

A COUNSEL OF IMPERFECTION.

By VIOLET HUNT.

IN TWO PARTS—PART TWO.

"H, why did I read it? I thought so good! I didn't know! What am I to do—now?"

"For four years, she says! He lived with her—as his wife! What does that mean? Lived—in one house—together—just as I and George are going to do. It means that. It can mean nothing else."

"She says that he is nothing to her now—she is provided for—by George, does she mean? But that I should know! She would like me to know the kind of a man I am going to marry."

"Am I going to marry him? Am I?"

"I have never asked him any questions—any more than he has asked me. In novels girls always ask their lovers to tell them all about their past lives. I did not. I never thought of it. I never realized that sort of thing between me and George. I took something for granted, I suppose. What? Oh, not this!"

"How can I meet him to-morrow and smile and let him kiss me, and marry him and go away with him alone—as she did? And I told him to try and pretend that he had done it all before!" She laughed bitterly. "He will have no need to pretend. He is used to it. It will be the same thing—with a different woman, that's all!"

"And I wanted him to begin at the beginning with me—to start fair—for us to make our mistakes together! I said so. Oh, what a fool I have made of myself!"

She sprang to her feet. "I must tell him. I must tell them all. I won't be made a fool of! I shall show him the letter and say that he must see that it puts our marriage quite out of the question. It does! It does! I could not possibly marry another woman's lover. Let him go back to her! He ought! He must!"

"Father ought to have found out about this. It was his duty. Perhaps he did. Perhaps he knew, and never told me—or mother? . . ."

"Poor mother! It will break her heart. Her heart was set on my marrying George. He is so nice to her. She will cry and try to persuade me, and I shall give in. . . ."

She began to walk feverishly about the room. "No; that won't do. I must run away. I must go to Cousin Madge's. She will take my side. She thinks men are awful. I never agreed with her—till now. Madge would think it dreadful for me to marry a man like that." She pulled a Gladstone bag out of a cupboard and began to fling some clothes into it. "This is as much as I can carry down stairs without bumping against the bannisters. One dress—the one I go in. It is only to put on my travelling dress to-night, instead

of my wedding dress to-morrow. They are both ready. My wedding dress—that I shall never wear!" . . . She leaned against the dressing table for a moment; then—

"Nonsense! I must be quick. I haven't so very much time. Parker bolts the door at half-past eleven. Where is—? Oh, dear, I can't find anything somehow! . . ."

"I see the light in George's window opposite. George is sitting up—burning letters most likely! Hers? He naturally wants to destroy all the traces of his past life. They always do."

"I must slip out and mind the creaky step and take a hansom at the corner and go to Cousin Madge's, and write to them from there. It will be so much easier."

"Have I got everything I am likely to want? I can send for the rest after. My purse, my prayer book, and George's photograph! . . ."

"What do I want George's photograph for? I don't want George. Oh, my God. I do—I do—I love him! Yes, I suppose I love him!"

She stopped whirling about the room and sat down helplessly. "And I am going to leave him—to break his heart—to insult him before all the world to-morrow—when he comes, poor thing, with a flower in his button-hole, and his eyes shining, as they always do when he looks at me! They are such beautiful eyes—I often tell him so. I dare say the other woman paid him little compliments, too, and stroked his hair, Ah! . . ."

"Why did she send it to-day? Why didn't she let me get married first? Then it could not have been undone and I should have to make the best of it. But one has some pride."

"Oh, I mustn't cry. The children will hear me through the wall—hear me crying the day before my wedding! Poor little things! they have talked of nothing else for weeks. Jack and Jim are to be the pages and hold up my train, after Lily and Flossie, in white and silver."

"Are to be? I talk as if I were going to be married. I shall never be married now. Never! never! That is what George has done. No one will know, but it will be George's fault."

She leaned on the window sill, and looked toward the lighted window in the hotel. "Supposing George had been a widower, should I have cared then? I suppose not. What is the difference? I should have thought nothing of it, any more than he would have minded my being a widow."

"But he certainly would have cared if I—It would have been like 'Hero' in Much Ado. He would have cast me off at the altar. And yet they expect me to marry him, and say nothing! Is there a different rule for men and women? Isn't it the same for both of them? Oh, I wish I had somebody to talk to about it! I can only speak about those sorts of things to George, somehow—and now I can't."

Going across the room she picked up the crumpled letter and began to re-read it.

"She says he is nothing to her now. He never sees her, she says. I wonder is that true? How heartlessly she writes! Why, she doesn't even seem to regret the 'breaking off of the connection.' 'The connection!' What a horrid way to put it! She cannot have really loved him. And George swore to me that he had never, never loved any woman but me. I believe George when he swears. But then, why did he live with her if he did not love her. . . . Oh, how confused I get! . . ."

"I dare say she is simply a vain, heartless flirt, who led him on till he could not go back, and entangled him, and made him think he was bound to her. It is generally the woman's fault in these kind of cases, I believe. She never really loved him—at least, not as I do, and now she wants to spite him and make him trouble. And she expects me to help her to do it—me, his best friend! And when it is done, she will hear that she has managed to separate us and triumph. Why should I help her? I don't want to hurt George. I want him to be happy. I don't care for myself."

"Oh, if he had only told me! I should have forgiven him directly, and adored him for telling me. . . ."

"If I ask him now all about it, he will tell me. He never lied to me in his life. But I shall never ask him. It would be too mean. I don't want to know what my husband did before he was my husband. It is no business of mine."

"It shall all be as if it had never been. And as for this perfectly disgraceful letter—"

She rose, shook out her long hair, and determinedly put the letter in the very hottest place that the dying fire now boasted. She covered it with a red coal, and held it firmly down with the poker till it burned.

"It isn't there now, the malignant thing, under that coal! I shall never see it again. Why did I ever read it, and allow it to make me unhappy? One should never even read an anonymous thing like that."

"Ah! but I have read it. I can't help that. I shall never forget it, I am afraid. It has made me grow up. . . . One has to grow up some time, I suppose. I won't have the angel over my bed, I think, in my new house. I am not a child any more."

"There, I hear them bolting the front door! I could not run away now if I wanted; and I don't want. I am going to go through with it and see what happens. At any rate, I have no secrets. Men are different, I suppose!"

She put the Gladstone bag back into the cupboard, and did up her hair in a thick plait. She shivered a little the while, and yawned twice with weariness.

"Oh, I am very cold. The fire's nearly out. I must get to bed. I seem very tired. If I don't manage to sleep, I shall look wrong to-morrow and give it away. That would never do. Oh, no, it must all go on; and there must not be a fuss. I couldn't have made a fuss when it came to the point. It would have been indecent—hateful! One must just take the world as it is."

"That's life—and life is rather sad, I think. I was so happy an hour ago—like a fool! Now I am sad—but I may be happy again, who knows? I know nothing—I'm only a girl; but I know that I love George. He is my best friend, after all, and I can't do without him."

She put her lamp out, and lay down quite straight and rigid in her little narrow bed. Presently the light in the room in the hotel opposite went out too. . . .