

Family Circle.

FROM OUT THE DEPTHS.

The brilliant gleam of the lights inside the quaint old Gothic church streamed through the dim stained glass, throwing variegated, rich tints upon the spotless snow without.

The chancel, aisles, and gallery had all been illuminated, in order to let our decorators see the effect wrought by their busy hands.

A touch here, a leaf, or bunch of holly-berries added there, and it was pronounced to be perfect. Pleasant words of congratulation and the brightest of smiles were exchanged; and then the little group glanced to see how the young Rector viewed the result of their labors.

He stood near the principal door, away in the shadow, a cloud of sadness upon his handsome face. But seeing that he was noticed, he slowly advanced, and spoke a few words of praise, not in his usual warm, cordial tones, but in a constrained manner as if his thoughts were not quite under his control.

It would not have pleased him had he been informed that every young lady present knew as well as he did himself why he was so troubled. He was surprised, hurt, keenly disappointed, because Beatrix Carwardyne had not come to-night, as she had faithfully promised to do.

The girls, assisted by lovers, friends, and brothers who had come to escort them home, began to wrap up—a work involving much expenditure of time and attention—so the Rector could wander back unobserved to the vestry-door to loiter aimlessly there. Some of the bell-ringers were in the porch, assembling early, to be in readiness for the mid-night Christmas chimes; and they had opened the door to look at the adornments within.

The moon had risen, and the scene without was so indescribably lovely, that Charles Etherege could not but gaze upon its wondrous beauty. Suddenly he made a step forward, as if he had seen a spirit. For a moment he was foolish enough to believe he had.

A slender figure, closely enveloped in a dark mantle, had paused for a second exactly opposite the open door, and had looked into the church. The face was that of Beatrix; but how changed. The rosy cheeks had given way to a death-like, waxy tint; the great brown eyes, so gay and laughing always, were now full of a horror unspeakable—as of one who had come face to face with the dead.

Charles Etherege dashed through the preoccupied admiring knot of bell-ringers, and out into the moonlight.

"Beatrix—Miss Carwardyne?" he exclaimed, following in the direction her figure had so swiftly taken.

Not a sound—not the slightest foot-fall told him that any living creature was nigh. He stopped, and inclined his ear towards the ground.

In a minute or so the crisp "scratching" of the snow upon the path leading towards the Rectory from the church betrayed the fugitive, and with a few strides he was on the faltering steps of Beatrix Carwardyne.

"What has happened, Miss Carwardyne?" he asked.

"Pray—pray do not stop me, Mr. Etherege!" she pleaded, making an effort to lower her veil.

He took her hand, and drew it within his arm quietly.

She shrank from him.

"Beatrix," he said abruptly, "I must know the cause of your distress. I was much disappointed at not seeing you before. Why did you not come?"

"I could not—I had to go elsewhere," she murmured. "You had no reason to be disappointed, Mr. Etherege."

"No reason! Beatrix, you know—although I have never spoken of my feelings—you know that I love you, and I thought—"

The girl drew her hand from his clasp, and turned her head away with a perceptible shudder.

"Is it possible that I have deceived myself, and that you do not care for me?" he exclaimed.

"Surely you have not been coquetting to amuse yourself, and now throw me aside? Beatrix, something has occurred to make you change thus suddenly towards me. I was longing for a chance of telling you what was in my heart—of confessing how much I love you—of asking if you would be my wife; and now—"

For an instant the vivid color flowed over the lovely face before him; but it receded, leaving a more ashy paleness.

"Spare me!" she exclaimed, stretching out her hands like one smitten with sudden blindness. "Leave me."

"Not alone, at this late hour," replied the young Rector, calmly, endeavoring to control his emotion. "One word: has the coming of the wealthy Earl of Allendale anything to do with your contemptuous rejection of the comparatively poor Charles Etherege?"

The young girl made an effort to reply, but her parched lips refused to make a sound. Her lover bent his jealous eyes upon her, and saw her agitation; then, in the unjust, ungenerous outburst of resentment against her that rose for a moment in his heart, concluded that his conjecture was right. Knowing her pure and unworldly nature as he did, he yet allowed himself to believe that ambition was prompting her to play the jilt—to sell herself for rank and wealth. "Why have you come here to-night?" he abruptly asked.

Beatrix shivered; but before she could speak in reply, rapid steps were heard, and one of the Rectory

servants came in view, almost running. The man, seeing his master, hastily addressed him, with a respectful apology to the young lady, as it was a matter of life and death.

"I have been looking everywhere for you, sir," the man declared. "You are wanted at once, if you please."

"Will you send some one to attend Miss Carwardyne home?" said Mr. Etherege.

Then, in a low tone, he spoke again to Beatrix. "You will no longer care to see me to-morrow. Pray make my excuses to your father, as he may wait dinner for me, and wonder why I fail to appear."

With cold formality, he lifted his hat—the sweet remembrances of the season, and his deep, fervent love for the fragile creature before him, alike driven away for the moment.

Beatrix watched the receding figures until they disappeared; and she was alone. Then she sank on her knees in the sparkling snow, and clasped her hands above her head in an agony of despair.

"My love—my darling," she cried, "come back to me! Oh, heaven! help me. My burden is more than I can bear."

As if from sheer weakness and exhaustion, she sank lower and lower, until her face was kept from the snow only by resting upon the little grobe muff she carried. No one would have recognized the gay, brilliant Beatrix Carwardyne in this almost lifeless form.

Approaching steps roused her. She sprang up and, as if inspired by sudden terror, darted away.

With the speed of a fawn, she traversed the remainder of the way that led to her father's stately hall. Arrived there, she would have sped up to her own room; but her father stood on the threshold of the dining-room door by accident. A cloudy look of annoyance was on his face.

"Come here, Beatrix love," said he, trying not to show his vexation; "I want to say a few words to you. While the servants were in the room at dinner, I could not find a chance, and when I expected to see you in the drawing-room, they told me you had gone out. What could have possessed you to leave the house on such a cold, wretched night. I cannot conceive; unless you went off with a lot of silly, pottering fools, to the church, with the view of flirting with young Etherege?"

Beatrix threw off her hat, veil, and mantle, and stood within the richly furnished room, and inviting room; but she did not speak a word.

Her father seemed too much agitated to notice her pallor or her silence.

For a few moments he strode to and fro; then stopped abruptly.

"Sit down," he said; "listen, and do not interrupt. What I have to say will startle you, but bear with me till I have heard me out. You have been trifling and flirting with this Etherege. Do not speak, I beg of you. This must be at an end. It has not come to anything serious; I trust. I have other views for you. As you know, the rich young Earl of Allendale comes to spend his Christmas week with us. Do you know why he comes? He asked me for your hand—nay, you have not refused him. Etherege has only a few hundred a year—the Earl has a magnificent fortune! He has sent me a telegram to say he will be here to-night."

Beatrix sank into a chair, no longer able to support herself.

"Come—come, my dear," said Mr. Carwardyne; "it will be all for the best—all for the best. If you have cared a little for this black-coated adorer of yours, why, my lady the Countess will forget the girlish fancies of Beatrix Carwardyne."

"What you ask, my father, is impossible," the young girl said, in a hollow voice.

"Beatrix," he replied, bending over her, and speaking in a hissing whisper, "only you can save me from ruin! The world deems me a rich man. Child, from mad speculations, I have lost all, and am in a fair way of being plunged into penury. Timely help would, however, redeem my fortunes. I said I have lost all; but in one year, if I am aided now, I may be far more wealthy than before I let myself drift into commercial gambling. Would you calmly see me a beggar? I am too old to face the world, to enlist as a soldier, or go to sea. His hollow laughter echoed dismally through the oak-paneled room. "In your hands rests my fate. Refuse, and you doom me to the death of a wretched pauper! For weeks past I have kept my pistols, and—"

Beatrix rose to her feet.

"Father," she said, looking him steadily in the face, "you look it for granted I went this evening to the church. I was not there. One of the servants told me, as I left this room, that one of my poor pensioners was dying, and begged to see me. My conscience smote me; I had not been near her for a week. Hurriedly I went, thinking to give her half an hour, and another half-hour to help in decorating the church; but when I entered her cottage—"

Great sobs broke from the white lips of the young girl, and she covered her face with her hands.

"What is this all about?" angrily asked her father, confounded by this unexpected display of emotion.

Beatrix dashed aside her tears, and raised her slender form.

"She had a terrible secret to tell. She had not sent for me, but for you; and the messenger had made a mistake, catching just the name."

"For me?" vaguely said the Squire, a troubled look in his eyes—"a terrible secret?"

"Her name was Peggy Wilton."

Squire Carwardyne threw out his hands, as if to ward off a blow, and fell back against the great dining-table.

"Impossible!" he muttered. "She died five and twenty years ago. Oh, no! a mistake. What did she tell you?"

"All," replied Beatrix—"all; and never can this

hand of mine be given to an honest man—never—never!"

"The story was false!" cried Mr. Carwardyne, his face blanched to a guilty pallor. "The woman is an impostor! Girl, did you listen to infamous fabrications about your own father?"

"It was all poured into my ears before I could stay the words, each one of which fell on my heart like molten lead," answered Beatrix, mournfully, her eyes fixed on the carpet. "Oh! my father, it is not too late, perhaps, to make restitution," she suddenly cried, falling on her knees before him, with clasped hands. "Give up all—let us face the world as beggars; nay, not as beggars; but let us be content to go into obscurity, and work for a daily crust!"

"What folly!" exclaimed Mr. Carwardyne, furiously. "So you are only too ready to believe ill of your father, whom you have professed to love. You have swallowed the delirious ravings of an old dying crane. What did this woman want with me?"

"To intercede with you to do justice—to make reparation," replied Beatrix, rising to her feet.

"To whom? Did she tell you that?"

"No."

"Fish! Is the woman dead?"

"They told me she could not live through the night; but they forbade me from staying with her or seeing for you, as she wished. Any further excitement would kill her."

"Where is the cottage?"

"Will you see her?" cried Beatrix.

"No; why should I see an old hag, who may be past my anger by this time? Hark! I hear wheels coming up the drive. Forget this nonsense—this drivelling folly. Give me your promise to save me from ruin and disgrace!"

Beatrix drew back some steps, and looked at her father in horror and amazement. His cool bravado, his *sans froid*, confounded her.

The Squire ran to the great bay window, lifted the heavy green velvet curtain, and looked out.

"It is the Earl," he cried. "He has alighted, and is handing out his aunt, who comes with him. Beatrix, we should be there to welcome them. Go to your room, and arrange your toilette; you must look your best. I do not ask your promise: I rely upon your help. Were the story true that you have heard, it is all paramount that you, at least, be saved from ruin."

He strode from the room, into the great square hall, going bareheaded into the portico to welcome his guests.

For one wild moment, thoughts of flying desperately from the anguish that had come to her this bright Christmas Eve rushed into Beatrix's fevered brain. She turned despairingly from side to side. No one to aid or counsel her; no ray of hope; new fears and cares heaped upon her.

"And I am only nineteen!" she murmured.

"The story is true; my father denied it without even asking what had been told. I thought to be so happy this merry Christmas, and now I could pray for the Angel of Death to take me from this agony. I can never see Charles Etherege again. My hopes, my happiness, my life—all a wreck. I can only seek for courage to lead my father to repentance."

Laughing voices and footsteps close to the door, warned her to make her escape. Catching up her hat and mantle, she quickly passed through a door at the end of the room, and fled away to her own apartment.

Morel, her waiting-maid, a pretty, innocent-looking country girl, was sitting by the dressing-table.

She started, as the young lady entered with such haste; but her sudden blush only betrayed a very simple secret: she had been planning a little Christmas gift for her mistress—a gay shell pincushion—and was taken by surprise.

"Gracious! miss, you aren't ill?" she exclaimed.

"No, yes, no, Morel, I am not well," said Beatrix, passing her hands vaguely over her forehead. "The Earl and Lady Bel Vavasour have just come. Go down, and see that her ladyship is made comfortable, and say that I will be down presently. My head aches."

The girl looked at her with anxiety; but Beatrix made an imperative sign for her to go.

The Earl was a tall, exceedingly handsome young man, with figure noble as that of the sculptured Apollo, and a face of absolutely faultless beauty, judged by canons of art. Scarcely anyone would have suspected that beneath so fair an exterior lay a heart cold and cruel as ever slumbered in the breast of a ruined gamester or *roue* of the most advanced type.

Only certain beak-nosed creditors, who were eating their way into the vast estates, that had passed unscathed to him from an almost miserly old uncle, knew that he had squandered his splendid revenues. Only half a dozen people were conscious that he was trying to trade on his coronet and reputed wealth to entrap the heiress of the prodigiously wealthy Squire Carwardyne, of Tollard-Earnham.

But not one being, save himself and now his only child, was conscious of the fact that the great Squire was trembling on the edge of bankruptcy—that he looked to the young Earl as his savior, while in a measure his victim.

Only the guilty man himself, his daughter, the poor woman who lay dying, and now one more, knew that Squire Carwardyne had no more claim to dwell in his stately hall than the first tramp that might sit down to rest by the stone pillars supporting the huge iron gates.

For nearly thirty years he had kept the dark secret locked within his breast. He would have carried it into the silence of the grave, unrepentant—nay, triumphant; and now, when he was least