

One in a Thousand, BUT TRUE TO THE LAST

CHAPTER XXII. THAT LETTER.

"Why couldn't you leave Adrian alone?" I cry, with pathetic reproach. "Why, when you found he had married another woman, couldn't you let your fancy for him die out? You must have seen that your marriage was not to be, or it would not have been prevented as it was!"

"What do you mean? Are you mad, Audrey?" she exclaims, with a perfect imitation of amazement.

"Do you think I don't know," I say, "that I have not known for some time—that Arthur St. Clair and my husband are the same?"

"Oh, you have found that out, have you?" she sneers. "Trust you to leave anything in mystery! Well, Adrian loved me first—has never ceased loving me—loves me now, as no man will ever love an insignificant creature like you. He hates the fetters that bind him to you, because they keep him from me. He curses himself for his madness in marrying you because of the likeness you bear me. Can't you see this? Won't you believe it?"

Her trade has not excited me much—it is a peculiarity of mine that as others grow angry I recover my calmness. I look at Theo now as I should at a mad woman.

"I do not believe you," I say, with slow distinctness.

"Don't you?" she says, with a triumphant smile. "Then shall I prove it to you?"

"Prove what?"

"That Adrian loves me best?"

"If you can," I return. "But when he comes home, I will ask him, and force him to say 'Yes' or 'No' before both of us."

"He will not be home until dinner time," she says; "and that is a long period to wait in suspense. If you are anxious for the truth, I can give it to you."

As she speaks, she rises, and, opening the dressing case on the table,

takes from it a letter, which she tosses to me contemptuously. It falls short of my knee and drops to the floor. It crosses my mind that Theo makes a mistake when she suffers her hatred or her anger to lead her into vulgarity. I pick up the letter, and see that it is addressed simply to "Lady Lasselles." I shiver as I recognize Adrian's large, unmistakable handwriting, and I take out the enclosure, with a feeling of sickness which threatens to overwhelm me. But I dare not give way. I must read it.

The date at the top is "Wednesday evening." Surely, this is Thursday? Yes, in spite of my whirling brain and wild beating heart, I remember that. Then it was written last night—probably after we returned home!

"My own dearest Theo," the letter begins, "I have quite made up my mind that this wretched state of things cannot go on much longer. I cannot live without you any longer, darling; you must come to me, and let me be all in all to you. I dare say your people will blame you for taking this step—they are sure to



do so—but, oh, my dearest, if you knew what an agony of doubts and fears I live in, you would take pity on me and come! This seeing you by stealth, this fear lest any other man should come and steal away my jewel, and, lastly, this change of quarters, are all driving me mad. If the regiment had been staying here longer, I might have waited a little; but it would only have been waiting, Theo. We were surely made for each other; so what does it matter whether we go a little sooner or later? I shall expect you to answer 'Yes' when I see you this evening, darling. What a long time it will seem till then!

"Your own—A." I read this epistle twice—Theo is quite right—there is no mistake. There is the Roman "VII." surrounded by the word "Cetrassiers," and beneath it the motto of the regiment. I am even conscious that it smells strongly of Adrian's favorite scent. I fold it up carefully and replace it in the envelope; then Theo's voice breaks the silence.

"You are satisfied, I hope?"

"Perfectly," I say, jolly. "You have proved that, as the possessor of Adrian's love, you have more right to him than I; and you shall have him."

As I rise from the chair, I cannot help seeing the gleam of joy which lights up her face.

"Give me my letter," she says, as I reach the door.

"No," I return, firmly; "to that I have the most right. I will keep it, Theo." I add, scornfully, "to remind me, if ever I should be tempted to forget it, that by right of love, Adrian belongs to you." Then I close the door softly, and go away.

I lock myself into my bedroom,

with the express intention of having a good cry; but I am surprised to find myself unable to indulge in any luxury of that kind. I sit down by the window, and try to think—think of what? That the blow has fallen at last—that everything is over between us—even my vague day dreams of a reconciliation "some day," that blissful "some day" so many of us believe in. I used to say and think that if I could but be perfectly certain of Adrian's wishes and feelings, I should be more content. Well, now I am perfectly certain. I have read the proof of it, and the death warrant of my love, in his own writing—the careless, bold characters that I have kissed so often. Ah, well, I shall kiss them no more now! Now that the certainty is come, I am a little surprised to find that, after all, I do not feel so very different; I had almost expected that I should fall down and die, or feel like one who has lost a limb or an eye, but I do not. I move unconsciously more fully into the sunshine, and enjoy the warmth as much as ever. The trees wave in the summer breeze just as sweetly as they did last year; the fresh, summer flowers have just as delicate a tint as of yore; the birds—ah, there is a difference there! Is it possible that that discordant shrieking can proceed from those thin throats, or are the nerves of my ears and head out of tune?

I lean upon the window ledge, and wonder how I shall feel when Adrian comes home. And then my heart tells me that when he returns, he must not find me here. The words Teddy spoke last night force themselves upon my memory—"I would go away and hide myself." That is what I must do. I must hide my undying misery and shame from the whole world—the world which knows me, that is. Yet where can I go? My first wild thought is of "daddy." Yet I put that away; not even to him can I take my trouble. There are the old servants at home,

too, who were there when we were little, happy children. I cannot face them. No; I must get quite away by myself. I must bear my trouble alone.

With eager, impatient fingers I seize my dressing case, and, opening the lower drawer, turn out the money it contains onto the table. Fortunately I have plenty; there is a roll of bank notes which "daddy" gave me on the morning I was married, and which I have had no occasion to touch. I count them over, and find they contain three hundred pounds. I have nearly a hundred more in gold and notes, and I put them away securely and fasten the drawer. I take out of this case, which was a present from my godmother, all the jewellery which Adrian has given me, or which belongs to his family, and pack them away in the larger case, which was one of his marriage gifts to me. In the middle drawer, I lay that letter, together with a large photograph of Adrian, and one of my father. Dear old "daddy," I wonder what he will say when he hears of his little lass' troubles! I look round the room in search of anything else I may wish to put in here; there is nothing. I go into Adrian's dressing room, vacantly and without any especial reason, and in a glass on the table is a tiny bunch of forget-me-nots. I kiss the simple half-withered flowers passionately, for I remember that some time yesterday he must have taken them out of the oak tray of lilies and forget-me-nots which I kept filled in the inner hall. I will take these. He has worn them, and Theo did not give them to him—she would not have chosen anything so unpretending and simple. I lay them in the same drawer with the two photographs, and my death warrant; and, having locked it I ring for Lane.

"I want you to pack me some things immediately," I say in as natural a tone as I can command.

"Yes, my lady—for how long?"

"You had better put in two dozen of everything," I answer, "and all the pocket handkerchiefs and collars you can find."

"Any dinner dresses, my lady?"

"Of course. Three will be enough—and some morning dresses; put in that velvet one which came home last week."

Lane fetches out a huge "imperial," and is soon busily engaged in filling it. I feel I must give some explanation of this sudden journey or she will be saying something downstairs.

"I am going to Thorngaby for a short time, Lane," I say, telling the untruth pretty well, considering the small amount of practice I have had in that way.

"Am I to go with you, my lady?"

"I think not, Lane. There are plenty of servants to attend to me. Whom is the carriage for?" I say, as the open carriage is driven round to the door.

"For Lady Lasselles; she is going to lunch with Mrs. Colville," says she—"so Green told me just now."

Nothing could have happened better for my purpose; probably neither she nor Adrian will return for dinner; and, as he never comes into my room while I am dressing, my flight will not be discovered until I am far beyond recall.

"When you go down tell some of the men that I want the stanophæton at one o'clock."

"Yes, my lady."

By this means I avoid taking Mary.

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son; so no one will know where I take my ticket for.

"You will lunch before leaving, my lady?" says Lane.

"Oh, yes! You can tell them to have it ready at half-past twelve," I answer. I am really quite cheerful, considering the general state of affairs. "It is twelve now," I add, as Lane rises from her knees and fastens the straps of my trunk.

"I think that is all, my lady," she says, looking round the room. "Yes, I think so. You had better go down and tell them what I want."

And so I am left alone—alone for the last time in the room Adrian was so sure I should be happy in.

Well, we have made a great mistake, and discovered it only when it is too late to rectify it. All I can do now is to spare Adrian the annoyance of seeing me day after day, of feeling that he can never be free from me, and myself the continual agony of witnessing his love for another.

I go down presently and eat my luncheon. I do not, as I have done so often before, make a pretense, and end by taking nothing. No; I make a better meal than I have done for weeks; chiefly, I think, because I am possessed with a wild, raging fever of excitement, and I am anxious to get to the end of my journey without breaking down. Lane brings down my seakinn coat and hat, and asks which dressing case I am going to take with me.

"The small one," I tell her; and then I look round, once more upon the home which ought to have been my earthly paradise, with eyes which take in every detail, with a hungry yearning, until a mist of tears shuts out the familiar objects, and I am fain to cover them with my shaking hand.

(To be Continued.)

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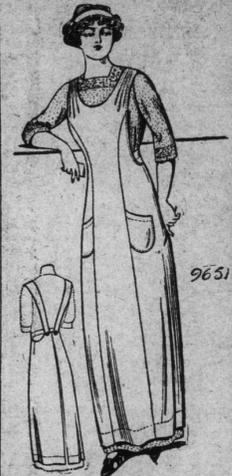
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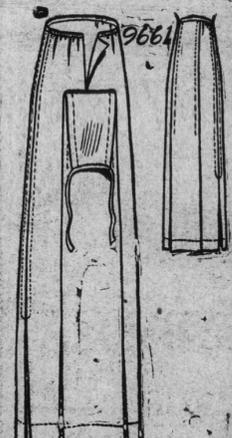


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