had received kindness in colder England.

No one is forgotten by him; though once "he is dead and laid in grave" he is forgotten by most.

—as Mona promised him,—and write Sir Paul Rodney over his head, giving him in death the title they would gladly have withheld from him in life.

CHAPTER XXXV.

An hour follows upon hour, even the most poignant grief grows less. Nature, sooner or later will come to the rescue, and hope "springing eternal" will cast despair into the black ground. Paul Rodney's death being rather more a shock than a grief to the inmates of the Towers, the remembrance of it fades from their minds with a rapidity that astonishes even themselves.

Mona, as a only natural, clings longest to the memory of that terrible day when grief and gladness had been so closely blended, when tragedy followed so fast upon their comedy that laughter and tears embraced each other and gloom overpowered their sunshine. Yet even she brightens up, and is quite herself again by the time the "merry month of May" comes—wearing down upon them all its wealth of blossoms, and music of glad birds, as if by magic in glade and dell.

Yet in her heart the erring cousin is not altogether forgotten. There are moments in every day when she recalls him to her mind, nor does she ever pass the huge tomb where his body lies at rest, awaiting the last trumpet, without a kindly thought of him and a hope that his soul is safe in heaven.

The county has behaved on the occasion somewhat disgracefully, and has declared itself to a man—without any reservation—uniquely glad of the chance that has restored Sir Nicholas to his own again. Perhaps what they just do not say is that they are delighted that Paul Rodney shot himself; this might sound brutal, and one must draw the line somewhere, and a last remnant of decency compels them to draw it at this point. But it is the thinnest line possible and easily stepped across.

Even the duchess refuses to say anything regrettable in the whole affair, and expresses herself to Lady Rodney on the subject of her nephew's death in terms that might almost be called congratulatory. She had been listened to in silence, of course, and with a deprecating shake of the head, but afterwards Lady Rodney is unable to declare to herself that the duchess has taken anything but a sound common-sense view of the matter.

In her own heart, and in the secret recesses of her chamber, Nicholas's mother blesses Mona for having returned the pistol that February afternoon to the troublesome young man (who is so well out of the way), and has entertained a positive affection for the roots of trees ever since the end of the accident.

But these unwholly thoughts belong to her own breast alone, and are hidden carefully out of sight, less any should guess at them.

The duke, calling at the Towers about a month after Paul Rodney's death, so far forgets himself as to say to Mona, who is present—

"Awful luck, your getting rid of that cousin, old Such an uncomfortable fellow, don't you know, and so uncommonly in the way."

At which Mona had turned her eyes upon him—eyes that literally flashed如火, and had told him slowly, but with meaning, that he should remember the dead could not defend themselves, and that she for one had not as yet learned to regard the death of any man as "awful luck."

"Give me my word," said the Duke afterwards to a select assembly. "When she looked at me then out of her wonderful Irish eyes, and told me all that with her mystical brogue, I never felt so small in all my life. Regular went into my boots, you know and staid there. But she is, without doubt or that, she really is the most charming woman I ever met."

Lady Lillias Eaton, too, had been rather fine upon the Rodney ups and downs. The history of the Australian's devotion had been as a revelation to her. She had actually come out of herself, and had neglected the ancient Britons for a full day and a half,—on the very highest authority,—merely to talk about Paul Rodney. Surely "nothing in his life" became him like the leaving it "of all those who would scarcely speak to him when living, not one but converses of him familiarly now he is dead."

"So very strange, so almost unparalleled in this degenerate age," says Lady Lillias to Lady Rodney, speaking of the will episode generally, and with as near an approach to enthusiasm as it is possible to her to produce. "A secret panel! How interesting! We lack that at Anadale. Pray, dear Lady Rodney, do tell me all about it again."

Whereupon Lady Rodney, to whom the whole matter is "cakes and ale," does tell it all over again, relating every incident, from the removal of the will from the library by Paul to his surrender of it next day to Mona.

Lady Lillias is delighted. "It is quite perfect, the whole story. It reminds me of the ballads about King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table."

"Watch the stealing of the will!" asks Lady Rodney, innocently. She knows nothing about the Ancient Britons, and abhors the very sound of their name, regarding them as indecent, immoral people, who went about insufficiently clothed. Of King Arthur and his round knights (as she will call them), having once got so hopelessly mixed on the subject as to disallow of her ever being disintegrated again) she knows even less, beyond what Tennyson has taught her.

To be Continued.

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