

and returned triumphant to the side of Frank Gresham, of whose dangerous illness she was ignorant.

But this was impossible. The danger to herself would be as great, nay, greater than to him; trying to elude or evade her fate seemed useless, and she decided to yield to it at last, though not perhaps with the best grace in the world.

There had not been time to get a license, and go through the marriage ceremony, on the day of their arrival in London, but the otherwise pliant and obedient lover declared that it must and should be accomplished on the following day, and then they would start at once for Australia.

Having made up her mind that it was her only resource, Florence resigned herself to the inevitable with a philosophical indifference worthy of a better cause, and ate the tempting dinner served up in the private room, with a relish which showed that anxiety and agitation had not by any means interfered with her appetite.

It was a tedious evening to her at least; tedious, because she had no interest in the conversation or thoughts of her companion, and she wondered if every night of her future life was to be spent in this dull, monotonous manner.

Vaguely and fearfully she felt that she was on the threshold of some great change, on the verge perhaps of a precipice, over which she might be hurled.

She had not experienced this sensation on the night of her abduction, the night which she had believed to be the eve of her wedding, and try to shake the feeling off as she would, it clung to her with a persistency that frightened and terrified her.

A crisis was at hand, and dull, stupid and intolerable as she found the present, it was a haven of bliss, rest and security, compared with the future.

"This is the last time we part," said Beltram, as, in obedience to her hint that she was tired and wished to retire to rest, he rose to bid her good night.

"Is it?" she asked, indifferently.

"Yes, I have the license in my pocket; to-morrow we will be married, and when you are all my own, you will try to love me, won't you?"

"I don't know," she said carelessly.

"Won't you try, Florence?" he asked, in a pleading, earnest tone.

"Perhaps," was the cold reply.

"Florence, do you hate and loathe me so much?" he asked, passionately, his eyes flashing and cheek flushed with excitement; "if it is so, tell me, tell me at once; it is not too late; tell me that you hate, despise and loathe me, that I have sacrificed my honorable and noble name, my position in the world; my hopes of earth and heaven for you; that I have made a very fiend and demon of myself to possess you; that the enemy of mankind who tempted me to become this wreck, has stolen your heart against me; tell me this, and I will leave you, leave you now at once and for ever; leave you to join him who made me what I am."

His face had become white with intense feeling and passion; his eyes blazed like lamps of fire; his breath came hot and fast between his parted lips and dilated nostrils; there was the fire and fury of madness, as well as of despised love, in his whole face, speech and manner.

For the first time, the woman before him began to realize what a volcano she was walking so carelessly upon.

The conviction that she had gone, or was going too far, that the man before her was, or might become dangerous, startled her into a conviction of the uncertainty of her position; nay, of her very life, and made her what no amount of abject pleading could have done, gentle, and even in appearance, earnest.

"Sidney, you are hard upon me," she said, in an embarrassed, almost pained tone, and drooping her white eyelids.

"You forget," she went on, "how sudden this has all been; how violent. You are like the Roman who took a Sabine wife by force, and thought to make her love him in a day. A woman may be subdued by superior strength, but her heart must be won by gentleness, and if I had not thought it might be so with me, do you not think, Sidney, that to-day I should have escaped from you?"

She lifted her eyes, those fatally beautifully eyes, to his now, with such a subtle light in them, that, had she lured him to instant death or destruction, he must have followed while their influence was upon him.

"Forgive me, dearest. I am hard, I am unreasonable, but if you knew what I have suffered, if you knew what I still suffer, you would pity me."

"Do you know," he went on with a sudden burst of confidence, "I sometimes think I am mad, or going mad. But it is my love for you. When you are mine, the dream will go away, and the old peace—no, the old peace which passeth understanding, that I used to preach about and feel—no, that won't come again, but I shall have your love; I have given my soul for it; I shall have you."

He was getting excited again, and the girl was anxious to get rid of him, for the time at least.

"Yes, you will have me," she said, in her low, winning, half-timid tones; "and now good-night, Sidney. As you said, this is our last parting."

And, for the first time, she held up her face that he might kiss her.

Who shall name a price for a kiss? Is it not

priceless or worthless, just as the being we love, or one who is indifferent to us, bestows it?

It is the most powerful weapon in a woman's armory, and if the woman is wise, not used too frequently, or given away too freely.

Only one kiss, but it riveted the chain which bound Sidney Beltram so firmly that only death could sever it.

The strange couple, who afforded the waiter and chambermaid at the hotel materials for wonder and conversation, met at breakfast in their private sitting-room, and the meal being over, ordered luncheon at one o'clock, then dressed and went out presumably on business.

Had the curious servants followed them, they would no doubt have been surprised to see Mr. and Mrs. Sidney enter a cab as soon as they had turned the corner of a street, and order the man to drive them to a certain church, not very far distant.

Still more surprised would they have been to see the couple dismiss the cab, enter the sacred edifice, walk up to the altar, where a clergyman appeared ready for them, and heard them, in the most matter-of-fact manner in the world, go through the marriage service.

But it was so.

The register was signed, a copy of the certificate given to the bride, the fees paid, and the pair, who were declared to be one till death should tear the bond asunder, left the church, with, as may be imagined, widely different feelings.

"For better or worse," such were the words that rang in Sidney Beltram's ears; the cup he had risked so much for was in his hands, almost at his lips, but may he drink it?

"I am tired and giddy, and should like to go back to the hotel. Call a cab, Sidney," said the new-made bride, and with anxious solicitation on the part of her husband, she is obeyed.

It is not long before the cab stops at the door of the hotel, just as two gentlemen—military men you would judge from their gait, though attired in plain clothes, are passing it.

There is no doubt about the bride being faint and unwell, though she is still conscious.

Perhaps it is the reaction from the excitement she has lately gone through; in any case, her anxious husband throws back her veil, that she may breathe more freely, and supports—almost carries her into the hotel.

Not, however, until their faces had been seen, one would suppose recognized, by the two unobserved gentlemen.

A pause, and whispered conversation ensues; then the shortest of the two gentlemen, whom you may perhaps recognise as Lieutenant Blackie, strolls up to the waiter who is loitering near the door, and slipping half a sovereign in the man's hand, inquires who the two new arrivals are.

"Mr. and Mrs. Sidney, sir; comed yesterday."

"Ah, yes, I thought so, old friends of mine. We were not mistaken," he added, turning to his companion; "they will be glad to see us. Here, my man," he continued, slipping another coin of equal value into the fellow's hand, "take us up and announce us as two old friends of Mr. and Mrs. Sidney."

The man looked at the gold, hesitated, then at the officer's face, but something which he saw there decided him, and he led the way, closely followed by the strangers.

"Two gentlemen to see you, sir."

The next instant they were in the room.

"This is a mistake. Who are you?" and Sidney Beltram sprang to his feet, while Florence, who had buried her head in the sofa cushion, looked up at this strange intrusion.

"Mr. Beltram, you know me," said Blackie, advancing. "I will justify my conduct afterwards, but may I inquire the name of that lady?" and he pointed to Florence, who sat looking at him with widely opened and terrified eyes.

"That lady is my wife, the Honorable Mrs. Sidney Beltram," was the proud and indignant reply.

"It is false! She is my wife, or was."

It was the stranger, Blackie's companion, who spoke, and at the sound of his voice Florence, who had not noticed or recognised him before, gave a cry of rage and terror, and sprang to her feet.

"You lie!" she hissed, her eyes flashing like those of a furious lioness. "You cheated me with a lie, you told me so, you cast me away like a dog, and left me to die."

"I believed you false; I know you were false, though not as I thought you, and I determined, in my anger, that the world and you should never know that you were my wife. I discovered my mistake, came back, but you were gone. You have chosen your own path," and he pointed to Beltram, "but you were my wife, though we part for ever. But where is my child?"

The wretched woman heard him, and the expression on her face was wild as it was pitiful.

"Your wife!—my child! Oh, Heaven! for what have I sinned? My child, my child!"

A gurgling sob, a stream of blood issuing from her parted lips, and the injured guilty woman fell forward on the floor, insensible.

She had broken a blood vessel.

## CHAPTER XLIX.

### IN THE VERY ACT.

The determination to do wrong is seldom formed without the opportunity to execute the intention following close upon it, and this was the case with Bob Brindley.

John Barker's death was, he told himself, necessary to his own safety, and, having arrived at that conclusion, the next thought was how to secure it.

Very carefully had Bob weighed the matter in his own mind, and taking into consideration John's habits of drunkenness, he felt assured that his sudden death, provided there was no appearance of violence, would not arouse surprise or suspicion in the mind of any one.

With this object in view, he went to the chemist at whose shop he was in the habit of buying any medicine or drugs he required, and with whom he was on friendly, even familiar terms.

It had been one of the hobbies and occupations of his leisure hours to make experiments with chemicals, with a view to finding out new and brilliant dyes, and also the secret of making the most fleeting colors fast.

This same subject would stand him in good stead as an excuse now.

So, after having talked a little while about his trials, successes and failures in his experiments, he asked for some prussic acid, and, not dreaming of evil, the chemist supplied him, adding the caution, however, that he had enough to kill half-a-dozen men, and therefore, must be careful of it.

"Never fear, mon," was the reply, as having paid the price demanded, and armed with the precious and fatal drug, he left the shop.

An hour after, and he was seated in the tap-room of the "Cross Keys," talking with his intended victim.

It was scarcely ten in the morning, and John was a trifle more sober than on the previous day.

"Listen to me, mon," said Bob, as the two were seated at a table with an empty pewter pot before them; "listen to me for five minutes, and then I'll stand whatever thee likes."

John, not being insensible to the advantage of having whatever he chose to order paid for, resigned himself to be talked to.

"I'm a-goin' away," said Bob, "and it's likely you may never see me again; what be you goin' to do?"

"Stay whar aw be till the brass is gone," was the almost surly reply.

"And then?"

"Make spinner Gresham fork out more."

"Aye; but they say he's awful ill and mayhap won't get better."

"Well, if he dies, I s'pose I mon go to wark."

"But arn't thee afear'd as the wark at the cottage will be found out, and that thee'll swing for't?"

"Noa, they'll no go to 'spect me. You and the parson got the lasses. Aw got nort, and they'll come on you two, afore they thinks on me."

"Aye, that may be," returned Brindley, who had no objection to humor his companion at the moment; "and that be the reason, don't thee see, Jone, why aw'm goin' to Americay?"

"Eigh, thee's goin' thar, art thee?"

"Aye. But now, what wilt thee have? It's our last glass, remember."

"Rum," was the reply; "hot and strong."

"Well, go and order it," said Bob, throwing him a half-crown.

The scarcely sober man complied, returning a few moments after, with a potman bringing in the two glasses of steaming spirit and water.

Bob sipped at his glass for a few seconds in silence, thinking, meanwhile, how very precarious his life was, and how it hung on the merest thread while at the mercy of this drunken babbler, his companion.

The poison was in his pocket, the half-emptied glass before him; but the opportunity for using the former seemed as far off as ever.

At this moment a man looked in the room, and seeing that Barker was not alone, beckoned him to come to him.

With scarcely steady footsteps the summons was obeyed, and now came Brindley's chance.

(To be continued.)

## II.

### IN TWO PARTS.

#### I.—Continued.

The High-street of Grandchester absolutely revels in eccentricities of structure. Besides its line of shops, broken by its corn-market and other public buildings, numerous mansions, of every size and form, standing back with dignity from the main thoroughfare, give importance as well as picturesqueness to this portion of the ancient city.

Suddenly the carriage stopped. Susan saw that they were in front of a huge, gloomy pile, which, faced with a columned portico, and lighted by a single gas jet, had very much the appearance of a deserted palace, and caused in Susan's bosom a misgiving thrill, as she thought, "Could this be the Hornet, her future home?"

A second glance reassured her. Iron wickets, in front of huge entrance-doors, showed that they were public rooms of some sort, now closed. The driver had got down to open a gate on the opposite side, and now, without reascending, led his horse up the carriage sweep, conducting to a large, cheerful-looking, modern mansion, and stopped, by Susan's direction, at a side-door leading to the kitchen offices.

Susan's summons was answered by a neat maid, who called a man to take her box, and led her straight to the housekeeper's room.

"Mrs. Martin," the girl remarked, "said you

was to come here, and warm and rest yourself in her big chair, comfortable, till she can come down and give you your tea, and tell you all about it, you know!" Therewith she bustled away.

Tell her all about it! So the mystery was to be at once explained. Meanwhile, Miss Lute-string warmed her toes, as directed, and looked about her. Mrs. Martin's room was a picture of neatness, ease, and comfort. It was even more. Everything seemed to glitter and smile. The very chairs—certain of which were of antique form—seemed to put out arms and legs in a jaunty and inviting manner; clocks ticked merrily, cats purred, and a cricket, though, for reasons of his own, remaining invisible, evidently considered it incumbent on him to do the honors of the apartment, and keep up the spirits of the new arrival, until the mistress should appear.

Ten minutes had elapsed, when a cheery voice roused Susan from her pleasant reverie.

"So here you are, my dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Martin, hurrying in, and speaking almost before she saw the visitor, with whom she shook hands cordially, giving her a kind, motherly kiss. Mrs. Martin was a plump, not to say portly dame of middle age. There was something pleasant and wholesome in the touch of the good woman's warm cheek and hand. It was noted of Mrs. Martin that her hands, preserving their warmth in the coldest winter's day, never increased it in the height of summer. Her circulation, like her genial temper, never varied.

One other peculiarity we may mention, namely, that she believed every other creature, being to be at times, nay, at frequent times, below par, and consequently in need of a "fillip." It might not be too much to say that Mrs. Martin conceived the entire universe to be indebted for continued existence to the periodical administration of the remedy just mentioned.

"And how are you, my dear? Nice and warm? I'd have been down before," she continued, "but I had to toss up a little something for master, poor gentleman, that only I knows how to make."

"Is Mr. Mountjoy ill?" asked Susan.

"Ill? Eh, no—quite charming," responded the housekeeper, cheerfully. "But he's had a long practice to-day. And, oh, how his poor arms must have ached. He wanted a fillip, so I—"

"What does he practice, ma'am?" inquired Susan.

"Fiddle," said Mrs. Martin, briefly. "I put off my tea, my dear," she went on quickly, "that you and I might have it cosy together. This'll be your sittin' room 'long o' me. Your bedroom's near missis's. I'll show it you while the kettle's billing."

Following her guide up the back staircase, Susan found herself in a broad corridor, running, to all appearance, almost the entire length of the house. It was hung with family pictures, showed groups of sculpture in recesses lined with crimson velvet, and was carpeted with some rich material, so soft and yielding that Susan felt as if her feet would never reach the ground.

"Missis's room adjoins Mr. Mountjoy's," Mrs. Martin continued, "and here," as they entered a small but pleasant chamber, "is yours. That's missis's bell in the corner. There's a dear and dumb walet, and you won't have much to do, my dear, unless missis's speerits should give way, sudden," concluded the good woman, with a sigh.

Susan noticed that her room was in front, and recognized the grim, forbidding walls of the assembly rooms, scowling at her from over the way.

"What is that building?" she inquired, with a sort of curiosity she would have found it difficult to explain to herself.

"Sembly and show rooms—Dwarfinoh's," was Mrs. Martin's reply. "They're dark and quiet just now, but they wakes up sometimes, I promise you."

"Dwarfinoh!" An odd name. Susan cast another glance through the window. That dreary, prison-like edifice seemed to exercise over her a gloomy fascination she could not in the least understand.

Very quickly the pair found themselves once more seated in Mrs. Martin's bright little room, enjoying their tea. Tea did I call it? With hot with poached eggs on delicate ham? With hot cakes? With even one of those mysterious "somebings," the true secret of whose composition was locked in Mrs. Martin's breast, and ultimately (so I am assured) died with her unrevealed?

Hungry as she was, Susan's anxious curiosity to learn something of the future object of her care, somewhat damped her appetite, thereby awakening Mrs. Martin's ever-ready sympathy. "You're below yourself, child, I see that," said the good lady, soothingly. "Tis leaving home, and all that. Bless your heart, you only want a fillip. Now just you put aside that cold slop, and take what I'm going to give you."

So speaking, Mrs. Martin singled out a little key, and, bustling to a cellaret that glistened in a sequestered nook of the apartment, instantly returned with a small glass, filled to the brim with some fluid resembling the purest molasses.

"Drink that."

Susan obeyed. It was—though not weak—delicious.

"There. I don't give that to every one, I promise you," remarked Mrs. Martin, carefully wiping and putting away the glass.