

CUPIDITY AND CRIME.

CHAPTER IV. (CONTINUED.)

"Is your head better, dear?" she asked, with the anxious interest she always manifested now in the girl's slightest ailment. "Cristino, give your sister a cup of tea. You look a little better for your rest."

"I am better, thank you," Nora said quietly, "though I have not been resting all the time. I had some visitors to entertain."

Mrs. Bruce and Cristino exchanged glances, and the former said, with something like a return to her old imperious manner—

"You should not have seen them, child. It was very wrong."

"Why?" Nora's clear sorrowful gray eyes widened a little with the word.

Mrs. Bruce coughed in an uncomfortable fashion.

"Well, there is no real reason, I suppose; but it is not the usual thing for a young bride-elect to receive every idle caller."

Cristino laughed irreverently to hear her mother expounding the laws of etiquette, and even Nora's face brightened with a momentary smile.

"That may be," she said, with the faintest touch of mockery in her tone; "but these were not idle callers. I assure you. From each I received a special message, and I could hardly deny myself to Lord de Gretton's kinswoman or to your son."

"Then you saw Lady Olivia Blake?" Miss Singleton asked, drawing her chair a little nearer in the eagerness of her curiosity, and fixing her shining light eyes on Nora's face, as though she would read there the object and result of the interview.

But Mrs. Bruce's interest had taken an abrupt turn in another direction. Hard and selfish as she was, she had a mother's heart for her children, and its warmest corner was reserved for her handsome unsatisfactory son. When she thought of him, even Lord de Gretton and the grand marriage on which her soul was set seemed things of small account.

"Has Vance been here?" she cried, in tones of quick vexation. "How tiresome that I should just miss the dear boy! I did not know he was in town."

"Never mind Vance now, mother," Cristino said, with an impatient frown. "I want to hear about Lady Olivia."

"And never mind Lady Olivia now, Nora; I want to hear about my dear boy."

Mrs. Bruce spoke with unusual firmness and decision, uninfluenced for once by her daughter's petulant displeasure. Nora looked from one speaker to the other and shrugged her shoulders slightly.

"Which shall I obey when you give such contradictory orders?"

"Me," said her step-mother promptly.

"Cristino is only curious; I am really troubled about my boy. Where is he staying, Nora, and when shall we see him—to-night?"

Miss Bruce hesitated oddly over her answer; and Cristino, who heard the report of her brother's proceedings with ostentatious indifference and inattention, but studied her step-sister closely all the while, fancied that the pale face flushed a little when at last she spoke.

"No; he will not be in London for some time. He wished me to bid you all good-bye, and say that he would not be with you again until after Christmas."

"Nora!" There was so much agitated incredulity and sincere distress in the mother's tone that Nora's soft heart was touched; even Cristino condescended to show something like interest in the matter at last.

"After Christmas!" she cried, with a supercilious lifting of her light brows. "How absurd! Of course he means to be present at the wedding!"

"He does not," Nora answered quietly, not raising her eyes from the diamond ring that glittered on her slender fingers and always seemed to attract her gaze by

a species of fascination. "That was why he came now to bid me good-bye."

"And borrow money, I suppose," Cristino cried angrily. Her opinion of her brother was not specially high, and she had always bitterly resented his avowed preference for his step-sister.

Mrs. Bruce gave a bitter little cry, and raised her handkerchief to her eyes. Cristino's suggestion seemed only too probable; but the hardness of it hurt and shamed her. In a half-hearted fashion she began to apologise and explain; but Nora, with something like indignation, checked her.

"Nothing of the sort!" she cried quickly, her lovely eyes aglow and passion lending to her pale face some of its old rich color. "For shame, Cristino, to speak so of your brother! You ought to know him better."

"I speak so precisely because I do know him," Cristino retorted, with an obstinate look. "Confess now that he is in some scrape, that he told you something he dared not say to us. Ah, I thought so!"—with a cruelly exultant laugh. "Vance has long ceased to be an idol and a delusion to me."

"You have but one idol, Cristino," Nora answered, with unusual bitterness; but she did not deny Miss Singleton's suggestion; and Mrs. Bruce, who had been watching her almost affectionately, read in that silence a confirmation of her worst fears.

"Another scrape," she said wretchedly—"another quarrel with your father—more debts to pay! Oh, Vance, Vance, you will break my heart some day!"

Nora had small reason to love her step-mother or pity herself-wrought woes. She knew better than any one how far the weak mother-love, the injudicious petting he received, had gone to ruin all that was good and manly in Vance Singleton's nature, how long the handsome high-spirited boy had been encouraged in a ruinous idleness and a rebellious spirit that set all discipline at naught, how far he owed it to his mother that at seven-and-twenty he was a scapegrace, a spendthrift, without a profession, and friendless, with his way to make in the world.

All this Nora remembered then, not bitterly, but with an intense pity for the woman who, she thought, must find such sorry comfort in her afflictions. She did not know that to characters of Mrs. Bruce's type all things must come from without, inasmuch as remorse never assails them. They can imagine a world in arms has wrought them woe, never in any circumstances that they themselves have done wrong. But Nora knew nothing of this; she saw the florid face grow pale and the hard eyes dim; and, acting on a sudden impulse, she knelt by her step-sister and said brightly and coaxingly. "Vance is in no scrape—he is in excellent spirits; and he did not come to borrow money, as Cristino unkindly suggests, but to bring me a present. Look!" And with a pretty triumph in the pleasure she gave, she opened a tiny case and showed a ring set with four milk-white pearls.

"Did Vance give you that?" Cristino broke in incredulously; while Mrs. Bruce looked at it almost with awe. An inconsiderable item indeed in the gorgeous list of the future Lady de Gretton's wedding-presents, from penurious Vance it was a rare and costly gift.

"He did indeed!" Nora cried proudly; and her gray eyes brightened through quick grateful tears. "Now, Mrs. Bruce, you are not to fret for Vance, nor to doubt him or inquire the reason of his absence yet, but wait in patience until he can explain all. That, with a kiss, was his message to you, and there our interview ended."

Mrs. Bruce looked doubtful still; but the darker shadows had vanished from her face as she handed back the ring and returned Nora's kiss.

"I wish I had seen him, poor boy. However, I dare say it is all for the best."

"Of course it is, mother!" Cristino snappishly. "Even if he is off on a wild-goose chase, the governor will be pleased

that he should try something, and, as Lord de Gretton so decidedly disapproves of him, he is just as well out of the way."

All the new look of life and brightness, all the interest kindled by her step-brother's visit and the impulse to defend him died out of Nora's face, and the old dull look of resignation came back. True, she raised her dark head proudly, and said, in clear incisive tones—

"Lord de Gretton has never presumed to speak slightly of Vance in my presence."

But, the little effort made, she sank back wearily in her place, and the gray eyes regained their old look of far-off patient pain. Cristino however soon broke in upon her reverie.

"Well," she cried sharply. "Vance has had enough attention now, I hope! Perhaps I may have my question answered at last?"

Nora looked round dreamily, "Your question! What was it, Cristino?"

"A comprehensive one, my dear," Cristino laughed—"I want to hear all about Lady Olivia's visit!"

Nora roused herself wearily at the words. She hated talking more than was absolutely necessary; her thoughts were always more or less confused and rambling now, and she collected them only with pain and difficulty. To speak of Vance indeed had been no effort; but Vance, with all his faults, was dear to her; moreover, he was a part of the old life that was slipping so surely from her. She would talk of him as long as they wished; but what could she say of Lady Olivia's visit but that she shrank from the subject with a vague unreasonable dislike.

"Was her ladyship very overpowering? Did she try to patronise you, child?" Mrs. Bruce asked, thinking she had hit upon a probable reason for the girl's look of extreme distaste.

"Oh, dear, no!" Nora said, with indignant sincerity. "She was—nice, I think, but a little strange in manner, as though she were intensely curious and yet thinking of something else all the time."

"A very uncomfortable manner," Cristino remarked, with a laugh. "Do you think her so handsome, Nora?"

This time Nora's answer came without hesitation of any kind.

"Most beautiful, in a grand imperial fashion that half frightens you. Her eyes are—the girl's own eyes darkened and dilated, as though they gazed upon some terrifying object still—I do not know how to describe them—so dark and so bright, with a sort of jewel-like glitter that dazzles and thrills you."

"My dear Nora!" Mrs. Bruce cried, in astonishment; while Cristino said, with a queer smile—

"Well, if you do not care to discuss your visitor, it is not that she failed to impress you. Did you ever make such a study of a pair of eyes before?"

Nora only shook her head, and Mrs. Bruce said blandly—

"We have always heard that Spanish mother's side and essayed to comfort her."

"You are quite wrong, Mrs. Bruce," eyes are something out of the common way; and, you know, Lady Olivia is half a Spaniard."

"Is she?" Nora asked, lifting her head with freshened interest, and trying to recall something she had lately heard about her oddly impressive guest.

"Oh, yes! Do you not remember Lord de Gretton told us that his uncle married, when quite an old man, a very beautiful Spanish lady, who died at Lady Olivia's birth?"

"Yes," Nora said slowly, resting her chin within her hollowed palm, and striving to collect her scattered thoughts.

They were drifting dangerously near the truth now; a little more enlightenment would have saved her even then. But her brain was dazed and weary, a mist seemed to hang over and clog her thoughts, and there was none to help and guide her to the light.

"I think I remember that—and something more," she added slowly; and the

large eyes turned in sorrowful appeal from one face to the other. "Was she not at one time engaged to—her cousin?"

Mrs. Bruce and her daughter exchanged a glance of quick dismay. Was it possible that the prize by which both had learned to set such store might still slip through their fingers?

Cristino was first to speak.

"Oh, that old story!" she cried, with a contemptuous laugh. "If you dig up such antediluvian anecdotes as that, you must be jealous indeed, Nora."

Nora did not answer; her lips twitched nervously at what seemed to her the cruellest of jests; but her large lovely eyes still turned to Mrs. Bruce in dumb appeal.

"You talk great nonsense, Cristino!" that lady cried severely, glad to find vent for the agitation of her nerves in a well-deserved rebuke to her daughter. "Nora is a sensible girl—not likely to indulge in retrospective jealousy or make herself wretched over shadows. She knows that Lord de Gretton's past belongs to himself, his future to her only."

"I am not jealous," Nora said; and her voice rang out with a sudden sharpness of bitter scorn and fierce disgust. What cruel hypocrites they were, she thought, talking of jealousy to her, when they knew that the one love of her life lay dead in Arthur Beaupre's grave, that a cold duty and a lifeless, loveless obedience were all she had promised Lord de Gretton! "I am not jealous, and you know it. I had another reason for asking about Lady Olivia Blake."

"Of course, my dear—a natural curiosity," said Mrs. Bruce soothingly. "Fortunately I can tell you the whole story at once. She was engaged to her cousin, Lord de Gretton, when she was a young thing—eighteen or so—and he—well, a good bit younger than he is now—not that I think a husband a bit the better for being this side of the fifties," Mrs. Bruce added, in a prudent parenthesis, as she stole a sharp side-glance at the eagerly listening girl. "Well, it was a family arrangement—no love lost on either side, I fancy; and, as often happens, in such cases, it fell through just before the day fixed for the wedding. My Lady Olivia took French leave of her disconsolate bridegroom and her father's home, and eloped with Captain Francis Blake, a dashing young Irish Hussar, who had made fierce love to her all through the season."

A long sigh that was like the very voice of disappointment and despair broke from Nora's white lips as she turned her face from her step-mother's sharp gaze. What she had expected to hear she hardly knew; a vague wild hope of possible freedom had sprung to life and died within the hour—that was all.

Miss Singleton bestowed upon her mother a glance of warmest approval. How admirably she had managed her very difficult case! To have denied all engagement between Lord de Gretton and his cousin, when at any moment the story might reach Nora's ears, when indeed there was no knowing how much Lady Olivia herself might tell, would have been dangerous in the extreme; to tell just half the truth, and fling the story back into a period almost antecedent to Nora's birth—this was grand mendacity indeed in Cristino's opinion; and so a little later she told her much-gratified parent.

"I did not think you could do anything so delicately dexterous, mother," she said when, Nora being safe in Lord de Gretton's company, the two women discussed their plans and arranged their dinner-dresses in Mrs. Bruce's room. "I really trembled when you began to speak."

Mrs. Bruce settled the rose-point on her black velvet shoulders and answered with conscious dignity—

"You might have known I should not blunder in such a delicate matter—where there was so much at stake too. I have some tact, Cristino."

"Well, so it seems," Cristino agreed, with her never-failing laugh and a stare of candid wonder. "That is what amazes