

THE GREAT LINTON MYSTERY.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A CONVERSATION.

"After all, I'm what you have made me."

The words fell with startling distinctness upon Gertie's ear; and, turning her head as she stopped abruptly, she saw them close to her—Gilbert with his back against a tree and his face turned towards the distant hills. Miss Drummond seated on the stump of a cut fir a few feet from him.

Gertie put her hand upon the bole of a fir for support. The ascent of the hill had made her strangely giddy, and it seemed as if each beat of her heart would suffocate her. It was Miss Drummond who spoke. Gilbert made no response. After a few moments of silence, she continued—

"Whatever I am, I deserve your consideration. If you have done your best to make me hate you, you have also done your best to make me love you; and, if you have succeeded, you have no right to blame me, however late my love has come. You know I love you."

"It is you who say so."

"I say so. Well, can you deny it? Would any woman in my position, without my love, have been so merciful?"

He laughed contemptuously.

"I have been merciful!" she continued, with emphasis. "What but mercy has made me hold my tongue?"

"Prudence."

"Prudence! What advantage have I gained by silence? All that you had to give you offered me at Cherbourg, and I refused it. Was that prudence? Tell me what I have to gain by keeping silent."

"There's your life to lose by not keeping silent."

"Oh, do you think I wish to die of old age? I'd blow out my brains to-morrow if I found a wrinkle in my face."

"There's nothing particularly new or interesting in what you say. If you have told me all you wished to tell, we will return to the house."

"I've not finished yet. When I agreed to play my part in the farce that has been running here for the last three or four weeks, I suppressed a very strong inclination to be revenged on that bit of a girl who has taken my place; and for that sacrifice I expected a reward. You ought to know that I am not the kind of woman whose life is self-sacrifice. I never did believe that virtue was its own reward, nor anything like it. If you thought I should rest content to be a visitor in the house which should be mine, and to witness an heir receiving those caresses to which I have the first claim, you were mistaken. I expected at least to share your caresses—I tell you that that you may know how to reconcile me to the position you wish me to retain. I am flesh and blood, Gilbert; I am a woman with rather more than a woman's share of passion and jealousy, and I tell you that the present condition of things is intolerable. I can read that stupid child's face, and I know the meaning of her gaily to-day; she has a dress to wear at dinner to-day which she thinks it will mortify me to see. She is right—for you gave it to her."

"I'll give you a dozen as good, you know for the asking."

"I don't choose to ask."

"Ah, and all this business is because the poor girl has a new dress—eh?"

"Whether it is that or something else doesn't matter. The result is that I am resolved that this state of things shall end."

"Have you any alteration to suggest?"

"Yes, I have."

She paused. Gilbert continued to look with a dull eye on the golden hills.

Gertie had listened like one in a dream, who has a vague fable wish to get away from it to hear. She dared not move for the fear of falling, it seemed as if the tree

she held rocked to and fro with the land-scapes before her eyes, and that the earth was slipping, alighting, slipping away from her feet. Now and then a pang shot through her body, as if a knife were being thrust into her, and she had to bite her lip to prevent a cry escaping; and then a cold moisture broke out upon her forehead, and there was a sickness at her heart, and her limbs trembled so that each moment she expected to lose her hold upon the tree and fall. Oh, if she could only get away without being seen or heard!

"You must send that maudlin child away! That is what it must come to sooner or later." Gertie heard that, and summoned her courage with the desperate resolution of getting down the hill before her pain came again. "You will throw her aside as you throw me aside."

A dull thud, like the sound of a log falling on the turf, reached Gilbert's ear above the harsh raking voice of Miss Drummond; and, turning his head he saw his wife lying face downwards on the earth.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AFTERWARDS.

Gertie's swoon was not of long duration. When consciousness returned, she found her head upon Gilbert's shoulder; she felt that he was carrying her, and that they were descending the hill. Something terrible had happened, she could not remember what. It was delightful to know that she was in his arms, and to yield to the desire to close her eyes and forget again. Presently she felt something cold upon her temples, so cold that it took her breath away, and, opening her eyes, she discovered that she was lying upon the ground, with her head resting in the hollow of her husband's arm, and that he was dipping a handkerchief in the watercourse by which she lay. He wetted her temples, and she remembered that she had fallen giddy under the firs. How tenderly he cared for her!

"Dear one!" she murmured, lifting her arm and drawing his head to her lips.

"Better now?" he asked.

"Oh, yes! I could sit up, love." She thought of her new dress, and feared the water would spoil it.

He raised her to a sitting posture, supporting her firmly. She felt the water trickle from her face, and looked down at her dress in alarm. The wonderful bodice was cut from top to the bottom, and, beneath, her corsets gaped open, cut equally from top to bottom.

"Oh, my beautiful dress!" she cried.

"Good Heaven, Gertie," exclaimed Gilbert, with impatience, "don't you know that the thing might have killed you? What on earth induced you to put yourself in such an infernal machine as that?"

"Does it displease you, dear?" she asked piteously.

"Heavens, do you think to please me by putting yourself on a level with fools—and—"

He did not complete the sentence.

And this was the result of her plans to win his admiration, and the end of all those hopes she had cherished during the week! She burst into tears, being too weak to bear her bitter disappointment with fortitude.

Without a word, Gilbert lifted her up in his arms and continued his march towards the house.

"He thinks I am nothing but a little fool, and he will love me no more," she thought, with that extravagant despondency which usually follows such a crisis as that she had gone through.

Then she suddenly recollected what she had heard on the hill. That woman had told Gilbert that she was a silly child, and that he would throw her aside when he was wearied of her. Was that all a ex-

lucy? Was there not truth in it? Had she not at this very moment proved that she was silly? Without angry protest he had listened to what that bad woman said against her; he had not kissed her since she returned to consciousness; he had seen her burst into tears without attempting to charm them away with his sympathy. Was it not a proof that he thought her no better than a little fool and despised her for her folly? And was it not a proof that he thought her no better than a little fool and despised her for her folly? And was it not a truth? Was she not a fool to let him see how weak and wretched she felt? He might suppose that she was crying because her dress was spoiled. Oh, she must do something to prove that she was sensible and strong!

"I am quite myself again now, love," she said, bringing her voice under control by a strong effort. "I should like to walk; it will do me good."

Gilbert set her upon her feet and drew a long breath; with all his strength, he had not the superhuman powers of a hero of romance, and the descent of the hill had tried him. She drew the cut edges of her bodice together as well as she could and held them with her hands, and Gilbert, supporting her body with his arm, led her under the shadow of the acacias round the lawn to the house.

His silence frightened her. How could she convince him that she was not a silly child?

"I haven't heard the bell yet," she said, trying to speak in an ordinary tone, as if nothing had happened. "I may not keep dinner waiting, after all."

"Oh, hang the dinner! Time enough for that when we've got you to bed."

Gertie submitted without remonstrance, saying to herself that it would be a poor sign of good sense to oppose herself to her husband's wisdom.

She felt better lying down, with the cool pillow under her head, which ached a little. Gilbert drew the curtains and kissed her before he went away. She wished to speak to him; she did not know what she had to say, but there was a load at her heart which would be removed if only she could pour out its care to him. But Pierce was in the room, and it was impossible. When he was gone, she sat up in bed and said—

"Pierce, take away that dress, and the corsets as well. I don't want to see them ever again—do you understand?"

"Yes, madam. Does your ladyship require anything else?" The careful woman was anxious to know what was going on at the dinner-table.

"No. If I want anything at all, I will ring for you."

Left to herself, Gertie determined to think it all out rationally, and determine what her line of conduct should be. But her ideas would not arrange themselves—there were so many all hurrying through her mind that they upset each other, as it were; and somehow the rustling of the poplars by the river and the scent of heliotropes waited through the *persimmes* got the ascendancy over everything else, and she fell asleep.

It was quite dark when she awoke. Her headache had passed off, and she felt refreshed and invigorated by her long sleep. She remembered now quite clearly all that had taken place from the time she put on her dress to the time she had Pierce carry it away. Everything came before her with marvellous distinctness; even the phrases she had caught as she stood under the firs with that sickening pain at her heart. What she had heard of the dialogue between Miss Drummond and Gilbert had not caused her to faint away. She had heard little that she had not before learnt or surmised. Gilbert had been Miss Drummond's lover once upon a time. Miss Drummond told her that on the first day she came, and, unpleasant as the fact was, she had reconciled herself to it as a thing of the past which could not be undone by idleness. He did not love her now—that was very certain—and he never could again. Oh, he would never cease to love her who was

his real wife, if she only bore herself bravely, kept bright and pleasant, and did not do foolish things! It was the knowledge of that which made Miss Drummond so angry. He would never, never, never yield to her horrid wishes. Where was he now? What time was it?

With this thought she drew back the curtain of her bed, to see if any light was showing through the window. It took her a moment or two to make out what she saw. Ah, the window was open and the *persimmes* were thrown back—that was how the beauty of the starry heavens came to flash upon her. Gilbert perhaps had come to look at her before going to bed in the next room, and had opened the window, the night being so still and calm.

As she looked, a great dark figure rose against the sky.

"Oh, is it you, my darling?" she cried, recognising, even in the darkness, the form of her husband's head and body.

"Awake, Gertie?" he said, coming to her.

She could not speak, her heart was so full of love and of joy to think he should be watching in her room while she slept; but she drew him down to her and kissed his lips and his face.

"Feel all right again, sweetheart?" he asked, resting himself by her side on the bed.

"Oh, yes—so happy, love!" She was grateful for the darkness, for tears—she knew not why—had sprung to her eyes and were silently flowing down her cheeks on to the pillow. "Is it late, dear?" she added in a whisper, that the sound of her voice might not betray her.

"The old Bear's getting jolly low down."

"And my favourite Pleiades, where are they?"

"Oh, right away out there!" Gilbert extended his arm, then brought it back and stroked her hair gently with his fingers.

Now she was nearly happy, she would talk without being silly.

"I've sent them away, dear," she said, in a light confidential undertone.

"What—the seven stars?"

"No—my dress and the corsets. I didn't think they would displease you."

"Of course you didn't. I know all about it. You would wear rags with the same purpose. Do you think I haven't read the riddle of that dress? Poor little Gertie, putting her body to the torture for the sake of a smile, and getting no return for her loving tribute but a harsh rebuke!"

"I deserved it dear. It was very silly to do that."

"If that was silly, then they were fools, and nothing more, whose devotion led them to the rack. Did I seem very cruel, Gertie?"

"How could you seem cruel, dear, to me?"

"Men are sometimes cruel from mere want of self-command, or perhaps from a kind of brutal instinct to punish those who give them pain. I dare say, if I analysed my feeling, I should find that I was angry with you for having risked so much for my sake. Fancy what might have happened! Then I was upset, to begin with—worried beyond endurance by that woman, you know."

"Why do you let her worry you, love?"

"Because I can't help myself. We were having a kind of explanation when you were coming to us."

"I was going away, dear. I didn't want to hear what you were saying."

"Ah, you heard something then?"

"Yes, something."

There was perfect silence for a minute. His fingers ceased to stroke her hair.

"What did you hear?" he asked then, in a low earnest tone.

"I heard her threaten to reveal something which you had made her promise to keep secret; and that explained why you had tolerated her stay with us. But I don't think you need mind that, love, if you would like to send her away."

"Mind what, Gertie?"