

A Broken Vow;

—OR—

BETTER THAN REVENGE.

CHAPTER XXII.

Mr. Victor Kelman was a man who lived by some curious method known only to himself. There were times when he had plenty of money, and times when he had none; an adventurer, he was a man of no country, and yet of all countries. It was quite impossible to say how old he might be, or how young; and he had had only one consistent feeling in the whole course of his existence. That feeling was his love for Olive Varney.

It had begun in admiration, and had continued in wonder. She had been so unlike the women he had met—so strong and dominant and self-reliant; and she was interesting by reason of the life she led. In strange Continental cities and towns he had met her, again and again—a sad and solemn girl—wandering with her father—a desolate stranger among light-hearted and happy people. The mystery about her had attracted him; her beauty also. Then had come that strange news of her death; and the marvellous surprise of finding her alive beside her own grave. He had been willing enough to act as her accomplice in a matter which promised some sport, and which promised, above all things, to bring him into closer relationship with herself.

But the man was maddened at the thought that she had used him up to a certain point, and then had calmly flung him aside, and told him she was done with him. To declare that she was Olive Varney would not serve his purpose, and would not further his cause with her; he was quite at a standstill, and had merely wasted his time, as he told himself bitterly enough. He was no nearer to the stony heart of this woman than he had ever been; and he had been made to appear ridiculous before other people for a mere whim of hers.

A creature of moods at all times, he had suddenly decided to abandon the matter; had changed his mind once more, and to the little shop in Westminster, in search of the real Aunt Phipps who had so basely deceived him. There, of course, he discovered that she was dead.

He discovered something else. Going back to the little shop after Olive Varney had left the place, he seated himself, in his usual casual fashion, on the counter, and spoke pleasant words to Mr. Jordan Tagg.

"You don't remember me," he said. "Perhaps if I call you Father Time you will remember. I was a friend of the dear departed." He jerked his head in the direction of the floor above as he spoke.

"I remember you well," Tagg had said. "I did not quite recognize you just now, although your face seemed familiar. What do you want?"

Thereupon Mr. Victor Kelman had entered into the matter of Aunt Phipps' death; had by a few cunning questions discovered the manner of the death, and even the place of burial. A few more casual questions, and he found that the old lady had left behind a few odd papers and a book or two—things of so little importance that Tagg had forgotten even to mention them to Olive. Now that it was all over, he evidently would not be sorry to get rid of them.

Assuming a carelessness he did not feel, Victor Kelman had managed to get hold of these things, and had finally taken them away with him. He was so gentlemanly, and he appeared to know all the circumstances concerning Aunt Phipps so well, that old Jordan Tagg had no suspicion.

From his point of view, however, the papers appeared worthless. There was an old well-worn Prayer Book, with the name "Annie Phipps" written in it; and there was a certain amount of desultory writing in a little note-book—a species of diary with which the old woman had apparently occupied her spare time in those last days. Victor read them through contemptuously enough; he found that they were for the most part laments in regard to the person she called "poor Phipps," and expressions of concern regarding the probable fate of her nephew.

"Now if she'd only have told the story in extenso, we might have

got something out of it," Mr. Victor Kelman had murmured discontentedly to himself. "Hullo! what's this? She has done more for the boy than ever I could have done; she is a complete stranger, and yet for some reason she has given Christopher a hundred pounds. I was always lucky, spite of Phipps. I shall sleep tonight. That's a confession, at least; that pins down the whole business in a line or two," murmured Victor Kelman.

After that he had dived furtively into the diary, and had found out references. In one case there was a whimsical but accurate description of Olive herself; even to slow, quiet voice, and the dark eyes and everything. "She's the proudest Aunt Phipps in the world. I am quite proud of myself; if only Phipps had seen her, there would have been much chance for me."

A little further on he came to the last entry of all. "I am a little afraid to-day—and very lonely. All the clocks in all the world seem to be ticking and chiming my brain. It does not matter; I die to-night there is someone stronger and braver than I am someone they call Aunt Phipps. I wonder why she was so anxious to take my name and my place. I wonder—"

There the diary ceased; but Mr. Victor Kelman had read enough. In idle curiosity he turned back to the front page of the Prayer Book and found that "Annie Phipps" had been written in at a comparatively recent date, and that another name had been scored out. Inside the cover itself was written, in an old-fashioned, girlish hand—

"Given to me on my 10th birthday—June 5th, 1859. Anne Clifton."

Looking back at that name which had been erased, Mr. Victor Kelman discovered the long curve of the capital "C" standing out at one end of the erasure, and at the tops of the "I" and the "A" sticking out above it. He laughed as he shut up the Prayer Book and put it with the rest of the papers. "You are scarcely so old as that would make out, my dear Olive," he had said. "We'll keep these for future reference, or for use if necessary."

As a matter of fact, Mr. Victor Kelman might have made mischief at once, and might have proved his case. But two things held him back; the first, that he still had some faint hope that Olive might turn to him of her own accord; second, that he might use the knowledge he had gained concerning her to force her to come to him. In any case there was plenty of time and he had his weapons ready.

The nomadic, adventuring spirit of the man asserted itself, and he went abroad. Thus it happened that he knew nothing of the marriage of Chris and Lucy, and not of any other changes that had taken place. In just the same fashion as he had wandered off on other occasions during all the years Olive Varney had known him, so on one occasion he packed the few possessions he had and disappeared.

It is necessary that we should look at the events in this curious little history to some extent through the eyes of Mr. Victor Kelman; only difficulty being that those events were not turned in the direction of Greenways' Gardens until some months had elapsed. Then—little more prosperous than he had been before, and a little tired with wandering aimlessly—he suddenly thought of that strange, fascinating woman with whom he jointly held a secret, as it were, and he determined once more to find her. In any distinctly aggressive spirit, but rather because he had nothing else to do, and the affair had amused him.

He urged the thing out in his own curious fashion, and he considered how best he could find Olive. The most natural and straightforward way would have been to go to Greenways' Gardens and enquire; but there was nothing natural nor straightforward about Victor Kelman. Arguing with himself that the real heart of the business lay with the boy Christopher Dayne, he determined to seek him; because if Olive had kept all that curious little comedy regarding Aunt Phipps, she must necessarily be still connected with Chris.

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