

A MODERN OTHELLO

CHAPTER VI

There was a grim surprise awaiting me at home, in the dark shadow of the night which had fallen there before my return. My faithful maid-servant Phoebe was ready to apprise me of it as she opened the door to me.

"If you please, Miss Bevis, there is a letter for you on the drawing-room table."

"Well, Phoebe, what of that?" I said. "It is past the post hour, I suppose."

"It isn't that, miss; it hasn't come by post, but Mr. Frederick wrote it before he went away."

"Before he—"

And then I paused with all my breath spent at the new fear which came quickly to me. I recovered myself, and went into my little drawing-room, Phoebe following me, full of curiosity and loquacity.

"Yes, Miss Bevis, he has gone all in a flash like. The railway porter came and fetched his boxes, and then he wrote that letter, and cried that hard over it that my heart was wrung to see him. And then off he went growling like a pig, and I'm very glad you are back, miss."

I took the letter and opened it. I knew its purport. I could have guessed almost at the lines, and I read it as though for the twentieth time rather than the first.

"Yes, Phoebe, he has gone," I said, folding my epistle.

"Yes, miss, but doesn't he say what the centre of the room, he following me slowly."

"She is not here, then?" he inquired.

"She—Mary!" I exclaimed.

"I saw the light in your window, and it was the last hope that I had. Yet I knew it was in vain! From this hour forth, God help her!"

"Mary—is not—at your house?" I said again, in a higher key; "she is not at home, do you say? Oh! am I dreaming, or have you told me this indeed?"

"Mary is not at home," he answered, gloomily; "she has fled with your brother."

"No—no; I will not believe it," I screamed. "If you swore it to me, I would not believe it."

"I have tried to think it a delusion," he went on, with the same unnatural calmness; "I have prayed it might be, and I a madman come back to his home. I have hurried here to make sure that it is real. Tell me, I am mad, Rebecca, and I will bless you to my dying day."

"You are mad to think any wrong of her," I cried; "appearances may be against her, but she may be at a friend's house—"

He held up his hand to stop me, and I paused as at a given signal.

"Your brother was at my house to-night," he said, "two hours before I returned. He called to see her. The servants state they stole out together from the drawing-room window. It was a plot that had been arranged between them long ago."

"Oh, great Heaven! do not tell me this, or I shall not believe in man or woman more."

"It was a damnable hypocrisy to deceive me," he cried, exhibiting some warmth of temper at last; "to lead me to believe she had been always good and true, and was prepared to go with me to the limits of the earth; and then to love that wretch—that villain—all the time!"

"It is not true," I gasped.

"Where is your brother? Can you say he is in the house—that he is not gone away?"

"He left this afternoon," I stammered, "but that is a coincidence—"

"He did not leave Westerton so early. He was at The Limes a few hours since, and long after you had quitted it. Rebecca, Bevis, I shall kill him when we meet," he whispered, with a bitter intensity, in my ears.

"Leave me, please; let me think of this. I am disturbed now. Pray go. What good can I do?"

"Tell me where he said he was going."

"I do not know."

"Did he leave no letter?"

"No."

It was a falsehood, but I could not show him Fred's letter, for it spoke of a love that should not have existed, and of a passion which had not died out but as despairing and distraught. I would spare his misery all that I could.

"You would not deceive me," he said, with a strange humility in his mournfulness. "I can believe in one woman's word yet."

He walked toward the window, which was still open, paused and looked back.

"Come and see me, come and help be by kind words, if I should be alive to-morrow," he said.

"You will do nothing rash," I cried.

"You will be patient and wait. Do not think the worst—the very worst of her."

"I will be patient and wait," he muttered. He passed out into the snow, and I watched him toil upon his way until he was lost in the darkness beyond my garden hedge. Then once more the curtains were drawn by my trembling hands, and I tottered back

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to my place, a woman very weak now. I remembered that I knelt and prayed there, too—prayed away even the great dark doubt, and rose with the confidence that it was not my poor darling's guilt which was the clew to this dark mystery. There was another solution to come, and all might yet be well. What had happened Mary Gordon had foreseen; this step had doubtless been resolved upon, but there was no sin in her thoughts when she had spoken to me with her hands upon my shoulders.

"If it should ever come to pass that I am away from Conrad—a long, long distance away—and he is living with his heart closed against me, as it has been all this bitter year, will you tell him what I have said, and what message I bade you give poor Fred, for my honor's sake and his?"

They were almost her last words, and I had well remembered them.

CHAPTER VII.

It was all over the tattling town of Westerton the next morning that Mrs. Gordon had eloped with Fred Bevis. It was an indisputable fact, and the proofs were as strong as Holy Writ. Nothing could be clearer than this case, which set the gossips tongues in motion. The young wife had taken advantage of her husband's absence and fled. Here was one more sad page to the big, bad volume of men and women's lives.

What could I think myself even, after the days had dragged on, and never a word from her or Fred? The silence was that of sin, although my trustful heart refused to be convinced, and my ears were ringing yet with Mary Gordon's parting words.

I saw no more of her desolate husband. I wrote to him once asking if he had heard any news of Mary, and the answer that came back was monosyllabic: "None." It was rumored in the town he was going abroad in search of her, and presently that he had shut himself in his own house, and refused to see his friends, or be tortured by their sympathy with his dissonant. He will recover shortly; he will face the world again, and get the better of his trouble; get a divorce, and a second wife more faithful to him. These were a few of the prophecies current in Westerton; but as time rolled on, I feared for him. It is possible that there came to my own heart even a wish to help him by kind words—never a wish to marry him, I know—and that the picture which the servants drew of his solitary life, his exclusion in the library where the books remained unopened, and he sat staring into empty space, touched me with its hopeless misery. I had loved the man once, I had hoped for his happiness with her he preferred before myself, and his isolation was painful to consider. I had known

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how proud and susceptible a man he was, and I could guess how the blow had fallen upon him. He would go mad. That was to be the end of the story; there was no chance for him which any one could see, if he took the trouble of his life in that grim, awful manner. Friends sent to him their advice at last and got no answer from him; they had long since ceased to call at a house where they were invariably refused admittance by its master; only one servant in it, even had an opportunity of waiting upon him; the rest were warned to keep beyond the precincts of his library and bedroom as they valued remaining in his service. He only wanted peace and rest, he asserted; was there any one living who would begrudge it to him?

Sometimes the temptation came to me to write him a long letter, to tell him of my last meeting with Mary; and all that she had said; and more than once, as the time went on, and wrought no change in him, it was a temptation almost irresistible. I could not account for it; the words were an idle mockery now, and would aggregate to me pain; and yet, toward the winter again, I found myself sitting, pen in hand, at my desk, resolved to dare the message. There was a story, about this time, that Fred and Mrs. Gordon had been seen together in Dresden, and that stopped me again. One of those busybodies whose faculties lie in remembering faces, and who perpetrate are men of innumerable mistakes, came back to Westerton to maintain that he had seen them, and there could be no possibility of error. Well, well, it was natural that he should not be mistaken, and so an end to it. Such news as that might stir the misanthrope at The Limes to action; but no movement was made by the injured husband, and day's stole on imperceptibly toward the well-remembered Christmas-time when he had married Mary, and again when, after a year of misery, he has grown hopeful of "sweet reconciliation."

It was the 23rd of December at last. It had come round to the day of her flight—her wedding-day too, chosen out of sheer revenge, her husband would always think. It was a contrast to the bitter weather of the last two Christmases; people said it was like the autumn again, the days were so bright and sunny. I thought, since Conrad Gordon's wedding. In what way was he keeping its anniversary in his lonely house?

All day that thought weighed me down; I could see him in his library, with the shadows thick upon him, and his dark face set and immobile. It was the one figure by which I was haunted. I did not go out; I did not work, or write, or read. The early night found me still brooding before

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the fire-light, in much the same way as I had done a twelvemonth since, only the hour was late then, and the snow upon the ground. I was not thinking of Mary Gordon, I am prepared to affirm her solemnly—only of her husband in his trouble, and wondering when it would end. It is just possible it might be a delusion, and I its victim to this day. But as I covered over the faint embers of the fire in my darkening room, I felt two hands upon my shoulders, pressing down upon me fondly, and a voice whispering suddenly and awfully in my ears the last four words. Mary Gordon has ever spoken to me:

"You will not forget!"

They were words slowly and solemnly delivered—not the far-off echo of memory twelve months old—and I covered down still more in my alarm, with the pressure of the two hands still upon me. Even her name escaped me aloud.

"Mary!" I murmured; "My poor Mary!" and then the words came to my ears again, but this time changed somewhat, or my nervous fancies were betraying me.

"You MUST not forget!"

The pressure passed away, and I stood up panting and afraid, with my eyes gazing into the shadows of the room, where there was a somewhat vague and misty moving from me, with its hands outspread as if in supplication. A something that was like Mary Gordon in face and figure, as seen at a distance through a veil, or with faint lines of snow-drift glancing atawart it—a vision from another world.

I gave a scream and fainted. When I came to myself the room was lighted up, and Phoebe was stooping over me with a glass of water in her hand.

"Are you better now, Miss Bevis?" she inquired, anxiously.

"What's the matter? Have I been ill?"

"I heard you scream, and I ran and found you in a swoon," was the reply.

"Did—did you meet any one as you came in?"

"No, ma'am—not anybody."

"Draw the curtains, please, and leave me to myself."

"The executed my command and I was left to think of all that had happened. Was it a warning, or the ef-

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fect of an imagination overwrought? Had I brooded too deeply upon this, or was Mary Gordon dead, and unable to rest in her grave? I was not superstitious; I had always laughed at superstitious folk; but the impression on my mind was not to be thought down, or shaken off too readily. I had heard Mary's voice; I had seen something so like Mary, too, that I was ghost-haunted. "You will not forget," had been whispered in my ears, and I had forgotten! I had made a promise, and failed to keep it. I was untrue to my trust. I was wholly wrong.

I came to a sudden determination; I would go to Conrad Gordon that very evening, and tell him all his wife had said. I would be refused admittance with the rest, but at the worst I could send in my message to him. It might do good; it might change the whole current of his thoughts. I had been too long silent, knowing more than he did.

I rang the bell, and asked for my hat and cloak. I gave Phoebe instructions to accompany me. We were standing in the hall together, ready to depart, when a knocking and a ringing at the door startled us. I had few visitors, and none at so late an hour. The clock was striking eight.

"Who can it be?" said Phoebe.

"It is Conrad Gordon," I answered.

"Oh! good gracious, I hope it isn't, or I shall think you're quite a witch, Miss Bevis."

"Open the door, please, quick!"

Phoebe obeyed my instructions, and my brother stepped into the house.

"Fred! You have come back, then?"

"Yes, Beekie; why should I not?"

"Was the first question."

"To face your accusers; to prove that their calumnies are false?" I continued.

"Calumnies?" repeated my brother.

"What calumnies?"

"You don't know?" I exclaimed, with a half-scream of delight. "You have not heard?"

"Not a word." (To be Continued.)

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