

In less than a fortnight more, the task of restoring the letter was completed. Excepting certain instances, in which the morsels of the torn paper had been irretrievably lost—and in which it had been necessary to complete the sense, in harmony with the writer's intention—the whole letter had been put together; and the promised copy of it was forwarded to me in Paris.

Before you, too, read that dreadful letter, do me one favour. Let me briefly remind you of the circumstances under which Eustace Macalan married his first wife.

Remember that the poor creature fell in love with him, without awakening any corresponding affection on his side. Remember that he separated himself from her, and did all he could to avoid her, when he found this out. Remember that she presented herself at his residence in London without a word of warning; that he did his best to save her reputation; that he failed, through no fault of his own; and that he ended, rashly ended in a moment of despair, by marrying her, to silence the scandal that must otherwise have blighted her life as a woman for the rest of her days. Bear all this in mind (it is the sworn testimony of respectable witnesses) and pray do not forget—however foolishly and blameably he may have written about her in the secret pages of his Diary—that he was proved to have done his best to conceal from his wife the aversion which the poor soul inspired in him; and that he was, in the opinion of those who could best judge him, at least a courteous and a considerate husband, if he could be no more.

And now take the letter. It asks but one favour of you: it asks to be read by the light of Christ's teaching:—"Judge not, that ye be not judged."

CHAPTER XLVII. THE WIFE'S CONFESSION.

Gleninch, October 19, 18—

MY HUSBAND:—

"I HAVE something very painful to tell you, about one of your oldest friends.

"You have never encouraged me to come to you with any confidences of mine. If you had allowed me to be as familiar with you as some wives are with their husbands, I should have spoken to you personally, instead of writing. As it is, I don't know how you might receive what I have to say to you, if I said it by word of mouth. So I write.

"The man against whom I warn you is still a guest in this house—Miserrimus Dexter. No falser or wickeder creature walks the earth. Don't throw my letter aside! I have waited to say this until I could find proof that might satisfy you. I have got the proof.

"You may remember that I ventured to express some disapproval, when you first told me you had asked this man to visit us. If you had allowed me time to explain myself, I might have been bold enough to give you a good reason for the aversion I felt towards your friend. But you would not wait. You hastily, and most unjustly, accused me of feeling prejudiced against the miserable creature on account of his deformity. No other feeling than compassion for deformed persons has ever entered my mind. I have indeed almost a fellow-feeling for them; being that next worst thing myself to a deformity—a plain woman. I objected to Mr. Dexter as your guest, because he had asked me to be his wife in past days, and because I had reason to fear that he still regarded me, after my marriage, with a guilty and horrible love. Was it not my duty, as a good wife, to object to his being your guest at Gleninch? And was it not your duty, as a good husband, to encourage me to say more?

"Well! Mr. Dexter has been your guest for many weeks; and Mr. Dexter has dared to speak to me again of his love. He has insulted me, and insulted you, by declaring that he adores me, and that you hate me. He has promised me a life of unalloyed happiness, in a foreign country with my lover. And he has prophesied for me a life of unendurable misery, at home with my husband.

"Why did I not make my complaint to you, and have this monster dismissed from the house at once and for ever?

"Are you sure you would have believed me, if I had complained, and if your bosom friend had denied all intention of insulting me? I heard you once say, when you were not aware that I was within hearing, that the vainest women were always the ugliest women. You might have accused me of vanity. Who knows?

"But I have no desire to shelter myself under this excuse. I am a jealous unhappy creature; always doubtful of your affection for me; always fearing that another woman has got my place in your heart. Miserrimus Dexter has practised on this weakness of mine. He has declared he can prove to me, if I will permit him, that I am, in your secret heart, an object of loathing to you; that you shrink from touching me; that you curse the hour when you were foolish enough to make me your wife. For two nights and days I struggled against the temptation to let him produce his proofs. It was a terrible temptation, to a woman who was far from feeling sure of the sincerity of your affection for her; and it ended in the getting the better of my resistance. I wickedly concealed the disgust which the wretch inspired in me; I wickedly gave him leave to explain himself; I wickedly permitted this enemy of yours and of mine to take me into his confidence. And why? Because I loved you and you only; and because Miserrimus Dexter's proposal did, after all, echo a doubt of you that had long been gnawing secretly at my heart.

"Forgive me, Eustace! This is my first sin against you. It shall be my last.

"I will not spare myself; I will write a full confession of what I said to him and of what he said to me. You may make me suffer for it,

when you know what I have done; but you will at least be warned in time; you will see your false friend in his true light.

"I said to him, 'How can you prove to me that my husband hates me in secret?'

"He answered, 'I can prove it, under his own handwriting; you shall see it in his Diary.'

"I said, 'His Diary has a lock; and the drawer in which he keeps it has a lock. How can you get at the Diary and the drawer?'

"He answered, 'I have my own way of getting at both of them, without the slightest risk of being discovered by your husband. All you have to do is to give me the opportunity of seeing you privately. I will engage, in return, to bring the open Diary with me to your room.'

"I said, 'How can I give the opportunity? What do you mean?'

"He pointed to the key, in the door of communication between my room and the little study.

"He said, 'With my infirmity, I may not be able to profit by the first opportunity of visiting you here, unobserved: I must be able to choose my own time and my own way of getting to you secretly. Let me take this key; leaving the door locked. When the key is missed, if you say it doesn't matter—if you point out that the door is locked, and tell the servants not to trouble themselves about finding the key—there will be no disturbance in the house; and I shall be in secure possession of a means of communication with you which no one will suspect. Will you do this?'

"I have done it.

"Yes! I have become the accomplice of this doubled-faced villain. I have degraded myself, and outraged you, by making an appointment to pry into your Diary. I know how base my conduct is. I can make no excuse. I can only repeat that I love you, and that I am sorely afraid you don't love me. And Miserrimus Dexter offers to end my doubts by showing me the most secret thoughts of your heart, in your own writing.

"He is to be with me, for this purpose, while you are out, some time in the course of the next two hours. I shall decline to be satisfied with only once looking at your Diary; and I shall make an appointment with him to bring it to me again, at the same time to-morrow. Before then, you will receive these lines, by the hand of my nurse. Go out as usual, after reading them. But return privately, and unlock the table drawer in which you keep your book.

(To be continued.)

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