

THE GUARDED SECRET

CHAPTER XLIV.

Again a disappointed and baffled expression crossed Mr. Rodney's face. He was cruelly tortured by this dreadful secret, that lay, like a great ink blot, on the fair fame of his beautiful, beloved daughter.

"Aline, did you know that it was wrong for you to take such an oath?" he inquired.

A piteous look came over the sweet, pale face.

"It was hard for me to do so, but I did not know that it was wrong," she replied.

"I was perfectly ignorant, papa, of the dreadful consequences that would follow upon my silence."

"I wish to heaven that you had never suffered anyone to bind you to such a promise," he cried.

"But, papa, I mean, I could never have come home unless I had taken the solemn vow asked of me. At first I refused, I was determined to resist all attempts to compel me."

When I found that I would never be permitted to come back unless I gave way, I yielded. I was so homesick and wretched, papa, that I could not hold out."

He crossed the room to her and took one of the cold, nervous hands in his.

"Aline, forgive me for asking you so hard a question," he said, "for sometimes I am tempted to believe in your innocence still, in spite of all the circumstantial evidence to the contrary. My daughter, will you swear that you are as innocent and pure as when you left your home that dreadful day?"

She lifted her white hand to heaven and looked at him fearlessly with her bright, clear gaze.

"Yes, papa, I swear before heaven that I am as pure as when I went away," she replied.

Then there was silence for a moment. Mrs. Rodney had fallen down upon the bed, weeping bitterly but quietly.

Mr. Rodney walked over to the window, and stood looking out again at the gloomy outlines of his neighbor's house. It had acquired a strange fascination for him since he had learned that his daughter had been hidden there so long.

"I wonder," he broke out abruptly, "what I have ever done to Oran Delaney that he should have done this thing to me?"

Aline had sunk wearily into her chair again. She looked around at him now earnestly.

"Papa, I am sure you have done nothing," she said. "There are reasons relating to himself that compel him to wish the story of my presence in his house unknown."

"One thing I must know, Aline. This man who has so cruelly lighted all your prospects in life, does he love you?"

"No, papa," she replied, with something like wonder at the question.

"Yet yesterday he risked his life to save yours?"

"I think he meant that in some sort as a reparation," she said timidly.

"Then it was he that sent you the ten thousand dollars?" interrogated her father quickly.

"It was he," she replied.

"Then you were right not to accept it," he exclaimed. "Oran Delaney must make you a greater reparation than that for the ill you have sustained at his hands."

"He will not reveal the secret—we need not hope for it," Aline said, despondently.

"A thousand revealed secrets could not clear the stain from your name, my poor child," he answered. "You are irretrievably compromised by your stay in his house. There is but one atonement he can make you, and I, as the guardian of your honor, shall force him to that if it be at the point of the sword."

"Would you murder Mr. Delaney?" she exclaimed, in horror.

"I will meet him on the field of honor and fight him until one or both of us are dead," Mr. Rodney answered, so resolutely that Aline shuddered. A vision of the scene he threatened rushed over his mind. Oh, what a terrible price she was paying for the willful folly of that summer day long past!

"Papa, you said there was one atonement he could make," she said. "Will you tell me what you meant?"

"He must make you his wife, Aline. He must give you the shelter of his proud honorable name to wash away the stain he has cast upon you. In no other way can he make atonement for his fault," Mr. Rodney exclaimed.

CHAPTER XLV.

Mr. Rodney's firm and decisive declaration had the effect of frightening his fair young daughter. She looked at him piteously.

"But, papa, I do not want to be married," she exclaimed with such a childish air of dismay and surprise that he could have laughed if he had

not been so miserable. "I do not want to be married, I should not like to be married," Aline repeated, forlornly.

"But, my dear, all women marry," said her father.

"Not all," replied she. "I know several who did not. There are Miss Palmer, Miss Brown, Miss Robinson."

"Cross old maids, all of them," Mr. Rodney replied. "I hope you will never be an old maid, Aline. Indeed, you must not think of such a thing. You will have to marry, and the man you marry must be Oran Delaney."

"I dare say he will not want to be married any more than I do," said Aline, with unconscious hopefulness.

A certain hard and grim expression came over Mr. Rodney's handsome face.

"He will not have much choice in the matter," he replied.

"Oh, papa," the young girl cried, and a deep color rose up all over her face.

"Well?" he said.

"Would you give me to one who took me unwillingly?" she asked in a tone of blended shame and reproach.

He was silent a moment, and his brows knitted themselves together in a straight line. Aline, gazing wistfully at him, saw that gray hairs had come into his brown locks that were not there a few months ago.

Her heart thrilled with pain and remorse.

"Aline, I do not know how to answer you," he said. "God knows that I do not wish to force you upon any man. But your good name is in his hands. I must see Mr. Delaney, quick. Go and ask him to give me an interview."

He could only stare at her in blank astonishment.

"I was so surprised and frightened, sir, that I did not speak one word to her, but just left her standing there shivering in the middle of the room, and came away to do her bidding. Now, what answer shall I take back?"

Will you see her, Mr. Delaney?" He hesitated a moment, and Mrs. Griffin added respectfully:

"If he refuses," she echoed, faintly.

"Then I will kill him, or he shall kill me," he replied, bitterly.

Aline sat gazing at him like one stunned. All the horror of her position rushed over her.

Was there indeed no other way out of the labyrinth of error in which she was involved than by this dreadful, forced marriage?

All the native pride within her rose up in arms against it. Could she give herself up to be an unwilling bride, forced upon an unwilling bridegroom?

She shrank sensitively from the thought. Better be dead, she thought.

She looked at her father and said, with lips:

"Papa, I wish that Mr. Delaney had not saved me yesterday. I should then have been spared all this trouble and distress. My poor life is only a sorrowful disgrace to you all."

Mr. Rodney did not answer. Perhaps his troubled thoughts ran in the same channel.

Aline waited a moment for him to speak, but as he remained silent and abstracted, she asked timidly:

"Papa, will you not tell me how you became possessed of my secret?"

"What good can it do you to know?" he inquired.

"None that I can think of," she replied, wearily. "It was only my natural curiosity that prompted me to ask the question."

"At some other time, Aline, I will tell you," said her father. "I would prefer not to do so at present."

And after a moment's hesitation he abruptly left the room. Aline remained sitting wearily in her chair, gazing into the leaping flames of the bright coal fire with sad blue eyes that could scarcely see for the thick mist of tears that filled them. Her heart ached drearily in her breast. Something like despair thrilled through her as she sat up there with her small hands folded on her lap.

"It were better if I had died yesterday—aye, it were better if I had never been born," she murmured to herself with a sudden passionate bitterness.

CHAPTER XLVI.

While Aline sat gazing dreamily into the fire, the winter eve, the gray, taciturn master of Delaney House lay languidly on a silken couch in his quiet library.

The dark, handsome face had a worn and weary expression. It was pale, too, and the dark eyes were dim and heavy. His head rested wearily on a crimson satin cushion, and one hand was pressed against his brow, as if in pain.

There was a light tap at the door, and then Mrs. Griffin entered and replenished the fire that had commenced to burn low behind the steel bars of the grate. Then she stood looking at him anxiously a moment.

"Your head aches?" she asked, questioningly.

"Slightly," he replied, indifferently.

"Can I do nothing for you?" the old woman questioned, kindly.

"No; it does not matter. The pain will wear itself out by and by."

She looked at him wistfully a moment, then went out quietly, leaving him to silence and repose again.

The fire crackled merrily in the grate, the clock ticked softly on the marble mantel. Outside, the noiseless flakes of snow fell lightly against the window-pane. Gradually the twilight began to fall, and shadows gathered in the room.

Mr. Delaney lay very still and quiet, with half-closed eyes shaded by his hand, his fine features grave even to sadness. In the gathering obscurity a heavy sigh drifted over his lips.

Mrs. Griffin came back, lighted the library lamp, then paused and regarded him with a strange expression.

He removed his hand and looked at her with his heavy eyes.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Oh, Mr. Delaney, there's some one to see you!" she exclaimed.

He started up, all his gravity and calmness stirred by angry displeasure.

"Some one to see me? Have you forgotten my order to admit no one?" he exclaimed.

"No, sir, I have not forgotten," she answered. "But she did not knock. She came slipping in so softly, like a ghost, that I was frightened."

"She? Whom?" he exclaimed, hoarsely.

"Miss Rodney, sir."

"Miss Rodney—Aline—here in this house? My God!" he cried, abruptly.

"Yes, sir, down in the kitchen, waiting to see you," said Mrs. Griffin.

"You see, I forgot to lock the door, and just at dark the knob turned soft like, and she came gliding in, still as a ghost, and pale as one, too, sir. And she says to me weak and nervous-like, 'I must see Mr. Delaney, quick. Go and ask him to give me an interview.'"

He could only stare at her in blank astonishment.

"I was so surprised and frightened, sir, that I did not speak one word to her, but just left her standing there shivering in the middle of the room, and came away to do her bidding. Now, what answer shall I take back?"

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CHAPTER XLVII.

If the solid earth had parted beneath Oran Delaney's feet, he could not have been more surprised than he was at those words from Aline Rodney's lips. He did not answer, only stared at her in hopeless bewilderment.

"I must see Mr. Delaney, quick. Go and ask him to give me an interview," she repeated, clearly, thinking he had not heard her, and no blush stained the pale cheek, the white lids did not drop over the blue eyes that gazed at him frankly and gravely. What did she mean? Had she gone mad under the stress of her great trial?

He went over to her and lifted one of the white hands that hung by her side. It was cold as ice as he held it in the warm clasp of his own.

"Aline, child, I do not understand you. What was it you said to me?"

He saw a little shiver creep over the slender form, but she looked up at him bravely, and repeated her words:

"I want you to marry me, Mr. Delaney."

"To marry you, Aline? Do you then love me, my poor child?" he asked, gazing into the clear eyes with sudden compassion.

She shook her small head gravely.

"No, but I want to be your wife," she said, and the words filled him with the most utter bewilderment.

There she stood, a young, beautiful, intelligent girl, usurping his sex's prerogative with a calm, unblushing face and clear, frank eyes that regarded him with the innocent light of a child—the calmness of an unawakened heart.

"You do not love me, yet you wish to be my wife? Aline, are you dreaming or am I?" he asked, drawing her forward into the warmth of the bright fire, for little shivers of deadly cold were shaking the girl's form from head to foot.

He saw a sudden, passionate pain flame into the pale face. She threw out her hand with a gesture of despair.

"No, I am not dreaming, nor are you," she said. "I would to God that we were! This reality is more horrible than any dream!"

"But, why—why should you wish—to—?" he began, and paused, unable to continue, and feeling a shamed consciousness of a fiery, uncontrollable color overspreading his face.

To be wooed in this calm, business-like fashion by this ridiculous child was so strange, too absurd for anything, and yet there were little thrills of rapturous emotion tingling along his nerves, his heart was beating quickly with emotion.

The girl's eyes had wandered to the leaping flames of the bright fire. She turned them back gravely to his face.

"Why do I wish you to marry me?" she said. "I will tell you, Mr. Delaney. The secret of my stay in this house has been discovered!"

"You have broken your oath!" he exclaimed in sudden anger.

She stood before him in proud silence, neither denying nor assenting to his affirmation.

Gazing at the fair face a moment he felt that he had wronged her by his brief suspicion.

"Aline, forgive me. I see that I am suspecting you unjustly," he said.

But tell me, who has revealed the secret?"

"I do not know," she answered.

"But only a little while ago papa came in and charged me with it. He was very, very angry."

"Angry with you?" he questioned.

"Angry with you," she answered, a faint color creeping into the pallid face. "He told me that you had forever compromised my good name, and that I could never take my place in the world, in society, unless you married me."

She was speaking to him with the simple directness of a child. He was staggered by her simplicity—assurance he would have called it in any other woman.

"And so he sent you here to ask me?" he said.

A look of terror came over the fair face. She glanced around her fearfully.

"No, I have stolen away, and if he misses me he will come here to seek for me," she said. "I must hurry back, but first I must have an answer to my question. Tell me, Mr. Delaney, will you do as I have asked you?"

To be continued.

A PROBLEM FOR THE EDITOR.

It has been asked whether stepping on a man's corns gives provocation for swearing. ANSWER.—Keep the corns clear of corns by using Putnam's Corn Extractor.

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