

LITERARY.

me be your cavalier for the last time, Hester.

The concert was a splendid one, and I achieved quite a triumph, but was astonished at being frequently addressed as Mrs. Lee by the various loungers in the waiting-room.

In the morning at breakfast I read in the paper—'We understand that the fair lady who charmed us much last night is the young bride of our eminent tenor, Mr. Alfred Lee and that she intends following her husband's profession.'

The paper fell from my hand. What could it mean? I was still in the midst of my astonishment, when he entered.

'You must choose now, Hester,' he said, hurriedly.

'Have you done this?' I asked, showing him the paper.

What object could I have in telling a lie?' he said. You must make it truth.'

'Never!' I exclaimed.

You shall!' he said in a low hissing whisper. 'Either give me your promise now at once, or to-morrow the world in which you shine shall withdraw its countenance from you.'

What could I do? I was alone in the world, and in his power, my fair fame in his hands, and I consented.

The die was cast; I had consented to be Alfred Lee's wife, and I became possessed with a feverish haste to have it over; to enter upon my bondage for such I knew well my life would be. I had compromised myself; at least, so he told me, by my mode of life, and my good name was at stake; and, to save it, I was to marry him. I made no settlement of my money; I thought of none. I felt weary of my very existence, and cared not what happened. I had purchased an annuity for my poor father, who was now emaciated, when my uncle died, and its proceeds sufficed to keep him clothed and cared for, Alfred Lee would have invited his friends, and had a regular conventional wedding party; but this I would not agree to. It was thus: I have married Willie had been alive, amid the joy and congratulation of friends, and I could not see another in the place he would have filled amid such rejoicings.

'No, I said, in reply to Alfred's repeated urgings. 'I will marry you, but I will have no merry makings over my misery.'

'Miser, Hester!' said he. 'Why should you be miserable in being my wife?'

'I don't know,' I replied; 'but I am.' 'Then why marry me at all?' he asked.

'You know why, Alfred Lee,' I exclaimed, passionately. 'Am I not helpless in your hands? Am I not in your power?'

'I think you are, just a little,' he returned, with some of his own gentleness. 'But you need not hate me, Hester. You used to like me.'

I could not answer him, and he talked me into something like composure ere he left me.

The morning of our wedding-day dawned, and I went to the church, plainly dressed, in a cab with Susan whom I insisted on taking as a witness, much to Alfred's disgust, who met us at the church door.

It was a fit morning for such a wedding—storm, wind, and blinding rain. The church looked as comfortable inside as it did out. Even the clergyman shivered as he listened to the bowling wind, which moaned and rattled at the casements; and I fancied he looked with a curious eye at my pale face and dark unbridal dress.

I stood mechanically where they placed me, and the opening words of the service fell unheeded on my ears. I was thinking of Willie of his lying so far away under the blind sea, while I, Hester Burton, was standing there to give my hand to the very man he had warned me against. The words of the solemn adjuration, 'I require and charge you both, roused me from my reverie, and rang through the silent church with that seemed a warning sound.

'Any impediment?' I knew of none, Heaven pity me! I knew of none, and I shrank cowering on the cushions as the ceremony went on. It was over at last, and we rose. I felt my husband's touch mine, and heard his exulting whisper, 'Mine! mine now!'

I signed my name like one in a dream, and passed out of the vestry. I saw the copy of a certificate given to my husband, and involuntarily I held out for it. He hesitated a moment, and then saying, 'Oh you're welcome to it if you like,' gave it to me.

I trust it hurriedly into my pocket for we had reached the church door, and the storm had not abated. My veil was up, as he had raised it for his first husband's kiss, and there, close to me, the rain beating full into his upturned face, and his eyes fixed on me, stood Willie Thornton.

Willie! I gasped, staggering blindly forward.

'Ay,' he said, in a low voice, 'Willie—that Willie to whom you vowed eternal faith;—that Willie who has come two thousand miles to find you another's wife. May heaven pardon you, Hester Burton as I do!'

I saw him turn slowly away, with groping, stumbling step, like a blind person; saw my husband lift his hat to him with a smile of defiant mockery, and knew no more till I found myself at home—Alfred Lee's home and mine.

Of my married life I have not much to tell; many a woman besides myself has found her idle clay after she has reared it. He sought for a long time to make me believe that my seeing Willie at the church door was merely imagination—that I had worked up my fancy in believing I had seen him. I knew better; and when after a little while, we read the story of his almost miraculous escape from death, the subject ceased, and I went about a hearthless, hopeless, despairing woman.

When I had been married but a very few months I found what had been Alfred Lee's motive in marrying me—my voice and my money—for his reason had been a double one. Out of the former he expected to make a fortune, and the latter was very necessary to him, for with all his brilliant success he was always poor from his extravagant habits. I overheard him tell one of his associates one night that he had been prepared to carry me off by force, rather than not obtain me, and that Willie's loss had been 'A devilish lucky accident for him.'

'Of course she doesn't know all that,' drawled his friend.

'Not exactly,' he replied. 'I flatter myself I played the lover capitally.'

But I knew it all now, and my resolution, was taken. My money he might have; it was his now; but my voice was my own, and not a note of it should sound for his emolument. I told him so when he returned home, for it was in the waiting-room of a concert-room I had heard the conversation.

'We shall see,' was his only remark. 'We shall,' I replied.

Soon after this my baby was born—a lovely infant. I almost worshipped him, and he brought comfort to my desolate heart, and made me again a rational reasoning woman. His father took little notice of him; and, as soon as I recovered, he began again to urge me to take engagements, but I refused resolutely and steadfastly.

'You must, Hester,' he said.

'I have made up my mind,' I replied; 'I will sign in public no more.'

'Are you mad?' he asked.

'No,' I replied; 'I am coming to my senses at last, I think.'

'If you will not sing you must starve,' said he; 'for I have no money, and may be arrested any day.'

No money! All my fortune gone in little more than twelve months, and my husband in danger of an arrest! He was not, however, arrested at that time; but we had to give up our house, and take lodgings.

Too soon I discovered that for the fortune I should have to provide for myself, for but little of Alfred's earnings found its way into my pocket. I looked about me for pupils, and succeeded in getting a few; I pleased them, and the number gradually increased, until, by the time I had been married three years, I was maintaining myself and child, and very frequently my husband as well, by my earnings. He had used every argument, even violence, to make me return to my profession, but in vain, and treated me with uniform coldness and contempt. There was no love between us; any affection I fancied I felt had died out at the church door when Willie Thornton's pale face rose between us like a messenger from the dead; and my life was a weary burden, with nothing but hard duty before me on my way.

One morning, Alfred came in hurriedly, and said, in an agitated tone, 'Hester, give me what money you have I must go.'

To be continued.

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'I will,' I replied, and he left me. I did think of it and accepted it, and sang at a private concert the next week. My success was triumphant, and so were Alfred Lee's congratulations.

From that time he was not so gentle or so loverlike as he had been, and I felt myself daily more in his power. I sang at concert after concert, always with the same success, and became, as so many do, dazzled and enraptured with my new mode of life. I thought of nothing but my art, until one day my teacher came to me and said, 'Hester, you must make up your mind soon.'

'Make up mind?' said I, in astonishment.

'Yes,' said he, 'whether you will marry me or not.'

'I have made up my mind,' I replied; 'I will not marry you.'

'Think again, Hester, before you decide,' said he; 'people are beginning to talk.'

'What about?' I asked.

'About you and me,' he replied.

'Why?' I demanded, indignantly.

'Are you so innocent?' he said, with a half sneer. 'Can you not understand what I mean?'

'I can not,' I replied.

'Then I must speak out,' said he. In one moment I comprehended his meaning. The room seemed turned round; I had given no further heed to what was passing around me; I knew not now whether he spoke the truth.

'They shall no longer talk about me!' I exclaimed, indignantly. 'I will leave London to-morrow.'

'You cannot,' he replied. 'You are bound to fulfill one more engagement at least.'

'I will not,' I said; 'I will go.' 'And make people talk more than ever!' said he. 'No, Hester, you shall do nothing so mad. Go with me to Birmingham. Sing this once, and then go where you will.'

I gave my word, and he felt me, and I resolved in bitterness and despair to quit London for ever, and bury myself and my sorrow for a way.

'Go at once,' whispered my inward monitor. 'Say for nothing.'

'Do not break your engagement,' said the voice of Pride; 'you will give the world a handle to whisper, if you do.'

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