

A WILD PROXY.

BY MRS. W. K. CLIFFORD.

(Continued.)

'Let me go,' she entreated, and he heard her voice tremble.

They did not meet again till the next evening, but he wrote her a little note in the morning. *Shall we go as far as Leghorn by this boat? it will be there to-morrow, and we should get a quiet talk to-night. Send word, 'Yes' or 'No.'* She sent word, 'Yes.'

He looked no better when she appeared, but it was nothing, he told her, though he could hardly trust himself to speak.

'Perhaps the 'tremendously,' will carry us through yet,' he said to himself. 'If only this confounded fever would not master me.' He went to the upper deck, and sat on a long cane chair alone, through the sunset and past the dinner hour. He did not want her with him; he wanted to be alone and to think. But presently she came, he heard her step, and turned to look at her coming towards him through the twilight. Oh! had he dared but to love her—dared but take her life in his hands, and hide her forever from that other man! She was beginning to love him, but it was he and not she who knew it. This last day or two she had been different, and to-night she was not able to meet his eyes. Since that mad avowal last night, she knew all that was in his heart. Something told him that she too had changed. She sat down beside him, but he managed to keep his face turned seaward, as if he were watching the darkness coming towards them; and she was afraid to speak. She listened to the rushing of the water as the ship cut through it. The ship's officers below were playing dominos in the deserted saloon, and she heard the clinking of the glasses from which they drank their syrup-and water. It grew quite dark, and eight bells sounded from amidships.

She thought of England, and felt as if it were at the far end of the world. Perhaps she would never see it again. She thought of her husband. It seemed as if he had lived in the ages long ago, and had only left her a legacy that was half shame. She was going to inherit it soon—it would be called divorce.

Frank turned his face to her: she saw his eyes in the dim light.

'Nell,' he said.

She held out her hands and felt her heart go with them; the darkness seemed to gather a little closer, as if the daylight would be sorry. He caught the hands, and held them in a hard, strong clasp, though he was shaking with ague.

'Nell,' he said. 'My life—Nell!' and drew her face nearer.

A dry sob came into her throat. She stooped and kissed him, and felt as if she had signed away her soul.

CHAPTER IX.

For a moment there was silence; then she got up and slowly went to a seat a little distance off and rested her face down in her hands, and a feeling that was half shame and half joy filled her heart and made her eyes dim. How could she help loving him, she thought. The other man had deserted her, and a wild scorn was taking possession of her as she remembered it; but this man had been infinitely tender. The long days had seemed like weeks, but they had been blessed ones, in which, happy and miserable by turns, she had seen the places that had been dreams to her till she walked beside him through their streets, and saw their people's faces. She thought of the dinner at Dover by the open window at the 'Lord Wardeu,' and the merry day at Paris and the drive to the Bois. There had been two or three days at Marseille, too long and sad, but looking back now they were very precious to think over. She remembered every word he had said there, the walk in the flower market, and the laces under the trees on the Padre at night. The frogs in the fountain had croaked aloud as never frogs had croaked before, and he had invented ridiculous legends about them, and sworn they had come from the Egyptians. Then there had been the walk down to the old port and up to Notre Dame de la Garde, and along the Cannebierre, and later, the sailing away in the ship.

She lifted her face; the white flowers of yesterday were still in her dress, but she had crushed them till they had made a stain on its delicate colour—in one mad moment, a month later, she put her cheek against it. Then she heard him get up from the long deck chair and come slowly towards her. He put his hand on her shoulder, it sent a throb through her—right or wrong, she loved him, and could not help it.

'Nell,' he said. There was a tone in his voice that made her look up quickly, love and passion were it, but something else that sounded like dogged determination. His face was set and white, his teeth together, his head put back as if he were afraid. 'Nell,' he said again, and shivered, 'I can't go on with it. I have been a beast and a brute. I wish Lal would come and stick knives in me and kill me ten times over.' She stared at him with astonishment. 'I wish I could be burnt, and hanged, and drowned, for I did it all myself.'

'What?' she asked. 'Did what?'

'I brought you away. I did it for a lark, and I loved you. I think I did that from the first moment.'

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'Yes, but—but—' she stood up and faced him, 'I don't understand.' 'I have led Lal a fool's dance, and led ourselves one in front of him. He didn't send us on; he didn't know that I brought you away from Victoria. I did it.'

'You did it?' she was getting dazed.

'Yes, I thought it would be fun to give him a wild dance, and I tickled his nose with a straw in the shape of a telegram from every place.'

'But he sent us telegrams?'

'I invented them.'

'Invented them?'

'Yes, and sent them all.'

'Frank, you are mad!'

'Yes, I am mad, Nell. I didn't realise somehow that he would take it seriously at first—nor wholly how serious the whole thing was—till I heard those belated idiots yesterday say that he was going to divorce you. I didn't even occur to me that he'd put the blame on you, as well as on me, and think—'

'What does he think?' she asked, breathlessly.

'He thinks that we have run away with each other.'

'He thinks that! and you let him think it all this time, and cost him all that pain? You let him think I was so wicked and bad!'

'Yes—all that.'

'Oh, I can't believe it! And he is going to divorce me because he thinks I have done this?' He, staring at her through the darkness, could see that her face was as white as his own. 'And you could do it for a lark—you could ruin our lives and let me be made shameful, and she put her hands for a moment over her beating heart.

'Yes,' he said, 'and because I loved you too, though I did not mean to let you know that, on my honor.'

'Your honor!' she said, with a wild burst of tears. 'Oh, you don't know what honor means.' He ground his teeth, and controlled himself with an effort.

'You are giving it me hot,' he said, 'but I deserve it, and must submit. I thought you loved me half an hour ago. That's why I found courage to speak to-night. I love you, Nell,' his face grew almost contorted while he spoke; but his voice was the same voice that had gone to her heart the last few days, and she could not get away from it—but I am wiser than you, and know that we are not stronger than the men and women who have gone before us. While I only loved you, we were safe, but when I knew you loved me back—'

'Oh, I didn't!' she cried, 'I didn't! I love my husband—it was the first time she had called Lal that, but it seemed to give her strength—and no one else in the world.'

'All right! but if you had cared, we mightn't—it's all a question of what one cares for most, Nell, whether it's virtue or money, or a man or a woman,' he said, cynically. 'No; perhaps that's wrong. You said to-day that the man was the thing he made, and the deed he did.'

'A wicked, cruel deed,' she cried.

'All right,' he said, 'I am what I have done—but I expect I have made Lal think himself a fool.'

He laughed a weird, wicked laugh that enraged her. Mrs. Ives was right, he was a demon.

'I hate you!' she burst out.

Through the dusky night he could see that her face was scornful and hard. He looked at it curiously.

'Oh, I could kill you; for being so cruel and so wicked!' she cried.

'Rage suits you very well, baby,' he said. 'A nice vixen you'll be in five years' time, and I don't believe that Lal will know either how to hold you in or to give you rein.' She threw her head back; her cheeks burnt. It was too much to bear.

'I shall go home the moment we get to land,' she cried passionately, 'and I shall tell him how you finished by insulting me, and laughing at him.'

'You flare very well, my dear.' The sadness and weariness he so often put into his voice were there, and he seemed to be half tottering. 'I'll take you back to-morrow—rather a tame ending, to go meekly back, hand in hand, and say we are very sorry. I'll explain it all very neatly and you shall hate me for the rest of your days with a pure heart fervently.'

'I shall go alone. I couldn't bear the insult of your presence any longer. I couldn't speak to you.'

'And a quarter of an hour ago you loved me—you did, Nell—and you kissed me,' he said, in a low voice.

'I don't love you now. I hate to think I did, even for those few minutes. It was wickedness; and I would rather have been burnt alive than kiss you.'

'Or than do it again,' he broke out in his old devil-may-care manner. 'You had better tell Lal; that'll take the sweetness and the sin alike out of it.'

'I shall.'

'I don't doubt it, and he'll forgive you, and tell you not to do it again, and you'll live happy ever after, strictly virtuous and deadly dull.'

'Frank,' she exclaimed, 'I never understand you.'

'May you never do so, baby, for the things and the people we understand lose half their fascination. My dear,' he went on, gently and almost sweetly, 'I have behaved, as I said just now, like a beast and a brute. I have made Lal look a fool in the eyes of all London, and cost him pain and mortifica-

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