

HER HUMBLE LOVER

The priest lifts his hat with the exquisite smile of warm-hearted benevolence and sympathy, and Hector, making a signal to Sir Frederic, he comes and walks beside them.

The good father bends a benign glance on Lord Delamere.

"You wish to speak with me, my lord. Will you bring your friend into my house?"

Hector inclines his head, and in silence they reach the little gate which divides the garden from the churchyard.

"Wait," says the father. "I will get a light. My servant has gone to Alletto."

He goes in, and the two foes stand in silent misery at the gate. A light dawns in the house, the door opens, and Hector stands aside for Sir Frederic to pass, when suddenly there is the rustle of a woman's dress, a burst of mad laughter, the gleam of steel, and as Sir Frederic turns he is in time to see Lord Delamere fall and stagger back against the gate and slide to the ground, with a knife buried in his breast.

It has all happened so quickly; it is so much like the awful falling of a tree smitten by lightning, that for a moment Sir Frederic stands rooted to the spot, and staring wildly in the direction taken by the flying girl, who had struck the blow even as he ran; then, with a cry of horror, he throws himself on his knees beside the motionless figure, shouting wildly for help. With an answering cry the father turns to him, and with upheld light kneels beside him.

"He is killed!" exclaims Sir Frederic, hoarsely. "She has killed him! What—what—Heaven's name shall we do?"

"Lush, my son!" says the priest, trembling, yet already self-possessed and brave with strength which no earthly courage will supply. "Give me your handkerchief! Turn your head aside, and as he speaks he draws out the cruel knife, and begins to staunch the blood. "Come! we must bear him to the house," and exerting his strength to the utmost, he raises the limp form in his arms.

Between them they carry him who, but a few moments before, was a strong, stalwart man, now as helpless as a child, as lifeless as a fallen tree, into the priest's chamber.

"Now, quick, my son," he says, in a low voice. "Help me cut the clothing from the wound. Be calm. Every moment is one of life or death. Life hangs on a thread. Good! Give me that towel yonder. Light the other candle. Good!" as Sir Frederic, moved to strength by the serene calm of the good old man, obeys each command. "Now fly to the village, to the inn, and tell them to send me the landlord, Hermann. He is almost a surgeon, and has been in the German wars. You understand? Everything depends upon your promptness of mind, my son."

Sir Frederic murmurs a wild assent, and tears down the village street to the inn.

With breathless words he makes the landlord understand something of the tragedy that has occurred.

"Ah, yes!" exclaims the landlord, with a white face, as he seizes his hat. "It is what I expected. Oh, my poor friend! He that was so good and patient! Yes—yes, and snatching a case of instruments from a drawer, he darted up the street."

Sir Frederic, faint and exhausted, kept up only by the excitement, follows him, but to find his admittance to the room where Lord Delamere lies strictly forbidden; so he paces up and down the little parlor with clasped hands and bowed head. It never occurs to him, for a moment, to pursue the girl. All his thoughts are bent on the man lying at death's door upstairs, on Signa, far away and alone, to whom must be told this awful thing which has befallen them.

"And I! I have done it all! I am the cause!" he groans. "If I had not told her this would not have happened. By Heaven, he must be right, and I must be mad!"

Indeed, he was almost mad during the silent hours of intense stillness spent in that quiet parlor, with the consciousness of all that was going on above his head.

At last a footstep is heard outside, and the landlord enters.

"Are you there, landlord?" he says, in a hushed whisper.

"Yes—yes. What news? Is—Is he dead?" and he groans.

Hermann slowly shakes his head. "He has come to and wishes to see you. The good father and I, myself, have warned him of the danger of speaking, but he will have his way. Milord was always of that kind, and no one could say him otherwise, or go against him. You will not speak to him overmuch, milord."

Sir Frederic waves his hand in assent, and follows the man upstairs.

Stretched on the bed lies Hector Lord of Delamere. A few hours ago, and he could have performed with ease any of the feats that athletes boast of; a few hours ago, and he held Sir Frederic's life in his hands; and now he lies, helpless as a child, with white face, drained of every drop of blood—with eyes closed by lids that are too heavy to lift. Beside him, holding a helpless hand, stands the priest, a solemn pity and tenderness on his beautiful face. He makes a gesture with his free hand for Sir Frederic to approach, and he creeps near.

"Is he here? Are you there?" whispers Hector.

"I am here," answers Sir Frederic, almost inaudibly.

A faint sense of satisfaction makes itself visible on the white face.

"Bend down—I cannot make myself heard."

Sir Frederic kneels beside the bed. "Sir Frederic, it is not unlikely that I shall die."

A hollow moan escapes Sir Frederic's lips unwittingly.

"But I do not mean to die yet—not until she is here. I have sent for you because, though you—hate me—"

Sir Frederic's head droops, but warned by the father's unlifted finger, he does not speak.

"You are an Englishman, and—know the meaning of fair play."

"Yes, yes!" gasps Sir Frederic.

"I—I want you to—to fetch her you—yourself. I have calculated—fancy such a calculation in the shadow of death! Love is indeed stronger than the King of Terrors—that she will not have crossed until to-morrow—this morning."

"Quite right, my son," murmurs the sweet, pitiful voice of the priest.

"Thanks, father," falters Hector. "You will telegraph, Sir Frederic, as soon as the office opens, to the seaport; you will then go on to meet her. She—she may refuse to come back with you; it is not unlikely." Even in this supreme moment he cannot resist the half-taunt. "Father, take of my ring and give it to him."

The priest draws the ring off. It comes off easily; the fingers have already shrunk.

"Show it to her, and she will come. Bring her here before I—die, and I will forgive you all the harm you have done. Stop!"

Sir Frederic remains on his knees. Hector struggles for breath.

"As—as this is the last time we may meet—"

"No, no!" groans Sir Frederic.

"I want to say, I want you to believe that I am—innocent. The good father here, who would not utter a lie to save his own life, all our lives, can vouch for that! Blyte, you have—made—an awful mistake! Don't—don't let it weigh upon your mind. If I—had been in your place I might have done the same. Signa is—worth loving, and a man who lost her—might well behave like a—madman. Go now, telegraph, and—bring her!"

The soft voice dies away—Sir Frederic still kneels.

"Delamere," he says, in a hoarse whisper. "I—I believe you. I believe you are innocent, however black it looks. For Heaven's sake, forgive me!"

"I forgive you. Bring her to me!" is the breathless reply.

"Go now, my son," says the priest, and Sir Frederic, just touching the motionless hand laid death-like on the coverlid, goes noiselessly from the room.

Morning comes, and with a surgeon from Alletto, brought hither by a mounted messenger, he examines the patient with pursed lips and anxious brow.

"You have done everything that could have been done, father," he says.

"And will he live?" demands the priest, anxiously.

The surgeon shrugs his shoulders and declines to commit himself, after the manner of his tribe all the world over.

"The wound is a bad one," he says, looking down on the patient, who is now all unconscious; "but he is English, and the English die hard. I had one who fell from a mountain cliff and broke nearly every bone in his body, and he lived, and is well now! But who shall say? There is the fever, and this might all have the fever badly, and if he should have it too badly he will die. At any rate, father, I should be prepared to send for his friends."

"He has only one friend, his wife, and she is sent for," says the priest, gently, and the surgeon, shaking his head, goes on his way.

"Has she come?" he asks.

"Not yet, but she will, doubtless my son," replies the father, who scarcely leaves the bedside. Fancy Mr. Podswell watching beside a sick bed for four nights!

"Yes, I shall last until she comes, I feel it. And Lucia? You have not caught—I hope you have not caught her?"

"No, we have not," says the priest, simply. "We have not tried."

An expression of relief comes to Hector's face.

"I am glad," he says, and releases into unconsciousness.

No man, since suffering humanity began to suffer, was watched and tended as is Lord Delamere. A sister of mercy, in her black robe and white cap, hovers perpetually beside his bed, seeming to require neither sleep nor food, so vigilant and constant is her ministrations. The good father, whatever his duties will permit, is always by his side; and even Hermann neglects his inn to join the duet, and make a trio of it.

"I can," he says, hoarsely, "but I will ask you not to press me. It is her secret, and I had better keep it. I will not until she chooses to speak. And she is she better."

Laura Derwent looks at him, puzzled and thoughtful.

"Yes, she is better," she replies. "She has a wonderful constitution, and what is called strength of mind; strength of will, I say. She is better, and downstairs, but the mere ghost of her former self. Some terrible thing has happened to her, we can see, but what it is—but you will not tell us, you say?"

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If earthly skill can work a miracle, Lord Delamere will recover; but only a miracle, so says the surgeon, can produce this desired recovery.

"There is something here"—and he touches the white forehead—"which I cannot treat. Who can minister to a mind diseased? That is the English poet, Shakespeare. The man's mind is diseased, is burdened with a trouble which I cannot alleviate, and cannot therefore cure. I am afraid, father, that he will die."

The good father sighs, and the tender-hearted sister gazes on the handsome face with tearful eyes. If it came to a question of life for life, either of them would have given his or her life for that of the strong man whose power is ebbing away.

Ebbing so fast that the blood seems to desert each limb one by one, so that the once brown hand is as white as the colorless face.

"I fear he will die before that sweet young wife will reach him," murmurs the priest.

"Signa is not only an Englishman, but a gentleman. With all the speed that money can procure he hastens to the nearest seaport, to find that a steamer has sailed, having amongst her passengers a lady who answers to the description of Signa."

He arrives an hour only too late, but undaunted he takes the next steamer and makes his way to Paris. He has already telegraphed to Lady Rookwell, to Mr. Podswell, to Lord Delamere's agent, to every one he can think of. In his wild, bewildered mind, the dying man's promise stands out clear.

"I shall not die until I see her," he had said. Buoyed up by that he arrives in Paris, and commences to search the hotels.

He begins at the Grand, and finishes at the Hotel de Lisle, but can find no trace of Signa.

Despair seems to fill his heart; the dying man's command haunts him like a dream, and for the life of him, try as he will he cannot leave Paris.

On the third day, as he is walking along the principal drive in the Champs Elysees—walking along with his head bent, his hands clasped behind his back, he hears his name spoken. With a start he looks round; there are several carriages in the drive, and one of them stops beside him. It is a close brougham, and Laura Derwent is looking out from the window, beckoning to him.

He hurries up to her, a wild hope springing up in his bosom.

"Miss Derwent," he says, almost gasps.

"Yes, it is I, Sir Frederic," she answers, and there is nothing of the old sparkle in her eyes, or of the old brightness in her voice. "Have you got my telegram? Have you been to Lady Rookwell? Are you ill?" she asks, staring at his haggard face and anxious eyes.

"What telegram?" he says, ignoring her question regarding himself.

"I telegraphed to Blyte Park two days ago," she says, gravely.

"I have not been home for some time," he says. "Where is Lady Rookwell?"

"Here in Paris," she says. "We are in great trouble, and wanted you. Will you come into the carriage and let me take you home?"

He opens the door and gets in.

"What trouble?" he asks; then he sighs and puts his hand to his brow.

"Whatever it may be, it cannot be worse than mine; than that which I left behind me!" he adds.

Laura Derwent looks at him cautiously, and with sudden eagerness.

"Is it about Lady Delamere?" she asks.

"Yes," he says, instantly. "Yes! Have you heard? Do you know where she is—Signa, Lady Delamere?"

Laura Derwent stares at him.

"Certainly! She is at Lady Rookwell's villa, whither we are going."

"Thank Heaven!" he exclaims, trembling. "For Heaven's sake, make the man drive more quickly! There is not a moment to be lost! It is a matter of life or death. She has told you all—that she knows, but there is worse to tell you!" and his lips quiver.

Laura Derwent shakes her head.

"Be calm, Sir Frederic. There is some misunderstanding between us. Signa is with us, at Lady Rookwell's; she arrived three days ago; we met her by chance at the station; she was going home to Northwell—to the villa. We brought her home with us, and—"

"And she has told you!" he says, sorrowfully.

"She has told us nothing!" returns Laura Derwent, quietly, gravely. "She was taken ill immediately we reached the house; indeed, she was very ill when we found her. Something had happened, something dreadful, we could see. She was half-dead with sorrow and exhaustion—"

Sir Frederic groans and turns his head aside.

"But she would tell us nothing, excepting that she had left her husband, Lord Delamere, forever. She refused to give us the reason, would not even tell us where he could be found. That same night she grew worse, and in an attack of delirium mentioned your name in her wanderings. Then we telegraphed to you, as I say. Can you explain the mystery?"

"I can," he says, hoarsely, "but I will ask you not to press me. It is her secret, and I had better keep it. I will not until she chooses to speak. And she is she better."

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"No—no," he answers. "You will know very soon. Do you think she is fit to travel?"

Laura Derwent stares.

"Travel!" she exclaims. "Certainly not! It would be madness! Where to, in the name of goodness?"

"To her husband!" he answers, solemnly.

Laura Derwent stares.

"Why—why, she says she has left him, that she can never go back, and forbids us ever to mention his name! Where is he?"

"At Casalina, in Tuscany, dying or dead!"

Laura Derwent utters a low cry of horror.

"Lord Delamere, dying, dead! Are you sure?—I mean—you look and speak so strangely, Sir Frederic!"

"I have suffered the keenest torture a man can suffer—that which springs from remorse," he says, gravely; "and I have not tasted food since yesterday. I can neither eat nor sleep, Miss Derwent. If it is possible for her to do so without risking her life, she must go to him at once. He sent me to bring her. I do not know that it may not be too late even now. I left him as near death as it is possible for a man to be—"

"Great Heaven!" murmured Laura. "What is the matter?"

"An accident," he says, curtly. "I can tell you nothing more than that."

"What does it mean?" she exclaims.

Laura Derwent. "What place did you say—Casalina? Why—why—Isn't that the place where I met him? Yes, and the place where he fought the duel about the girl—ah, I think I see! Oh, Sir Frederic, who is to tell her?"

He shakes his head, heavy with grief and indecision.

"I know not. I dare not!"

"Of course she loves him still!"

"Better than life itself," he answers.

"What has he done, then, that she should leave him? You will not tell me? At any rate, you must not see her; there is the shadow of death on your face, Sir Frederic. Thank Heaven, your aunt is with her! She will know what to do!"

He breathes a sigh of relief, and then relapses into silence. He takes out a time-table and studies it mechanically.

"If it is possible she must leave Paris in two hours!"

"Two hours! It seems impossible to me! But Lady Rookwell will decide."

He smiles sadly.

"If I know Sir Lady Delamere, she will decide for herself and quickly," he says, significantly.

The carriage stops at the villa Lady Rookwell has rented, and Sir Frederic, as they enter the hall, notices the hush that seems to pervade the little house; the servants speak in a low voice, and Laura Derwent treads lightly.

"Go into the drawing-room," she says to Sir Frederic. "I will fetch my aunt. She is with her now."

(To be continued.)

IF YOU WERE A BOY.

If you were a boy this morning, I wonder what you would do. Was ever a day more perfect than today? Was ever the sky more blue? I'm speaking to you, grave senior, I noticed you as you went about feeding it into the city.

To add to your cent per cent. I noticed your sober manner. Your very important looks. And I noticed your boy beside you. The schoolboy with his books, I saw—and you—where the river sweeps down to the "swimming" hole. Another boy playing "hooky"?

A boy with a fishing pole.

If you were a boy this morning, I wonder what you would do. I saw you looking at a whistler. A word to the boy with you. It seemed to me then you told him that the trout boy was a fool. That nothing ripens manhood. Like the moments spent in school. With the fresh blue sky above you and the green fields under.

How dare you utter such nonsense, O lar and hypocrite?

If you were a boy this morning, I wonder what you would do. A boy with a heart and soul. A boy, in spite of a licking. The boy with the fishing pole. (Philadelphia Evening Ledger)

Storage Eggs Less Nutritious.

The assertion by dealers that "after all there is nothing inj