



## THE WEDDING RING.

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"Reflect a minute," said O'Mara, "and you will see that you are compromising this lady whom you declare it your object to serve. If I were as hot-headed as yourself there would be a deuce of a scandal."

Sir George turned to Gillian.

"Is it your wish that I should go?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "It is my wish you should go and take that man with you."

"Then, after you, sir," said Venables, with a flash of genuine triumph, pointing to the door.

"Pardon me! Deeply sorry, of course, to interfere with your arrangements, but I shall stay here to-night, *en famille*. Let me remind you, my

dear Gillian, that your conduct would suggest to an unprejudiced mind that while I was merely your husband you regarded that gentleman as your lover."

"What!" cried Venables, "you dare—"

"Do not heed his insults," said Gillian. "He merely wishes to provoke you to an outrage. Go—but before you go, save me from his presence."

"You hear," said Sir George. "Come, sir!"

"Absurd!" said O'Mara, "I remain."

With one strong clutch on his collar the baronet pulled him from his seat. For a moment O'Mara made a show of feigning resistance, but a rat in the fangs of a terrier was not more helpless.

"I yield to your *force majeure*," he said, "but I protest against this violation of my rights."

"You can protest just as well outside," said Venables, and with a gesture of impotent rage O'Mara retreated. Sir George shot a rapid whisper to Gillian as he passed her.

"At the bottom of the spinney, at nine; if you ever loved me, be there."

Before she could answer yes or no, he had followed O'Mara.

### CHAPTER XXIII.—FLIGHT.

Scarcely had Sir George disappeared when Gillian became conscious of a loud contention of voices in the garden. For a moment she fancied that O'Mara and the baronet must have broken into open quarrel, and listened with sick apprehension of new disaster, but a moment later she recognized the voice of Barbara in the debate, mingled with another which seemed strange to her. She moved to the window, and there saw her faithful servant engaged in a struggle with her brother-in-law, Jake Owen. Gillian had forgotten the man's existence, and recalled it by an effort.

"I tell ee," said Jake, who was white and feeble, but strung to an energy not his own by some fearful excitement, "I tell ee I *heard* him. Shouldn't I know his voice? Theer aint two like it in the world. Let me go, lass, let me go. He's close about. He can't ha' got far away by this time."

Barbara clung to him and held back.

"Jake, Jake! take a thought, lad, and remember where ye be. Is it likely as he'd be here? Do act reasonable, now, and don't ee go there, frightening the soul out o' my poor lady, as has enough to bear a' ready."

"I heard him, I tell ee," repeated Jake. "I heard him." His eyes fixed, and the ghastly pallor of his face deepened. "Sh!" he said, setting Barbara aside with a strong gesture. "He's there, I've got him. Quiet, my lass."

Gillian, fixed to her place behind the curtains with horror, saw him start with winding steps and crouching body a few paces forward, and then, with a sudden spring, strike hurriedly at the empty air with a formidable looking knife.

"—him!" he said, "he's gone again! What are ye doing with him?" he said fiercely to Barbara. "You're hiding him from me. You, Jess's sister! ye're false, my lass."

"Come back, Jake, come back to your bed," pleaded Barbara, "ye're not fit to be about, my poor lad."

"But I *saw* him," persisted Jake, though with an accent on the word, which showed that a flash of complete sanity had made him doubt the countenance of the vision. "I saw him right there."

"But ye saw him this morning," said Barbara, "and Jess, too."

"Ay!" said Jake, "lying dead and white at his feet. That was only a dream, lass, but this time —"

"It's only a dream, too, Jake. Come back to your bed, my poor lad."

Jake looked about him with a pathetically puzzled face, and yielding to Barbara's gentle pressure on his arm, allowed her to lead him away.

Time had slipped by unnoticed on this day of strange events, and it was with a sort of dull surprise that Gillian saw the finger of the clock upon the mantleself pointing to within five minutes of the hour of Sir George's rendezvous at the spinney. She began to wonder whether it would be right or wise to go, and so debating went. Her mind was a chaos, with no definite sensation save one of vague, hopeless misery.

She passed through the dusk of the open spaces of garden and farm, faintly silvered with strengthening moonlight, to the strip of dense shadow cast by the spinney. There she paused in a sharp wrestle with tears which would force their way through her eyelids, and became conscious of a measured step, pacing slowly up and down the high road beyond the trees. He was there already, waiting for her. The brave heart which had borne its own load of sorrow so well went out to his desolation. She conquered her weakness, and pressed forward. At the first crackle of her step upon the dried leaves with which the spinney