

CHARLIE STUART AND HIS SISTER.

BY MRS. MAY AGNES FLEMING.

PART II.

CHAPTER XXII.

She hurried upstairs and disappeared. Neither of the two spoke. Lady Helena's face was still hidden. She knew that she was crying—sighing, miserable tears—tears that were for him. Her good pale, composed, expectant—waiting for the end—

"Come up," Miss Catheron's soft voice at the head of the stairs called. Once more he gave his arm, once more in silence they went in together. A breathless hush seemed to lie upon the house and all within it. Not a sound was to be heard except the soft rustle of the trees, the soft, ceaseless pattering of the summer rain. In that silence they entered the chamber where the dying man lay. To the hour of his own death, that moment and all he saw was photographed indelibly upon Sir Victor Catheron's mind. The dim gray light of the room, the great white bed in the centre, and the awfully corpse-like face of the man lying among the pillows, and gazing at him with hollow, spectral eyes. His father—at last!

He advanced to the bedside as though under a spell. The spectral blue eyes were fixed upon him steadfastly, the pallid lips slowly opened and spoke. "Like me—as I was—like me. Ethel's son."

"My father." He was on his knees—a great awe upon him. It was the first time in his young life he had ever been in the presence of death. And the dying was his father, and his father whom he had never seen before.

"Like me," the faint lips repeated; "my face, my height, my name, my age." Like me. O God! will his end be like mine? A thrill of horror ran through all his hearers. His son strove to take his hand; it was withdrawn. Arown wrinkled the pallid brow.

"Wait," he said plaintively; "don't touch me; don't speak to me. Wait. Sit down; don't kneel to me. You don't know what you are about to hear. Inez, tell him now."

She closed the door—still with that changeless face—and looked it. It seemed as though, having suffered so much, nothing had power to move her outwardly now. She placed a chair for Lady Helena away from the bed—Lady Helena, who had stood aloof and not spoken to the dying man yet. She placed a chair for Sir Victor, and motioned him to seat himself, then drew another close to the bedside, stooped, and kissed the dying man. Then in a voice that never faltered, never failed, she began the story she had to tell.

place, was to be Kensal Green, not the Catheron vaults; that the secret of his life and death was still to be kept inviolate, and that (in this part of the note he grew impassioned, earnest) their marriage was not to be postponed. On the third of October, as all had been arranged it was still to take place. No other note followed. If Miss Darrell had been in love with her future husband, this profound silence must have wounded, surprised, grieved her. But she was not in love. He must be very much occupied, she carelessly thought, since he could not find time to drop her a daily bulletin—then dismissed the matter indifferently from her mind.

Late in the evening of the sixth day Sir Victor and Lady Helena returned home. Edith stood alone awaiting them, dressed in black silk, and with soft white lace and ruby ornaments, and looking very hard some.

Her lover rushed in and caught her in his arms with a sort of rapturous, breathless delight. "My love! my life!" he cried, "every hour has been an agony since I said good-bye!"

She drew herself from him. Sir Victor in the calm, courteous character of a perfectly unemotional suitor, she tolerated. Sir Victor in the role of Romeo was excessively distasteful to her. She drew herself out of his arms coldly and decisively.

"I am glad to see you back Sir Victor." But the stereotyped words of welcome fell chill on his ears. "You are not looking well. I am afraid you have been very much harassed since you left."

Surely he was not looking well. In those six days he had grown more than six years older. He had lost flesh and color; there was an indescribable something in his face and expression she had never seen before. More had happened than the death of the father he had never known, to alter him like this. She looked at him curiously. Would he tell her?

He did not. Not looking at her, with his eyes fixed moodily on the wood fire smouldering on the hearth, he repeated what his letter had already said. His father had died the morning of their arrival in London; they had buried him quietly and unobtrusively, by his request, in Kensal Green Cemetery; no one was to be told, and the wedding was not to be postponed. All this he said as a man repeats a lesson learned by rote—his eyes never once meeting hers.

She stood silently by, looking at him, listening to him. Something lay behind, then, that she was not to know. Well, it made them quits—she didn't care for the Catheron family secrets; if it were something unpleasant, as well not know. If Sir Victor told her, very well; if not, very well also. She cared little either way.

"Miss Catheron remains at St. John's Wood, I suppose?" she inquired indifferently, feeling in the pause that ensued she must say something.

"She remains—yes—with her two old servants for the present. I believe her ultimate intention is to go abroad."

"She will not return to Cheshire?"

A spasm of pain crossed his face; there was a momentary contraction of the muscles of his mouth.

o'clock; the place, Chesholm church. The bridesmaids would arrive at ten—the Earl of Wroamore, the father of the Ladies Gwendoline and Laura Drexel, was to give the bride away. They would return to Powys-place and eat the sumptuous breakfast—then off and away to the pretty town in North Wales. That was the programme. "When to-morrow comes," Edith thinks, "as she wanders about the house "will it be carried out?"

It occurred that on the bridal eve Miss Darrell was attacked with headache and sore throat. She had lingered heedlessly out in the rain the day before (one of her old habits to escape from Sir Victor, if the truth must be told), and paid the natural penalty on one's wedding-day, so Lady Helena insisted on a wet napkin round the throat, a warm bath, gruel, and early to bed. Willingly enough the girl obeyed—too glad to have this last evening alone. Immediately after dinner she bade her adieu to her bridegroom-elect, and went away to her own room.

The short October day had long ago darkened down, the curtains were drawn, a fire burned, the candles were lit. She took the bath, the gruel, and the wet napkin, and let herself be tucked up in bed.

"Romantic," she thought, with a laugh at herself, "for a bride."

Lady Helena—was it a presentiment of what was so near?—lingered by her side long that evening, and, at parting, for the first time took her in her arms and kissed her.

"Good-night, my child," the tender, tremulous tones said. "I pray you may make him happy—I pray that he may make you."

She lingered yet a little longer—her heart seemed dull, her eyes were shining through tears. Words seemed trembling on her lips—words she had not courage to say. For Edith, surprised and moved, she put her arms round the kind old neck, and hid her face for a moment on the genial old bosom.

"I will try," she whispered, "dear, kind Lady Helena—indeed I will try to be a good and faithful wife."

One last kiss, then they parted; the door closed behind her, and Edith was alone.

She lay as usual, high up among the billowy pillows, her hands clasped above her head, her dark, dreaming eyes fixed on the fire. She looked as though she were thinking, but she was not. Her mind was simply a blank. She was vaguely and idly watching the flickering shadows cast by the firelight on the wall, the gleam of yellow moonlight shimmering through the curtains; listening to the faint sighing of the night wind, the ticking of the little fanciful clock, to the pretty plaintive tunes it played before it struck the hour. Nine, ten, eleven—she heard them all, as she lay there, broad awake, neither thinking nor stirring.

Her maid came in for her last orders; she bade the girl good-night, and told her to go to bed—she wanted nothing more. Then again she was alone. But now a restlessness, as little to be understood as her former listless apathy, took hold of her. She could not lie there and sleep; she could not lie there awake. As the clock chimed twelve, she started up in bed in a sudden panic. Twelve! A new day—her wedding-day!

Impossible to lie there quiet any longer. She sprang up, locked her door, and began, in her long, white night-gown, pacing up and down. So another hour passed. One! One from the little Swiss musical clock; one, solemn and sombre, from the big clock up in the tower. Then she stopped—stopped in thought; then she walked to one of her boxes, and took out a writing-case, always kept locked. With a key attached to her neck she opened it, seated herself before a table, and drew forth a package of letters and a picture. The picture was the handsome photograph of Charlie Stuart; the letters, the letters he had written her to Sandy-pit.

sun, certainly looked much more like it than the quiet bride. She was pale, nervous, agitated beyond anything the girl had ever seen.

"How had Edith slept? How was her cold? How did she feel?"

"Never better," Miss Darrell responded smilingly. "The sore throat and headache are quite gone, and I am ready to do justice to the nice breakfast which I see Emily has brought."

She sat down to it—chocolate, rolls, an omelette and a savory little bird, with excellent and unromantic appetite. The service was cleared away, and the real business of the day began. She was under the hands of her maid, deep in the mysteries of the wedding toilette.

At ten came the bridesmaid, a brilliant berry, in sweeping trains, walking visions of silk, tulle, lace, perfume, and flowers. At half-past ten Miss Darrell, "queen rose of the rose-bud garden of girls," stood in their midst ready for the altar.

She looked beautiful. It is an understood thing that all brides, whatever their appearance on the ordinary occasions of life, look beautiful on this day of days. Edith Darrell had never looked so stately, so queenly, so handsome in her life. Just a thought pale, not not unbecomingly so—the rich, glistening white silk sweeping far behind her, set off well the fine figure, which fitted without flaw. The dark, proud face shone like a star from the misty folds of the bridal veil; the legendary orange blossoms crowned the rich, dark hair; on neck, ears, and arms glistened a priceless parure of pearls, the gift, like the dress and veil, of Lady Helena.

A fragrant bouquet of spotless white had been sent up by the bridegroom. At a quarter to eleven she entered the carriage and was driven to the church.

As she lay back, and looked dreamily out, the mellow October sunshine lighting the scene, the joy-bells clashing, the listless apathy of the past few days took her again. She took note of the trifles about her—her maid rejected all else. How yellow were the fields of stubble—how picturesque, gilded in the sunshine, the village of Chesholm looked. How glowing and rosy the faces of the people who looked in their gaily best to gaze at the bridal pageant. Was it health and happiness, or was it water only? wondered the bride. These were her wandering thoughts—these alone.

They reached the little church. All the way from the carriage to the stone porch the charity children strove her path with flowers, and sang (out of tune) a bridal anthem. She smiled down upon their vulgar, admiring little faces as she went by on the Earl of Wroamore's arm. The church was filled. Was seeing her married worth all this trouble to these good people, she wondered, as she walked up the aisle, still on the arm of the Right Honorable the Earl of Wroamore.

There was of course, a large throng of invited guests. Lady Helena was there in pale, flowing silks, the bridesmaids, a billowy crowd of white-plumaged birds, and the bridegroom, with a face whiter than the white waistcoat, standing waiting for his bride. And there, in surprise, book in hand, stood the rector of Chesholm and his curate, ready to tie the untieable knot.

A low, hushed murmur ran through the church at sight of the silver-shining figure of the bride. How handsome, how stately, how perfectly self-possessed and calm. Truly, if beauty and high-bred repose of manner be any palliation of low birth and obscurity, this American young lady had it.

An instant passes—she is kneeling by Sir Victor Catheron's side. "Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?" says the urbane tones of the rector of Chesholm, and the Right Honorable the Earl of Wroamore gives her away. "If any one here present knows any just cause or impediment why this man should not be married to this woman, I charge him, etc.; but no one knows. The solemn words go on. "Will thou take Edith Darrell to be thy wedded wife?" "I will," Sir Victor Catheron responds, but in broken, inarticulate tones. It is the bride's turn. "I will!" The clear, firm voice is perfectly audible in the almost painfully intense stillness. The ring slips over her finger; she watches it curiously. "I pronounce ye man and wife," says the rector. "What God hath joined together, let no man put asunder."

landscape, steeped in the amber glitter of the October afternoon sun.

—She looks across at the man she has married—did ever mortal man before on his wedding-day wear such a stony face as that? And yet he has married her for love—for love alone. Was ever another bridal journey performed like this—in profound gravity and silence on both sides—she wonders, half inclined to laugh. She looks down at her shining wedding ring—is it a circlet that means nothing? How is her life to go on after this gruesome wedding day?

They reach Wales. The sun is setting redly over mountains and sea. The carriage is awaiting them; she enters, and lies back wearily with closed eyes. She is dead tired and depressed; she is beginning to feel the want of last night's sleep, and in a weary way glad when the Carnarvon cottage is reached. Sir Victor's man, my lady's maid, and two Welsh servants came forth to meet them; and on Sir Victor's arm she enters the house.

She goes at once to her dressing-room, to rest, to bathe her face, and remove her wraps, performing those duties herself, and disengaging her maid. As she and Sir Victor separate, he mutters some half-incoherent words—he will take a walk and smoke a cigar before dinner, while she is resting. He is gone even while he says it, and she is alone.

She removes her gloves, hat, and jacket bathes her face, and descends to the little cottage drawing-room. It is quite deserted—sleepy silence everywhere reigns. She throws herself into an easy-chair beside the open window, and looks listlessly out. Ruby, and purple, and golden, the sun is setting in a radiant sky—the yellow sea creeps up on silver sands—old Carnarvon Castle gleams and glows in the rainbow light, like a fairy palace. It is unutterably beautiful, unutterably dreary and dull. And, while she thinks it, her heavy eyelids waver and fall, her head sinks back, and Edith falls fast asleep.

Fast asleep; and a mile away, Sir Victor Catheron paces up and down a strip of tawny sand the sea lapping softly at his feet, the birds singing in the branches, not a human soul far or near.

He is not smoking that before-dinner cigar—he is striding up and down more like an escaped Badlamite than anything else. His hat is drawn over his eyes, his brows are knit, his lips set tight, his hands are clenched. Presently he pauses, leans against a tree, and looks, with eyes full of some haggard horrible despair, out over the red light on sea and sky. And, as he looks, he falls down suddenly, as though some inspiration had seized him, upon his knees, and lifts his clasped hands to that radiant sky. A prayer, that seems frenzied in its agonized intensity, bursts from his lips—the sleeping sea, the twittering birds, the rustling leaves, and he who made them, alone are to hear. Then he falls forward on his face, and lies like a stone.

Is he mad? Surely no sane man ever acted, or looked, or spoke like this. He lies so—prostrate, motionless—for upward of an hour, then slowly and heavily he rises. His face is calmer now; it is the face of a man who has fought some desperate fight, and gained some desperate victory—one of those victories more cruel than death.

He turns and goes hence. He crushes through the tall, dewy grass, his white face set in a look of iron resolution. He is ghastrly beyond all feeling; dead and in his coffin he will hardly look more dead-like. He reaches the cottage, and the first sight upon which his eyes rest is his bride peacefully asleep in the chair by the still open window. She looks lovely in her slumber, and peaceful as a little child—no very terrible sight surely. But as his eyes fall upon her, he recalls in some great horror, as a man may who has received a blinding blow.

"Asleep," his pale lips whisper; "asleep—so she was!"

He stands spell-bound for a moment—then he breaks away headlong. He makes his way to the dining-room. The table, all bright with damask, silver, crystal and cut flowers, stands spread for dinner. He takes from his pocket a note-book and pencil, and still standing, writes rapidly down one page. Without reading, he folds and seals the sheet, and slowly and with dragging steps returns to the room where Edith sleeps. On the threshold he lingers—he seems afraid—afraid to approach. But he does approach at last. He places the note he has written on a table, he draws near his sleeping bride, he kneels down and kisses her hands, her dress, her hair. His haggard eyes burn on her face, their mesmeric light disturbs her. She murmurs and moves restlessly in her sleep. In an instant he is on his feet; in another, he is out of the room and the house; the deepening twilight takes him, and he is gone.

A train an hour later passes through Carnarvon on its way to London. One passenger alone awaits it at the station—one passenger who enters an empty first-class compartment and disappears. Then it goes shrieking on its way, bearing with it to London the bridegroom, Sir Victor Catheron.

"Sir Victor, my lady—I thought Sir Victor was here, my lady."

"Sir Victor has not been here since half an hour after our arrival. He went out for a walk; as you very well know. I ask you if he has returned."

"Sir Victor returned more than an hour ago, my lady. I saw him myself. You were asleep, my lady, at the window as he came up. He went into the dining-room and wrote a letter; I saw it in his hand. And then, my lady, he came in here."

"The man paused, and again peered around the room. Edith listened in growing surprise.

"I thought he was here still, my lady, so did Hemi, or we would have taken the liberty of entering and closing the window. We were sure he was here. He certainly entered with the letter in his hand. It's odd."

"Again there was a pause. Again Mr. Jamieson—

"If your ladyship will hallow, I will light the candles here, and then go and ascertain whether Sir Victor is in any of the other rooms."

She made an affirmative gesture, and returned to the window. The man lit the candles; a second after, an exclamation started her.

"The note, my lady! Here it is."

It lay upon the table; she walked over and took it up. In Sir Victor's hand, and addressed to herself! What did this mean? She stood looking at it a moment—then she turned to Jamieson.

"That will do," she said, briefly; "if I want you I will ring."

The man bowed and left the room. She stood still, holding the unopened note, strangely reluctant to break the seal. What did Sir Victor mean by absconding himself and writing her a note? With an effort she unlocked herself at last, and tore it open. It was strangely scrawled, the writing half illegible; slowly and with difficulty she made it out. This was what she read—

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