

murderer. She had been false beyond the falsity of woman.

His face set and hardened, and grew rigid as iron, as he thought of all this. She saw that stern darkness, and held up her clasped hands.

'Oh, forgive me! I was false and base! You despise me, and I deserve it! I wedded him. No scorn you can feel for me can be half so bitter as that I feel for myself. And yet, if you knew all, you might try at least to forgive.'

He smiled a little as he listened—a smile that had a world of bitterness in it.

'There need be no talk of forgiveness between us. You lost me, Lady Inez, and you married another man—not at all an uncommon case. Pray do not plead to me. I think I would rather not hear it. You did as most women would have done. I have no right to complain—nothing to pardon. I am only sorry you did not marry a better man.'

She covered her face with her hands, her tears falling like rain. 'Cruel—cruel! But I deserve it all. And yet I, too, have suffered—oh, my God, so bitterly, so long! Roderic, by the memory of the past, be merciful—spare me one kind word to me! Listen whilst I tell you all!'

She stretched out her hands to him in an agony of supplication. He bowed low before her, but he would not touch those extended hands. All that passionate pleading only seemed to harden his heart, only seemed to remind him that through her he had lost faith in man, trust in woman—that through her he had been an exile and an alien all those years.

'I listen, Lady Inez,' he said, gravely; 'but once more I repeat, it is unnecessary. Let the dead past stay dead—the suffering and misery have gone by. If it gives you pain, I do not ask you to speak one word.'

'It is your coldness, your sternness, your cruel indifference, that give me pain. Ah, you are very unlike the Roderic Desmond of twenty years ago!'

He smiled again. 'Very unlike, my Lady Inez. You can hardly wonder at that.'

'No; your lot has been cruelly hard—your exile long and terrible. And I seemed so false, so base, so heartless. And yet it was for love of you I wedded Gerald Desmond.'

Rory Desmond's blue eyes opened wide at this declaration. He almost laughed aloud.

'Pardon me, Lady Inez, but really that is hard to believe. You marry my rival—the man I have every reason to hate—because you love me! Sounds rather like a paradox, does it not?'

'Nevertheless, it is true. I can never tell you what I felt, what I suffered, in those first dreadful days when we all thought you murdered. I only wonder now I did not die or go mad. But I lived on, in a stupor of anguish, under the blow which killed your father. Ah, he was happier far than I! And on his death-bed he called me to his side and begged me to be Gerald Desmond's wife.'

'My father did this?'

'He did. Do not blame him now; he did it for the best. Gerald Desmond did with him as he willed; and I—oh, Rory! could I refuse your father anything in that supreme hour? You were dead, I thought, and it mattered little what became of me. Besides, I hoped my life would be but for a few months at best; I thought I could not live in such utter desolation as that. But, ah, how strong I was! I lived on and on—a living death—abhorring the man who was my husband—seeing my folly too late—ever, ever mourning for you. If you cannot forgive me, try at least and think less hardly of me, now that my days are numbered—for the sake of my daughter whom you love!'

He listened in pale amaze. Then all else was lost in a great and deep compassion for this frail, pale creature, who in heart had been true, after all—whose sufferings had been so much greater than his own.

'It is I who must ask forgiveness, Lady Inez,' he said, in a tone infinitely gentle and sweet, 'not you; for I have greatly wronged and misjudged you all these years. If you think there is anything to pardon, then I pardon it freely. God knows! I see it all now. You have been far more sinned against than sinning. Yes, Inez—my sister—I forgive all, out of my inmost heart.'

He kissed the pale, transparent hands reverently—he looked with pitying tenderness into that pallid, wasted, worn face. Yes, her womanly martyrdom had been long and very hard to bear.

Here eyes shone through their tears, at peace now. They dwelt upon him with an angelic look, full of an affection free from every taint of earthly passion—the gaze of a mother upon a beloved and long-lost son.

'And you will tell me all now—your past?' she said, softly; 'and why it is we have met at last?'

He seated himself beside her. Her face glimmered white as that of a spirit in the wan light as she lay back to listen. He told her all—his escape from prison by faithful Mike Muldoon; that terrible struggle for life on the cliff with the man who was her husband; of his second rescue from death by Mike; of the cruel news of his father's death and her marriage, which had

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