



EOLA.

BY CRIPNEY GREY.

CHAPTER I.

It is a dark, dismal night in November. The wind howls mournfully through the leafless branches of the withered trees; not a star is visible; and a drizzling rain adds to the wretched dreariness of the winter scene.—'Surely no human being would venture abroad on a night like this,' says Luxury, as he revels in the comfort of his soft, easy chair by a blazing fire.

'Misery heeds not external discomforts,' answers Poverty, bending his ragged head to the keen blast. True, oh Poverty! the despairing, grief-bowed soul is oblivious of all save its own sad, crushing weight of woe and bitterness.

We stand before a stately mansion, reared beside the romantic ruins of an ancient abbey and contrasting strangely, in its bright, modern appearance, with the solemn grandeur of the mouldering pile, the once massive walls of which, standing in huge, fantastically-shaped fragments, backed by the giant trees, whose bare arms, stretching wildly forth, are visible at different openings of the ruins, present a singular and ghostly spectacle to the eye of the night-gazer.

All within the handsome dwelling, however seems warmth, and light, and cheerfulness.—Luxuries are not wanting here. One room, in particular, appears to be very brilliantly lighted, and in it the gay young master of this wealthy establishment is entertaining a few of his chosen companions.

Lord Ewald is considered the richest man in shire. He is also free from every kind of control. No parents are living to shackle his pleasures with their wise and irksome counsel, no officious friends presume to dictate to him, no anxious wife interferes with his whims and caprices—all around him are mute, or fawning and subservient.

Let us draw his portrait, as he leans back yonder so gracefully on his cushioned seat.—His brow is white, smooth, and high; the light brown curls that lie negligently about it are luxuriant and glossy, and his bright blue eyes, though somewhat too voluptuous in their expression, are soft and intelligent, and to a casual observer winning and kind. The delicate nostrils slightly curled upper lip, and prominent chin, bespeak fastidiousness and pride, but this unpleasant effect is greatly obviated by the peculiarly fascinating smile that now plays around the entire countenance (it might be most disagreeable were that countenance distorted with anger). A slight moustache decorates the well-formed mouth, but no whiskers are yet visible on the smooth fresh cheeks.

Is this the portrait of a nobleman? In one sense; but Lord Ewald is noble in little more than the name.

Let us return to the exterior of his rich abode, and penetrate the mystery of that dark figure which for more than an hour has hovered near the window of the gaily-illuminated room.

It is the form of a female, surely! But on such a night—at such a time! What can have brought her to this dreary place? And why is she so intently gazing through that stately casement? A portion of the costly hangings are slightly disarranged, and through the aperture thus formed, a good view can be obtained of the interior of the apartment which Lord Ewald and his friends are occupying, unconscious of the pale young face that is ever and anon pressed against the cold glass, and the mournful dark eyes that peer so wistfully in upon the warm, bright scene, in which they luxuriate, while she stands shivering and weeping beneath the wintry sky.

Coldly blows the ruthless blast on her trembling form as the unhappy creature continues her dreary vigil, but she scarcely heeds it: it sweeps round and round her, tossing about her long, dark hair, and piercing through the slight and half theatrical garment which barely covers her; yet still that wan face rests against the chilly glass, and those sad eyes are fixed upon the gaily within.

Oh! what a depth of misery do they bespeak! What a pitiful meaning dwells in their wild lustre! What a tale of suffering and shame do they unfold! And yet what a wealth of yearning tenderness can be traced in their passionate gaze!

Poor young thing! Whatever may have been thy fault, its punishment has quickly followed. She is very beautiful, though worn with pain and sorrow. A princess might envy her slender, graceful figure, and those long black tresses falling from beneath her gipsy hood—how luxuriant and glossy they are! Her hands and feet too are small and well formed, and her skin is soft and spotless as that of the pampered patrician.

She is young to be the victim of so much misery; her ago can scarcely exceed seventeen, but she has lived long enough to feel life a burden, as can be traced in the feverish bitterness with which she more than once exclaims against the hard fate that has overtaken her.

Presently a servant enters the apartment in which is the object of her interest; he observes the carelessly-drawn curtain, and hastens to adjust it properly. Ah! draw it close—shut in all the comfort and the luxury—tend your master carefully—let no cold draught penetrate to his delicate person! What matters it to him or you that without that silken curtain shivers a poor forlorn child, whose young life he has blighted in the bud, and whose once innocent heart he has won from its purity, and immersed in a hopeless abyss of shame and despair!

The girl turns slowly away, and vanishes into the surrounding darkness.

On reaching the ruined abbey, she looks back, lingeringly and irresolute, as one who takes a last farewell of some cherished object.

'He is sitting there in warmth and gladness,' she murmured, gazing through her tears.

'He is surrounded with every comfort that heart could wish for; while I stand here wet with the cold, cold rain, and almost dead with shame and sorrow. Oh! how cruel!—how cruel! Only three months ago he met me

here—almost on this very spot: then I was a careless, light-hearted child, and now,—now—' The broken words died in a succession of bitter sobs, and leaning against a portion of the rough wall, the wretched girl gave way to a passionate burst of grief; her slender form quivered with the violence of her wild sorrow, and all other considerations for a time seemed forgotten in its intensity.

Presently the sound of approaching footsteps fell upon her ear. It seemed to arouse her from her painful paroxysm, for, mastering her sobs, and hastily wiping away her tears, she relinquished her sorrowful attitude, and walked hurriedly forward.

She had not proceeded many steps ere a tall, gipsy-looking man overtook her; she seemed to know him, and half paused as he approached, while a piteous expression of fear passed over her pale features.

'How is this Eola?' he said, almost fiercely, and grasping the shrieking creature's shoulder.

'Why do you steal away from your home to prow about this ghostly place on a night like this? You have been crying too,' he added, sharply, gazing searchingly into her face.

'Oh, Ralph!' she exclaimed, in a frightened tone, and putting up her little hands, in a deprecatory manner. 'Oh, Ralph! do not scold me. I—only came here to tell the fortunes of a servant-maid belonging to the house yonder; and—and—I have been crying a little, because she didn't come as she promised; for you know, Ralph' (and the speaker strove to throw a semblance of truth into her words), 'silver is scarce among us now.'

'You lie, Eola!' fiercely exclaimed her gipsy friend, for such he appeared. 'You did not come here for anything of the sort. You are deceiving me—deceiving us all; and you know it; else what did you want at that window yonder? I've watched you for the last five minutes, while you stood staring in it. Ah! you tremble! Did the servant promise to meet you there?'

'Come, Ralph; you are in a bad temper to-night,' said the poor girl, striving to assume a careless tone and manner. 'You are always trying to tease me. If curiosity did make me look in at those fine gentlemen for a few moments, its nothing to be cross about.'

'And pray did the same curiosity cause you to cry and oh, just now, like a passionate baby? I tell you, Eola, you are playing me false, in some way.'

The gipsy paused; and a half-sad, half-angry expression crossed his dark features, as he gazed on the shivering creature at his side, awaiting evidently some reply in denial of his accusation.

But she spoke not. 'What do you want,' he continued, 'night after night, and day after day, wandering alone among these woods and ruins? You have strangely changed, too, since we came to this place. Oh, Eola! I love you—you know I do. But if I thought you were cheating me, I could kill you where you stand.'

A singular smile for a moment hovered round the girl's mouth. Perhaps she saw nothing so very appalling in the threatened

fate. Perhaps it would have seemed almost welcome to her then.

'I don't deceive you, Ralph,' she said, at length. 'You deceive yourself.'

'How?'

'In thinking I can ever be your wife.'

'What! Are we not engaged to each other? Didn't you long ago promise to marry me?'

'I was a child then, and promised what I didn't understand. I didn't know what love was when I promised to love you.'

Poor Eola! she had touched a dangerous chord then. The gipsy seized her arm roughly.

'You have learnt lately, then!' he cried, savagely; 'at least, your words make out as much. God help the teacher if he crosses my path!'

The girl was silent.

'Am I right?' continued her companion; 'has another taught you how to love? Oh! if it is so, I will be revenged most fearfully! and a gleam of most dreadful passion fired the speaker's black eyes, while his set teeth grated audibly.

'You are silent!' he hissed out; 'and so you are guilty; but, oh! if that sneaking libertine has touched a flower intended for my plucking, let him look to it! I will tear him limb from limb, and throw the pieces to his mastiffs. Speak, Eola! has his baby face and whimpering voice won you for a nine days' plaything? or are you yet to become his victim?'

Eola glanced pitifully up into the face of her interrogator.

'Oh, Ralph!' she murmured; 'don't speak to me in that dreadful way: you terrify me. Indeed, indeed, I know nothing of this man. I am innocent of his love, I assure you.'

The gipsy looked intently in her pale face. Something there evidently touched his pity, for, assuming a gentle tone—

'Well, well,' he said; 'I'll believe you—at least, till I prove you false; but its strange you coming so often to this place. If your heart is with that wicked lord, I advise you to recall it, and place it where you will meet with true love, and not disgrace.'

Oh, Eola! if you have, indeed, been silly enough to fall in love with that man, let me beg of you, for your own sake, as well as mine to think no more of him. He is handsome and rich; but his heart is black as night, and he would ruin you with as little remorse as I would pull a daisy and then throw it away. I am only a poor man, Eola, but I love you dearly, and would even work my fingers to the bone—to make you happy, although I am hasty and rough at times to you.'

The gipsy paused for a moment, overcome with some deep emotion.

It was plain that beneath his rough demeanour and harsh tone there was much of real worth and feeling. Whatever might have been his failings, they were venial; and a loving woman might have transformed that rude, wild heart to one of the tenderest sentiments; but, alas! this could not now be.

The young girl began to weep. Her do-