

A WILD PROXY.

BY MRS. W. K. CLIFFORD.

(Continued.)

She arrived in Paris quite early in the morning on her backward journey, and drove to the Grand Hotel. It did not feel like a strange place, for she had been there already with Merreday, but when she had gone up in the lift to her room on the seventh floor, she felt very much alone, indeed, as she remembered that she was in a big hotel and a foreign land. She threw herself down on the bed, determined to think things over. She had not been able to do so very clearly in the train. And then she would write to Lal. Heaven only knew where he was, but a letter would surely find him, even if it was delayed a little. A telegram would be no good, for she could not explain much in it, and she felt that the sight of one must be maddening to him. But in a letter she would tell him everything, and beg him to come. She would tell him—oh! if she had not cared for Frank; or if she could only get him out of her thoughts! But she would tell Lal all that was in her heart. She felt that if she concealed the least little thing she would never be able to go to church, and hear the seventh commandment read out again, or remember calmly that it was printed in excellent type in the middle of her prayer book. He should know everything, even though he divorced her for it, or killed her and married a black woman afterwards. Yes, she would tell him that fearful story of guilt love—but not in a letter. And then she fell asleep, like the worn-out little soul she was, and had a few hours' blessed forgetfulness.

She awoke with a start, stared at the blue-and-drab curtains of the bed with astonishment, and suddenly remembering where she was, sprang up, rang the bell, and ordered some coffee. She had not courage enough to walk into an eating-room by herself. Then she sat down to count her money, and found that she had forty pounds left of the sum her father had given her, in a neat little pocket-book, on her wedding day. These little preliminaries over, she ventured down to the reading room, in which she had awaited Frank a fortnight ago, and, retiring to the screened-off portion at the far end, sat down to pour out her heart and soul to her husband.

She explained it all as well as she could, but she felt as if she had done it tamely, though as she wrote she loved him more and more, and felt that if on getting it he sent her, as she begged, one little word by telegraph to say that he was coming, it would be greater joy than she could bear. At last the letter was dropped into the box, and she returned to the deserted writing corner again, but only to sit down on the sofa between the two big palms where so many people go for semi-secluded and distinctly platonic flirtation. She wished she could turn the world round a little faster till Lal and her letter met, and he hurried to the telegraph office to set her fears at rest. And while she was thinking this someone said in a tone of astonishment, 'Mrs. Halstead!' She looked up with a cry of fear. There stood Mrs. Percy Ives.

'My dear Mrs. Halstead, I should as soon have thought of seeing my own ghost.' Her attitude was doubtful; instinctively Helen felt it.

'Mr. Merreday is here, I suppose?' Mrs. Ives saw that Helen's eyes were swollen with crying. 'Let us go away and talk, dear,' she said, taking her hand: 'and don't be afraid of me. I have not gone through life picking up stones to throw at other women. Where is Frank?'

'I don't know,' Helen said, chokingly.

'The young demon can't have left her already,' Mrs. Ives thought. 'Come to my room,' she said, gently. 'Percy won't be back for an hour. You look as though you wanted a woman's comforting.'

Almost without knowing it, Helen found herself sitting on the sofa at the foot of Mrs. Ives' bed, relating her story. Her listener was breathless. She heard it to the end, and then suddenly rushed to the dressing-table and looked for her eau-de-Cologne; 'for if I hadn't,' she told her husband afterwards, 'I should have laughed out.'

'You poor little thing,' she said aloud. Helen was a good five foot six inches; but adjectives and their meaning so often go separate ways on a woman's tongue. 'That boy is a demon; but what a goose you were! How could you think your husband such an idiot? Why, my dear, a man who could treat his wife in that cool fashion would deserve to live at the North Pole, with only a bear to keep him company. I can't think how you could go on.'

'But I didn't know,' said Helen. 'I'd never been on a honeymoon before, and Frank was his cousin.'

'Bless you!' she laughed. 'If Mr. Halstead isn't an idiot, he'll love you all the more for your innocence. But a man don't usually send his cousin to do his honeymooning for him. In fact, this is the only case in which I ever heard of its being done by proxy.'

'Oh, don't laugh!'

'I won't; but it is absurd, dear; though, like many ridiculous things, it's not so funny as it sounds. It set everyone in London talking, and made Mr. Halstead look such a fool: it was a joke at every club in town when we came away. I don't wonder he bolted.'

'Bolted! Has he bolted?'

Yes, indeed. First of all, he searched all round Paris for you, put the

police on, I believe; that would account for your not being found and for the whole thing being in the papers. He came back, I hear—we have been away from the day after your wedding, so I only speak from hearsay—shut up his house, sold his horses, and went abroad for a couple of years.'

'A couple of years! Then he won't get my letter,' Helen exclaimed, in despair and consternation. 'Where has he gone?'

'To the Rocky Mountains, I should say; they appear to be the sentimental cemetery to which men hurry to bury their various woes. Depend upon it he will return in excellent spirits to inherit the benefit of his experiences. He will be quite surprised to find you awaiting him.'

'Mrs. Ives,' said Helen, standing up and walking across the room with her head erect, 'if Lal lives two years thinking I have run away with another man I'll never speak to him again; I'm angry with him now sometimes.'

'Quite right, dear, and you look splendid when you blaze.' Helen thought of Frank's remark two nights before. 'Remember, he is in a trying position; imagine a bride bolting on her wedding day!'

'I'll never see him again—that is the kindest thing I can do for him.'

'Nonsense. It must simply be set right. I shall make a point of going everywhere and saying it is all a mistake and a wicked story invented to prevent him from being returned at the next election. Of course, we must telegraph all over the earth for him now; and when he contemplates another honeymoon, I should say, he will take a policeman at his elbow, and another at his wife's.'

'I am beginning to feel that I can never see him again.'

Mrs. Ives looked at her curiously. Then she put her arms round Helen's neck and kissed her.

'Tell me something quite truly, dear,' she said gently, 'have you grown fond of Frank?'

The hot blood rushed to Helen's face. 'No,' she said, and her heart sank. Some lies are rejected by hell in return for the good resolutions it filches to make into paving-stones. 'But I don't think I can go back.'

'Then you'll have to go on the stage, it's the feminine equivalent for the Rocky Mountains; but the return journey takes longer, and is more difficult. What are you going to do immediately?'

'I shall go home to my father,' Helen said, doubtfully. 'I shall go to-day.'

'That is wise. Percy shall take you as far as Calais, and directly I am back—we are only going to stay here a week—I will go and see you.'

The next evening Helen found herself at Charing Cross. It was half-past seven when she arrived, and broad daylight. She was afraid to drive up to her father's house. She decided to sit quietly in the waiting-room for an hour till twilight came—men and women are under so many obligations to the twilight—then to take a cab to the corner of Hyde Park Gate, and walk quietly on to the house. She was afraid to arrive too ostentatiously, for she was uncertain of her reception. Her stepmother had always been kind, but she knew that she had strong opinions about many things, especially of morality and the attitude that those in authority of any sort should take up concerning it.

The servant who opened the door was dismayed. 'I mustn't let you in, ma'am,' he said firmly but respectfully. She looked up aghast.

'They are Mrs. Lambert's orders,' he said, coming forward and speaking in a low confidential voice. 'She came down and gave them directly after Mr. Lambert's death.' A little cry escaped her lips.

'After Mr. Lambert's death! Is my dear father dead, Williams?'

'Yes, ma'am; didn't you know? He died three days after you went off with—Mr. Merreday.'

Helen was too miserable and too proud to contradict anything.

'Which he never heard of,' Williams went on, as if divining her thoughts. 'Mr. Halstead kept it dark. For the first week none of us knew, not till it was in the papers,' he added.

'He didn't hear? You are sure my father didn't hear?'

'No, ma'am! Not a word.'

'Thank God!' she said, holding on to the railings for support.

'He was taken ill the night of the wedding, and went off quite quiet on the Saturday, the man went on. 'You was telegraphed for, but no answer was had, and then Mrs. Lambert come down when it was in the papers, and told us all if you come we was not to let you in, and to say that the door was closed against you on account of what—you had done, ma'am.' He said the last words as if they were a painful duty.

'But it's all a mistake, Williams.'

'I'm glad to hear that, ma'am,' he said, rather incredulously; 'but I couldn't let you in without orders; and Mrs. Lambert is away now; they all went out of town directly after the funeral. Shall I call a cab or anything for you, ma'am?' he asked civilly.

'No thank you,' she answered, and slowly walked away. She went a few yards along the main road; then, fearing lest she should be seen by anyone who knew her, and with a desperate longing to be still, she slipped through the as yet open gate of Kensington Gardens, and hurried towards the trees. She found a seat beneath them, and crouched down, stunned by the news she had just heard. It occurred to her in a dreamy way that perhaps by an accident she might be shut in, and then she could stay there all night. That was what she would best like to do—four walls and ceiling would suffocate her. She wanted to cry her life out. She wanted to grieve for her father, to realise that she would never, never see him more, and to think of her husband though her heart was growing cold towards him; and, right or wrong, Frank Merreday would come into her thoughts,

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