

A MODERN OTHELLO

"Not often," I answered, slyly; "and I am sorry you have come back rich by this means, Fred."

"You must not preach," he said, quickly. "You were always disposed to be priggish and to sermonize. I often think that that last word lost you Conrad Gordon, Beekie."

"Perhaps so," was my reply.

"And a good loss too," he added, with a sudden fierceness. "I say a good loss—damn him! There!"

"Hush! hush! Fred; you forget yourself and me. You are not just."

"Has any one been just to me—acted justly towards me, Rebecca?" he continued, in the same fierce strain. "Have I not been a scape-goat all my life?"

He got up, and paced the room with long, impetuous strides; he struck the table with his hand as he passed it, and scattered my books on the floor.

"What has disturbed you, Fred?" of what have you to complain?" I asked.

"It is easy to inquire, but not easy to explain," he said, becoming somewhat calmer after this. "But I have not been treated well. He need not have taken me so completely at my word."

"You released her from the engagement—is it of Mary you are speaking, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes—yes."

"And you not mean—"

"I meant every word I said then," he interrupted, angrily again; "but I was mad when I wrote, and she might have seen that, and waited a little longer—waited till I had come back, as I have done, to marry her, and, my God! to find her another man's wife!"

"You have no right to complain, Fred," I urged.

"I think I have. That greedy old father of hers has been at the bottom of the plot, dragged her into it, persuaded her what an eligible match it was. He always hated me," Fred muttered.

"Well, well, it is all over now; why should you rave like that?"

"It is not all over."

"It is—it must be."

"She has never loved that brute Gordon, or forgotten me," he exclaimed. "I will see her—I will explain—I will tell him—"

"Nothing, I hope, Fred," I concluded.

"Ah! wait a bit, Beck. You are no judge of character—you never were," he said. "I'm not the weak milk-sop you have fancied me."

"All this is folly."

"I have been wronged, and I'll have my revenge," he cried.

"There has been no wrong; and you will think better of it to-morrow."

"We shall see!" he muttered.

His threats did not alarm me very much. I had seen a great deal of Fred's vapourings in my time, and I knew him too well, I thought, to believe that any disappointment would weigh upon him long.

Was it a worse judge of men's character than I am of my sex? Was I as mistaken in my estimate of Fred's as I had been, to all appearances, in Conrad Gordon's?

It seemed so; for Fred Bevis was unlike the old brother of mine from that day forth. Despite his long silence, his surrender of all claim to Mary's affections, he was a man who had returned back with a grievance.

and was disposed to nurse it, to his prejudice and my discomfiture. He was not my brother Fred again. He was a moody, discontented man, who cast a gloom over the house rather than helped to brighten it, as I had always thought he would. I missed the old hearty laugh which had been natural to him; I began to fear him and his moods a little, to be sorry, after a while, that he had come back, although it was hardly in my heart to think very badly of him. He was not the man for whose return I had prayed.

He renewed his acquaintance with Conrad Gordon and Mary. Living in so small a town; it was impossible to prevent this meeting; indeed, it was impossible to say why they should not meet. People who have changed their minds cross each other's path with every hour of the day, and these were commonplace folk who might be trusted to play propriety.

Conrad Gordon thought so—even turned the first meeting of the old lovers into a jest, as if anxious to put them at their ease. And Mary Gordon, proud of her husband's love, and reciprocating it very warmly, was at her ease at once. She had no suspicion of the old passion burning in the breast of Fred Bevis; she had outlived her first romance, and she felt glad to meet him as a friend, to laugh even at the follies of the past, the house of cards which had been built between them, and allowed to collapse, when they were almost boy and girl. Fred affected to laugh also; but alone in his room at night, I could hear him sobbing like a child or raving like a madman. Yes, he was very weak, poor Fred; but his weakness had taken a different phase, and there was danger in it now—danger to others as well as to himself.

CHAPTER III.

Conrad Gordon issued announcements to all his friends that the anniversary of his wedding-day was to be celebrated by a ball. It would be a grand ball, everybody was certain; when there was an opportunity for display, it was not in the Gordon nature to miss it. This had been always Conrad's weakness, and of late days, and with increasing wealth, it had grown upon him like a disease. He was spoiling his wife; he was offering a bad example to the country; he was encouraging extravagance, envious neighbors said among themselves, but they accepted his invita-

tion to the fete with alacrity, and mustered in goodly numbers to the show.

I had had a faint hope that Fred would decline the invitation, but he professed himself anxious to be my escort, and Mary's urgent letter to me was one to which I could not say no. I should have been glad to hide away from all their gaiety, but it was the end of the first year of their happiness, and I must come, Mary wrote; and I did not like the idea of Fred's going to their house without me. He had become grave and thoughtful of late days, I have said; and I was doubtful of a manner that was far from natural.

We went to The Limes the day before Christmas-eve; it was the end of one year and the beginning of another in Mary Gordon's life. It became a memorable date to me. I was like some one behind the scenes who knew more than the rest, and had grown uneasy with the knowledge. I was a spy in their midst,—as earnest and as watchful to me, and it might be in my power to thwart it, with God's help.

It was a night of shadow, despite my effort to shake off the gloom which submerged me, despite the light and life on every side of me, the crowds of friends and acquaintances, the bright faces, the merry peals of laughter, the gay dance-music from the orchestra. I had not seen Mary in higher spirits; her whole soul was in the success of the entertainment; and her husband flitted and fro, an amiable master of the ceremonies, intensely anxious for the comfort of his guests.

This was in the early part of the evening; after the great supper there was a change. I had been waiting for it; I felt there was a crisis in more than one weak life that night. Mary was walking with my brother, and I was watching them, when a Gordon's voice, close to my ear, started me.

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"I am afraid you have spent a very dull evening, Rebecca," he said. He had taken to calling me by my Christian name again, following his wife's example.

"Oh, no, I have danced several times. The party has been a very great success; don't you think so?" I said hurriedly, perhaps a little incoherently.

"I hope it has," he answered. "Mary and I have not spared any pains to do honor to the anniversary of our wedding-day, and she is very happy. I did not answer him; there was a new tone in his voice which I fancied I remembered—a faint ring of an old inharmonious note that used to jar upon me.

"I do not remember seeing Mary in such high spirits as these before," he added, thoughtfully; "she is as impulsive and full of excitement as a child."

"This is a memorable day to her."

"To you both," he added.

"Certainly."

"We look back and have nothing to regret," he continued; "we look forward full of faith too—that is what Mary said this morning."

"Yes, she is a very happy wife."

"Do you think so?"

"I do, indeed."

"I have tried to make her so, God knows," he said. Then he added, abruptly, "How old is your brother, may I ask?"

"Three and twenty."

"Seven years younger than I; he has the world before him."

"I trust he will succeed in it."

"Don't you think he will?" he asked, very sharply now.

"Yes—I hope so; but he has been very unfortunate."

"Will he remain a very great while with you, do you think?"

"I do not know."

He did not look at me whilst he put those questions; and he did not appear to be interested in my answers. I glanced up at him at last; he was watching his wife and Fred with a fixed attentiveness that was remarkable, and his swarthy features had deepened very much in hue. I had seen him look like that in the old days; I had missed it till now.

"How long were those two engaged to each other before they discovered their mistake, I wonder?" I fancied he was hardly speaking to me, but I replied to him:

"Two years almost—he was abroad the greater part of the time."

"Yes, yes—I know," he added, very quickly; "Mary has told me everything—she has concealed nothing from me. It was the old story of a boy's and girl's fancy for each other, ripening into the usual childish attachment. These first loves do not last, and are invariably mistakes."

He had already forgotten I had been his first love—that he had been mine! He was in a half-dream, with one couple amongst the dancers, for the dream figures which possessed him.

"I shall be glad when the fete is over," he muttered; "I am tired to-night—I am getting old, I fancy."

He strolled moodily away, and when the dance was concluded I saw him approach his wife, whisper a few words in her ear, draw her arm through his own, and walk away with her toward the spacious conservatory, into which the ballroom opened. My brother came and sat by my side, and burst into a loud laugh.

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"By Jove! if I don't think old Gordon's jealous!" he cried.

"He has had no cause, I am sure."

"Well, no. But why is Becky Bevis so cock-sure?" he said, significantly.

"Because Mary is not a flirt, and you are an honorable man," I replied.

"Not a flirt! Oh, much you know! Why, half the fellows are raving about Gordon's wife to-night," he said; and did you ever see her look so beautiful?"

"Probably not. A ball dress becomes a pretty girl."

"She hardly looks more than a girl, poor thing, does she?" said Fred, "and yet she has been married a year to that beetle-browed buckamoor."

"Hush! somebody will hear you."

"I don't care who hears me," he said, loudly; "it is a fact. Do you think she would have had him if it had not been for his money? Or that you would have had him, either, mind you—all those long years ago, when he asked you, and then served you so badly?"

"I have never owned that he treated me badly," I cried, indignantly, "and you have no right to tell me so."

"I beg your pardon, Beekie," he answered, very quickly, at my protest. "I ought not to have said that. There, there, God help me, I don't know what I am saying."

"Shall we go home?"

"Presently—in a few minutes Mrs. Gordon has promised me another dance," he stammered.

I looked up at him, and his face changed.

"Yes, I know what is in your suspicious little mind," he said, with a forced cough; "you are thinking of my melodramatic raving on the day I came back to Westerton. All that is over and gone."

"I am glad. It is all over then?"

"Yes, all over," he repeated.

There was a partner for me in the next quadrille, and Conrad Gordon and his wife were our vis-à-vis. I glanced toward Mary with a smile, which she did not reciprocate; there was a strange grave look that was forced upon her face; it was as though I had offended her in some way. Conrad Gordon had not lost his own grave aspect either, although he gazed down anxiously at his wife, as if to catch her glance. There had been a few words, "A little difference," and my brother Fred had been the cause—were the first faint mutterings of the storm to be heard on the anniversary of their wedding-day.

It was a melancholy quadrille for three of the party, and my partner, who made the fourth in the set, regarded

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us with dismay. When it was concluded I followed Mary, and her husband, seeing me approach, left us together.

"Has anything happened? Are you fatigued?" I hastened to inquire, as I sat down by her side.

"What should have happened to me?" Was the sharp rejoinder.

"I—I don't know; I thought that—, and then I came to a full stop. It was all very difficult of explanation."

"Nothing has happened, very particular," she answered, slowly. "I have met with a surprise. That is all."

"Has Fred—?" and then I stopped again.

"Yes—Fred; he has told me everything."

"Everything?" I repeated, wonderingly. "I do not understand."

"Everything concerning your past engagement to Conrad, which you have kept from me, hidden from me, both of you—all of you," she cried, glittering her fan violently, and the tears starting to her eyes.

"Oh, my dear Mary, I would have told you all this long ago, but it was your husband's wish that I should not—"

"You study my husband's wishes, it appears?"

"It was his place to tell you. I asked him if he would do so, before your wedding-day; I knew it would be so much better. Ah, do not reprove me, dear, I will tell you all to-morrow."

She softened at the regretful tones of my voice, at the sorrow which my face betrayed. She dropped her fan, and placed her hands in mine at once.

"There, there, Beekie, think no more about it," she exclaimed. "I am foolish—I understand why you did not tell me; it was from sheer kindness; but Conrad has put me out to-night. He has taken me to task, lectured me, found fault with me—only think—for the first time in my life, and about nothing. He shall be sorry for it."

"Forget it, and forgive all, both of you," I urged.

"I will not forgive him for a week," she answered, pettishly. "And to scold me for talking to Fred—poor, simple-minded, honest old Fred. It is too ridiculous. As if I had not known Fred all my life, as if we were not to be trusted even now, as if—"

"Mary, I think it is our dance," said Fred's voice, so close to us that we both started; then he led her away, and the instant—afterward they were whirling round in the waltz together. Conrad Gordon took her place at once; he had been watching us probably. The guests were thinning, and the hour was growing late.

"What has she been saying to you?" he asked, hastily; "may I inquire?"

"She will tell you," I answered, hurriedly; "it is nothing of importance."

"Everything is of importance that concerns her," he said. "We have

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had a few words—after all, the devil is not dead in me."

He stamped his foot upon the floor, and I could see a red light in his eyes.

"She has been speaking of our past engagement—"

"Ha! who has told her of that?" he exclaimed. "Your brother—has he come back to wreck me? That man, of all men!"

"No, no; do not think so," I urged. "It escaped in conversation between them. That's all."

"I will try and think it is all," he replied; "if I am mistaken, I am sorry for—your brother."

They were warbling words, I was assured; and yet they were quietly conveyed, and only his lurid glance made my heart sink a little. Going home, with the snow thick upon our carriage window, I could hear that voice again, and see the red shimmer of the eyes. Fred's laughter suddenly startled me from my reverie.

"What a fellow!" he exclaimed.

"Of whom are you speaking?"

"That Gordon, I mean. He's a regular Othello, Beekie."

(To be continued.)

FOOD IN FRANCE.

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France, so far as food is concerned, is in a bad way; worse than in 1917-18.

The total nutrition value for the 1918 crop of cereals, beans and potatoes is below that of last year.

The French Food Controller is authority for this statement and that the wheat crop is large and of better quality, but the maize, barley, oats, beans and potato crops are much smaller.

The potato situation is particularly grave for this year; the crop is not more than 7,500,000 long tons, as compared with an average for the last ten years of 12,000,000 long tons.

According to total wheat crop in France for 1918 will be about 180,000,000 bushels, an increase of about 25 per cent. over last year's production. For the three years preceding the war the average production was 324,187,000 bushels. In 1914 it was 282,689,000 bushels, while for the years 1917 and 1918 it dwindled to 144,149,000 bushels.

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