

THREE MAIDENS MARRIED.

[CONTINUED.]

'There is something in my history you do not know. I may tell you some day, or I may not. Let us talk of something else.'

The woman arose from her knees.

'I am powerless,' she said, 'I will do as you order.'

'You are wise, after all. Have you means enough?'

'Ample.'

'Does Mary serve you well?'

'I have no complaint to make.'

'Of course not; when she fails in her duty, there are others to replace her. If you have means enough for your needs, and no complaints of your servant, and no more lectures to read me, I might as well go. I have the honor to bid you a very good-night, madam. May you have all the quiet rest, and pleasant dreams, a good conscience can afford.'

He rose, bowed formally, and with a light, mocking laugh, left the room.

When he had gone, the woman sank on her knees again. She was not in prayer. The clenched hands, the compressed lips, and the convulsed features, showed that a thousand evil passions, and not devotion, were at work within.

The surgeon kept on his way with a light step, but as he came near a dark lane in the village, he slackened his pace and looked around. A female figure emerged from the lane. The party was closely muffled, but the two had evidently been expecting each other, for they conversed in a low tone for some time, both standing in the darkest shadow of the adjoining house. At length the surgeon parted the hood which the female wore, and stooping, kissed her. Just then, some one came along, when the female ran hastily into the lane, and the surgeon crouched back, until the stranger had passed. In a few minutes he followed.

And this was the day after his wife's funeral! What gossip for Ebury, if it had been known! But Ebury was profoundly ignorant of the matter.

CHAPTER VI.

MISS ELLEN AND HER LOVER, AND THE COMING DOWNFALL OF A YOUNG LADY'S HOPES.

The hot day had nearly passed, and the sun, approaching its setting, threw the tall shade of the trees across the garden of Mrs. Chavasse. The large window of a pleasant room opened on to it, and in this room stood a fair, graceful girl, with one of the loveliest faces ever seen in Ebury. Her dark blue eyes were bent on the ground; as well they might be: the rose of her cheek had deepened to crimson; as well it might do; for a gentleman's arm had fondly encircled her waist, and his lips had pushed aside the cluster of soft hair, and were rendering deeper that damask cheek. Alas, that her whole attitude, as she stood there, should tell of such rapturous happiness!

Neither was an inhabitant of that house; both had come in to pay an evening visit, and the young lady had thrown off her bonnet and mantle. It may be these visits were accidental; but if so, they took place nearly every evening. It happened that Mrs. and Miss Chavasse on this occasion were out, but expected to enter every minute; so, being alone, they were improving on the time.

And this from Miss Leicester, the carefully brought-up daughter of the rector of Ebury! That she should repose quietly in the embrace of that man without attempting to withdraw from it! Yes; and love has caused some of us to do as much. But oh, that the deep, ardent affection of which Ellen Leicester was so eminently capable, had been directed into any other channel than the one it was irrevocably fixed in!

For he who stood beside her was Gervase Castonel. It was not that he had once been married, but it was that there were some who deemed him a bad man, a mysterious man, with his sinister expression of face, when he did not care to check it, and his covert ways. Why should he have cast his coils round Ellen Leicester? why have striven to gain her love when there were so many others whose welcome to him would have carried with it no alloy? It would almost seem to, Mr. Castonel went by the rules of contrary, as the children say in their play-game. The only persons into whose houses he had not been received, and who had both taken so strange and unconquerable a dislike to him, were the late Mr. Winninton and the Reverend Mr. Leicester. Yet he had chosen his first wife in the niece of the first, and it seemed likely (to us who are in the secret) that he was seeking the second in the daughter of the last. Strange that he should have

been able to do his work so effectually; that Ellen Leicester, so good-and-dutiful, should have been won over to a passion for him, little short of infatuation, and that it should have been kept so secret from the whole world! Never was there a man who could go more mysteriously to work than Gervase Castonel.

'You speak of a second marriage, Ellen, my love,' he was saying, 'but how often have I told you that this scarcely applies to me. Were it that I had lived with her years of happiness, or that I had loved her, then your objections might have reason. I repeat to you, however much you may despise me for it, that I married her, caring only for you. Before I was awake to my own sensations, I had gone too far to retract; I had asked for her of old Winninton, and in honor I was obliged to keep to my hasty engagement. Even in our early marriage days I knew that I loved but you: sleeping or waking, it was you who were present to me, and I would awake from sleep, from dreams of my real idol, to caress thoughtlessly my false one! Oh, Ellen! you may disbelieve and refuse to love me, but in mercy say it not.'

There was great honey in the words of Mr. Castonel, there was greater honey in his tone, and Ellen Leicester's heart beat more rapidly within her. She disbelieve aught asserted by him!

'Ellen, you judge wrongly,' was his reply, as she whispered something in his ear. 'It is a duty sometimes to leave father and mother.'

'But not disobediently, not wilfully. And I know that they would never consent. You know it also, Gervase.'

'My darling Ellen, this is nonsense. Suppose I were to yield to your scruples, and marry another in my anger? What then, Ellen?'

'I think it would kill me,' she murmured.

'And because Mr. and Mrs. Leicester have taken an unjust prejudice against me, both our lives are to be rendered miserable? Would that be justice? Suppose you were my wife; do suppose it, only for a moment, Ellen; suppose that we were irrevocably united, we should then not have consent to ask, but forgiveness.'

She looked earnestly at him, and as his true meaning came across her, the mild expression of her deep blue eyes gave place to terror.

'Oh, Gervase,' she implored, clasping his arm in agitation, 'never say that again! As you value my peace here and hereafter, do not tempt me to disobedience. I mistook your meaning, did I not?' she continued in a rapid tone of terror. 'Gervase, I say, did I not mistake you?'

He felt that he had been too hasty; the right time was not come. But it would: for never did Gervase Castonel set his will upon a thing that he left unfulfilled.

Miss Chavasse entered. Ellen Leicester was in the garden then: she had glided out on hearing her approach. And Mr. Castonel was seated back in an arm-chair, intent upon a newspaper.

'Oh!' exclaimed Frances, 'I am sorry we should have been out. I am sure we are obliged to you for waiting for us, Mr. Castonel.'

'I have not waited long; but if I had waited the whole evening I should be amply repaid now.' He spoke softly and impressively, as he detained her hand in his: and from his manner then, it might well have been thought that he intended Frances Chavasse for his wife; at least it never could have been believed he was so ardently pursuing another.

'And Ellen Leicester is here,' added Frances, 'for that's her bonnet. Have you seen her?'

'Who? Miss Leicester? Yes, I believe I did see her. But I was so engaged with this paper. Here is some interesting medical evidence in it.'

'Is there?' But at that moment Ellen Leicester came to the window. 'How long have you been here?' asked Frances.

'About an hour,' was Miss Leicester's answer.

'What an awful girl for truth that is!' was the angry mental comment of Mr. Castonel.

'I must say you have proved yourselves sociable companions,' remarked Frances. 'You mope in the garden, Ellen, and Mr. Castonel pores over an old newspaper. Let us have a song.'

Now Mr. Castonel hated singing, but Frances sat down to the piano, and he was pleased to stand behind her and clasp the

hand of Ellen Leicester. Yet Frances, had she been asked, would have said Mr. Castonel's attention was given to herself; aye, and gloried in saying it, for she liked the man, and would have had no objection to become his second wife. It may be that she was scheming for it. Thus they remained till the night came on, and the moon was up. Frances, never tired of displaying her rich voice, and Ellen Leicester content to stand by his side had the standing lasted forever. Moonlight singing meetings are dangerous things.

A servant came for Ellen Leicester, and Mr. Castonel walked home with her. They went not the front way, but through the lane, which brought them to the back door of the rectory. Was it that Ellen shrank from going openly, lest her parents might see from the windows that Mr. Castonel was her companion? He lingered with her for a few moments at the gate, and when she entered she found her mother alone: the rector was out. To her it had been a delicious walk, and she felt that life would be indeed a blank, if not shared with Gervase Castonel.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MYSTERIOUS RESIDENT OF BEECH LODGE HIRES A SPY, WHO SEEMS LIKELY TO BE OF LITTLE VALUE.

A boy, in a shadowy livery, and having a basket in his hand, was loitering along the street one day. Presently he came in front of Beech Lodge. The servant girl there, who apparently had been watching, beckoned him to come over.

'Me, ma'am,' inquiringly, said John, for it was Mr. Castonel's tiger, and he hesitated.

The woman nodded affirmatively, whereupon John crossed, and entering a little gate, came to the house.

'My mistress wants to see you,' said the girl.

'Yes ma'am, I'll come in as soon as I scrape my feet.'

She led him into the little parlor, where her mistress was ready to receive him.

'What is your name?' she asked.

'John, ma'am.'

'Do you like spending money, John?'

'Do I? Oh, just you try me, ma'am.'

The lady handed him a shilling.

'You can have this very frequently, if you keep your tongue still to others, and use it to me.'

'Very well, ma'am.'

'Does your master visit much now?'

'Yes, ma'am; there's a good many sick just now.'

'I do not mean that. Does he pay many visits to young ladies?'

'Oh, yes, ma'am. He visits at Mr. Chavasse's a great deal.'

'Miss Chavasse is very handsome, is she not?'

'Oh, lor', ma'am, isn't she though?—They say that Master is going to marry her.'

'Ah?'

'I don't think so though.'

'No? Why not?'

'I can see when I keep my eyes open.—He's after Miss Leicester, I know.'

'That is the rector's daughter.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'And is she handsome, too?'

'Handsome nor 'tother. She's a beauty—she is.'

'Are there no other ladies?'

'No, ma'am.'

'None who come to visit him?'

'Yes, ma'am, patients.'

'If any come, let me know, and you may depend on me for a little pocket-money.'

'Yes, ma'am,' and John bowed himself and his basket out.

'If she wants information for her money, here's where they keep it,' said John, as he walked along, tossing the shilling about in his trowsers pocket, 'and it's always on hand suited to customers. Oh!'

His last exclamation was occasioned by the sudden appearance of his master, who seemed to come from out of the ground, or behind one of the beech trees, and John did not feel quite sure which.

'So you have been into Beech Lodge?' he asked.

'Yes, sir—they called me over.'

'What did they want?'

'The lady there—missus—what is her name, sir?'

'Never mind her name. What did she want?'

'Oh, nothing, sir—just asked after your health—that's all, sir.'

'John, you are lying to me. You were not called in for any such purpose. You had better tell the truth, for if I find that you deceive me, you will lose your place. She offered you money to act the spy on me.—Was that it?'

'She wanted to know about the young ladies you visit, sir.'

'Exactly. You have my permission to earn what money you can in that way—only remember this: I will always give the news you are to carry. Do you understand?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Now go on, and deliver your medicines.'

John touched his hat, and departed.

'I hope he'll have something for me pretty soon,' said John, 'a shilling won't last long.'

It was evident that the information to be obtained by the lady was not always to be reliable. In intrigue or in war, you cannot always rely upon your spies. They may be in the interest of the enemy, or they may cheat both parties.

CHAPTER VIII.

TWO GENTLEMEN SEEM TO HAVE NO VERY GOOD OPINION OF THE HERO OF THE STORY.

Ellen had been invited to spend the next evening with Miss Chavasse, as was a frequent occurrence, and it was chiefly in these evening meetings that her love had grown up and ripened. Mr. Castonel was ever a welcome visitor to Mrs. Chavasse, and Frances had laughed, and talked, and flirted with him, till a warmer feeling had arisen in her heart. He had all the practice of Ebury, being the only resident medical man, so in a pecuniary point of view, he was a desirable match for Frances. Little deemed they that Ellen Leicester was his attraction. A tacit sort of rivalry with Ellen existed in the mind of Frances; she thought of her as a rival in beauty, a rival in position, a rival in the favor of Ebury. But she was really fond of Ellen, always anxious to have her by her side, and it never once entered into her brain that Mr. Castonel, who was under cold displeasure at the rectory, should seek the favor of Ellen.

Again went Ellen that evening to the house of Mrs. Chavasse, and again went Mr. Castonel. They, the three, passed it in the garden, a large rambling place, nearly as full of weeds as of flowers. They rambled about the different walks, they sat on the benches; Mr. Castonel's attention was given chiefly to Frances, not to Ellen, his custom when with both. Frances possessed her mother's old talent for flirtation, and Mr. Castonel was nothing loth to exercise it. And so the evening passed, and the summer moon rose in its course.

'Oh!' suddenly cried Frances as they were approaching the house, 'I have forgotten the bay leaves mamma told me to gather. Now I must go back all the way down to the end of the garden.'

She probably thought Mr. Castonel would follow her. He did not. He turned to Ellen Leicester, and drawing her amongst the thick trees, clasped her to him.

'I shall wish you good-night, my darling; this moment is too precious to be lost. Oh, Ellen, are things to go on like this forever? It is true these evening meetings are a consolation to us, for they are spent in the presence of each other, but the hours which ought to be yours, and yours only, are thrown away in idle nonsense with Frances Chavasse. Oh, that we had indeed a right to be together and alone! When is that time to come?—for come it must, Ellen. When two people love as we do, and no justifiable impediment exists to its being legally ratified, that ratification will take place sooner or later. Think of this,' he murmured, reluctantly releasing her, as the steps of Miss Chavasse were heard drawing near.

'I expected you were in the house by this time,' she exclaimed, breathlessly, 'and you are only where I left you.'

'We waited for you,' said Mr. Castonel.

'Very considerate of you,' was the reply of Frances, spoken in a tone of pique. She had expected Mr. Castonel to follow her.

They walked on towards the house. Mr. Castonel giving his arm to Frances. Talking was heard in the drawing room, and they recognized the voice of Mr. Leicester.

'I will go round here,' said Mr. Castonel, indicating a path which led to a side gate of egress. 'If I enter, they will keep me talking; and I have a patient to see.'

'He extended a hand to each as he spoke,