



## THE WEDDING RING.

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"Have we not heard enough, sir?" asked Venables, turning with a groan of pain and impatience to Mr. Herbert.

"Be patient, George," said Gillian. "If I could bear it, surely you can bear to hear of it, now that it is all over so long ago. When my child was a few months old I learned that we were ruined. My fortune had gone, every penny, in gambling and debauchery. Grade by grade, we sank lower and lower, till at last we were actually starving—I and my darling Dora. He, meanwhile made enough money by the exercise of his talents as an artist for his own needs, dressed like a gentleman, and took his pleasures abroad, only returning to the miserable garret in which he lived when he was penniless. To do a few hours' work whereby to provide money for his pleasures. Dora was ill—she was dying of want of nourishment and fresh air. She would

have died had it not been for a friend—God bless him, a truer friend, a better man never broke bread. He gave me ten pounds with which to take her for a time into the country. My husband heard that I had the money. He seized it, and when I attempted to prevent him, he struck me to the ground. For weeks after I lay in the hospital. While I was convalescent, news came of the death of a relation in Australia. He had left me a sum of money, with which I came here and bought this farm. The rest you know."

### CHAPTER XIII.—A THUNDERCLAP.

At the end of Gillian's recital there was silence for a moment. Then Venables rose, and taking Gillian's hand, kissed it. There was a flash of moisture in his eyes, and his voice trembled as he spoke.

"What you have told us only confirms my faith in you, my deep affection. Henceforth, God willing, you shall lead a new life indeed."

"Let us hear Mr. Herbert, George," said Gillian.

"I have heard your story, Mrs. Dartmouth," said the clergyman, "with the deepest interest and compassion. I pity you, yet cannot altogether absolve you."

"What!" cried Sir George, almost fiercely. "Has she not suffered enough?"

"More than enough," said Mr. Herbert gently. "A heavy penalty for a wrong committed in the thoughtlessness of youth."

"What wrong has she committed?" asked Venables.

"The union she has described, a loveless union, can scarcely be defended. From its nature, perhaps, sprang many of her misfortunes. And let me ask another question. The name you bear is—ah—your husbands?"

"No."

"Another error," said Mr. Herbert.

"Nonsense," cried Venables, "it was a perfectly justifiable step."

"Deception of any kind is never justifiable. It is—ah—a violation of those spiritual veracities on which society is founded."

"Perhaps," said Venables, who relished as little as may be imagined the application of abstract principles of morality to the conduct of the woman he loved; "perhaps she might have done better to advertise in the public prints that she had come into a fortune, and that Mr. (whatever the black-guard's name may be) was humbly requested to return to his disconsolate wife now that she had something more that he might rob her of."

"George, George!" said Gillian, in a tone of remonstrance. "And the dispensation, sir?"

"On that point, if you have acquainted me with the actual facts, I have little or no doubt. You have never, in the spiritual sense, been a wife at all, and under the circumstances—I say under the circumstances—you may be justified in again marrying."

"Bravo!" cried Sir George. "The Church comes round to commonsense after all!"

"The informality, however," continued Mr. Herbert, "must be at once set right. Your true name is—"

"My husband's name," said Gillian, "was O'Mara!" It was the first time for seven years that it had passed her lips.

"Then, Mrs. O'Mara, I must ask you to correct this sad mistake at once. When it is done, and not until it is done, I shall have pleasure in performing the marriage ceremony."

"I will ask you to reconsider that point, sir," said Venables. "In the meantime, dear, we will go for our ride. The horses are waiting."

"I hope, Mr. Herbert," said Gillian, "that you will lunch with me when we return."

"I have a little correspondence to do," said Mr. Herbert, referring to his watch, "and it is a long step from here to the Vicarage."

"Then why not do your writing here?" said Gillian. "You will find the materials in my desk there. If you should need anything, you have only to ring, and Barbara will attend on you. Shall we find you here when we return?"

"You are extremely good, Mrs.—ah—" He boggled over the unfamiliar name, and ended by omitting it altogether. "You will find me here or in the garden."

"*Au revoir*," said Venables, and led his *fiancée* from the room. Mr. Herbert watched them mount and canter away.

"A painful story," he said, sitting at Gillian's desk. "Well, her troubles should be over now. Venables is a good fellow, and his affection for her is evidently very deep. Hardly such a match as he might have aspired to, or as I could have wished him to make; but— Well, well, I hope they may be happy."

He bent himself to his correspondence. The day was hot, and his walk and the long conference with Gillian and Sir George had tired him, and he nodded over the paper until he dozed. How long