

A MODERN OTHELLO

CHAPTER I.

Is there such a thing as an undying love—out of the house that prate so much about it? I, Rebecca Bevis, have grave doubts, coming as I do from a school of skeptics, and being a discontented woman. In what I was disappointed, and who disappointed me, the reader will perceive before this chapter closes, though it is of other lives rather than my own that I attempt to write. I am an old maid now—say a soured and discontented old maid if you will—and that's enough. I was a soured and discontented woman years ago, though young and pretty then, it was said; for my troubles had come early in life, and people thought they were over, knowing nothing of the scars which were left. I hid my feelings fairly, and friends believed in me, and said among themselves, "How well she bears up! how bravely she has borne his want of faith in her, his disaffection!" I think I did, for I was very proud, thank God! He was not fit for me; I should have made him unhappy as his wife; such thoughts as these were my consolation then—they are not now, perhaps, standing apart from the old life, and knowing now it has ended.

And this undying love of which I spoke just now—only enough, it was not thinking of his old protestations, his fancy pictures of eternal summer; I was not even dreaming of them five years afterwards, when I knew it was over for good, and that there was never a chance for me again. I was thinking then, as I think now, of the theory of eternal constancy, and what a mockery it all is.

Fred Bevis, my wild brother Fred, whom I have always loved so much, because he was weak and childish, perhaps, or because he loved me very much too, and told his friends there was not a wiser, shrewder little woman in the world than I—I was this younger brother whose inconstancy was on my mind. He was leaving England to make his fortune abroad, he said—to lose the little which he rather had left him, I was sure—and on the eve of his departure I was the witness to his solemn betrothal to Mary Vansittart, my one dear friend, my ardent, lovable Mary, the very one I would have chosen for my wife from a legion of fair women. They were to love each other all their lives long—that is the old theory which amuses young folks at first start—and both believed in these protestations for twelve months at least. At the expiration of the first year, Fred came home more full of love than ever, but with less money in his purse. He had been unfortunate in his speculations; luck had been dead against him, he said; indeed, "Fred's luck" had been a pleasant jest in our family before we were all scattered.

There were fresh protestations of fidelity between Fred and Mary, and then my brother sailed forth again to seek his fortune, and we heard no more of him for years. We thought he was dead—all but Mary, who believed in his life, but began at last to distrust his love, as well she might do.

He ended his long silence with a confession to me. Never a brave man, he had not the courage to tell Mary the truth. I was to stand between them as an intercessor, as a grim fate, perhaps, if these two had meant all that they had said. He had been unlucky again, he wrote—very unlucky this time—and there was no hope of retrieving his position. He released Mary from her engagement; he was bound in honor to do that; and I was to break the news to her at once. There was a great deal concerning his lost hopes, his lost money; but I could not tell what feelings he was having from me. I fulfilled

my mission, thinking perhaps I might help to break poor Mary's heart, or at least to shadow many years of Mary's life, for I was still romantic, after my own odd fashion.

There was some tears and sighs, a downcast look for a few days, a readiness to agree with me that probably it was for the best, and then Mary Vansittart was very much like the fair girl whom I had ever known. She was not disguising her feelings, I knew the preoccupied, far-away looks of a troubled woman too well. She was resigned to her position very quickly; she wrote her letter of farewell—the last of a long and loving series; she expressed her wishes generously for poor Fred's better luck; and there was the end of one more love dream. What a stereotyped finale it always is, I thought.

The curtain of this drama rose quickly and unexpectedly upon the second act. A believer in the fickleness of human nature myself, I was yet surprised to learn of Mary Vansittart's engagement to Mr. Gordon—a gentleman of some position in the county, and who had been away from England for a year or two disposing of his estates in the East Indies, where it was rumored he had amassed considerable wealth. He came back to our quiet neighborhood to settle down for good—to choose the best wife he could find, and live happily ever afterwards, if it were possible.

It was not possible. I could have told him that, had he done me the honor to consult me. When I heard from my dear Mary's own lips that he was engaged, it was too late. I was tongue-tied from that hour forth; it is possible I betrayed my astonishment too clearly.

"You are offended with me, Beckie," she cried; "you think I should have waited a little longer—reflected perhaps a little more upon the old engagement."

"No, my dear, not that," I said; "I am only too glad you have got poor Fred completely out of your mind."

"We should not have agreed very well, Fred and I," she said, thoughtfully.

"Perhaps not," I answered. "And where did you meet Mr. Gordon? I have heard nothing of this."

"I had been away in London on a visit, and it seemed to have all happened without me in a strange way. As if I had had any right to be consulted in the matter!"

"He is an old friend of papa's; he came to see us on his return. I was a rascally girl when he need to tease when he was here last; I should not have known him again. Oh, he is so very handsome, despite his dark skin, Beckie! I like dark men—don't you?" she ran on, rhapsodically.

"He is very rich," I added, quickly. "I don't care about riches, she replied. "I hope you will not think I have accepted him on that account. It is no, in my thoughts; it never has been."

"I believe you."

"He has been very frequently at our house during your stay in town. I have met him at one or two balls this winter. We were formally engaged on Christmas eve—only think!"

"And when shall you be married?"

"Not till next Christmas," she answered; "papa will have a year's engagement between us, and Conrad is very cross about it."

"A year is a fair probation," I said, calmly; "it will give you time; it will give him."

"You speak as if you thought we were likely to change," she said; "and oh! that is not possible."

"He is much older than you, some ten years at least, and you are so very young, Mary."

"Yes, yes; but how do you know he



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is ten years older than I? That is exactly the difference between us."

"Have I not lived in Westerton all my life, you only child? Did I not know Mr. Gordon ten years ago, when you were the 'gawky girl' of whom you have just spoken?"

"Oh, yes; and you knew Conrad before he went to India for the last time."

"Yes."

"How strange!" she said. "I mentioned your name to him, told him you were my dearest friend, and he never said he knew you."

"That is very likely; people forget so soon!"

"But," she added, confidentially, "I told him everything about you, and that I had been engaged to him for a little while when—when—"

"When you were a child, and hardly knew your own mind," I added. "Well, I am very glad you have told him that."

"Of course; I was bound in honor to tell him."

"Certainly you were."

I did not tell her everything myself; I left it to Conrad Gordon to speak of an old engagement too, if he cared to do so, if he thought that he was bound in honor also. It was not my place to speak of a past love, of a bitter, needless, cruel quarrel, of all that had been, and that could never be again.

I shed some tears over this when Mary had left me. I was sorry for the engagement for Mary Vansittart's sake. To my nervous mind it was an ill-assorted match, and would be broken off before the year was over, as mine and his was, as Mary and Fred's. Conrad Gordon had many admirable traits of character; he was in many ways a contrast to other men, being earnest, clever, honorable; but he was of an irritable and suspicious nature—a man persistently seeking for a second and hidden reason for everything upon earth, and who had made his own life almost a curse by his miserable search. He had made mine so completely. He had suspected me cruelly and unjustly, and my pride could not brook his doubts. Hence we had parted in the old time of which Mary Vansittart knew nothing.

I met him presently at Mary's father's house. It was a meeting which we were well, being both prepared for it, and both good actors. I had often wondered what sort of meeting it would be, and here it was calm, smooth and commonplace, totally unmarred by false sentiment. How completely we had forgotten each other! What a farce, I thought again, is this talk of eternal constancy! He was gentle in his manner toward me; he was very loving and attentive to Mary Vansittart. He had improved greatly in his manners; a certain brusqueness which he had always evinced was entirely missing. Late in the evening he said to me apart, "I have not told Mary of the past; it is not worth while, Miss Bevis."

"Why not," I replied. "It might be as well."

"No, no; she is young and impulsive, very quickly disturbed; and it is your secret, which I should respect, surely."

"It is hardly a secret. I left it for you to tell; you have my free permission. What does it matter now?" I said, lightly.

"A great deal to me," he replied, very gravely. "She would ask many questions, and I was wholly in the wrong."

"Yes, wholly," I repeated. "It is late in the day to ask your pardon, Miss Bevis, but I do, with all my heart," he said, with strange humility.

"I thank you," I murmured back. "All has happened for the best," he said. "We were not suited for each other. I was a jealous and vindictive fellow when I parted from you."

"Do not let us speak of it again," I said. "It is ended for good. We have got over our troubles very well," I added.

He laughed. "Yes, we have, indeed," he replied; "but it took me years to think I was in the wrong, you must know. Oh, how I have hated you! I—But there, there, my character is changed; my whole being, I think, is renewed in my love for Mary Vansittart. It is a new life; I should die if that dream were to fade—if she were to have one thought of what a man I had been. And I am forgiven?" he added, suddenly.

"To be sure you are," was the reply. "Only make Mary a good husband; for I love her very much."

"Yes, yes, I understand. She has told me everything about you. She loves you very much too. How strange it all is!"

He went away to Mary's side, and I sat watching them for awhile, thinking even that they might be happy, after all—that it was probable he had altered for the better, and I had known him only at his worst. Men do change, Heaven knows.

This is the prologue to my story, and will explain what follows.

The engagement was continued throughout the year. There were no lovers' quarrels, no jealousies, no suspicions; it was a year of mutual affection. I contrasted it with my own fleeting engagement—one of storm and shipwreck—and thought I must have been gravely in fault myself, and full of ill temper and distrust, or else the man before me had changed completely, since I had been "all in all" to him.

Conrad Gordon and Mary Vansittart were married two days before Christmas. It was a grand wedding, and I wished them with all my heart god-speed and every blessing on their pilgrimage. The snow was falling thickly on them as they came out of the church, and Gordon looked up at the

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sky, shuddered visibly, and frowned as a liberty taken with him by the elements. His East Indian blood was chilled by the day's inclemency.

"I should have liked sunshine on our wedding day," he said to Mary.

"Does it matter?" she asked, with a smile.

"No, no, perhaps not," he answered; "but I used to believe in omens once."

Yes—I remembered that time too well.

CHAPTER II.

The happy couple spent a long honeymoon abroad. They were not back in Westerton before the spring. They began their home life together with the same confidence with which they had entered into their engagement to be married. How true they are of each other! was on the lips of every friend they had.

They had, therefore, every prospect of their being a happy marriage. I was not disposed to doubt it myself now, though I had never known this new Conrad Gordon whom everybody liked, why he had always been in the old days a different man to me. All the faults of his disposition he seemed to have left behind with his lands in East India, and to have returned an amiable, generous, high-souled gentleman. He seemed to have outlived even his peevish disposition. He took it as a compliment, as a pleasant jest even, any attention which his pretty wife received. Was this really the same man? was the wild thought which I would have at times.

As the spring passed thus; the bright summer, when they went away to the sea; the autumn up to the early winter, when they were that again in their grand home, from Conrad's own I received no further confidences. I was assured he was happy; that he had not a care in the world from his affectionate wife, who made an idol of him after her own fashion too, and whose high spirits and girlish little fantasies were as predominant as in her maiden days. It could not last, I was certain; but when the time would come for these two to be more staid and matter-of-fact and homely, I did not really perceive.

There was a gay life, if there was a fault to be found with them, it was in their incessant pursuit of pleasure, in the dinner parties and balls which they gave at their own house—which they attended at their numerous friends'. There seemed no peace and rest, and little of the home life which in her place I would have preferred. Whether she would have preferred

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It too I was not able to ascertain. She was fond of society, of admiration, of the busy world without doors. The gay life seemed to agree with her, and to steal no roses from her cheeks. "Conrad is fond of seeing me the centre of a crowd," she said to me once, "and I like the excitement of it all very well. We are not a steady-going old married pair yet, Beckie."

"No, but it is time you were," I said. "It was close upon the end of the year—close upon Christmas-time—when there came across the snow-covered lawn to my French window, at which I was sitting a figure from the past, of which I had often dreamed. I did not see him until he was standing at the window to scare me. Then his hearty laugh at my astonishment rang through the frosty air like a peal from the old days."

"Fred!" I cried, opening the window in my impulse, and letting him in along with the snow-drift, "this is a surprise. How glad I am to see you back!"

"I thought you would be," he answered, taking me in his arms; "I was sure you would, for one, at all events. Sisters don't change with every wind and tide, thank God!"

I looked into his face. Something told me that he had already heard the news of Mary's marriage, and was inclined to regard it despondently, almost as a breach of faith toward one who should not have been forgotten quite so readily, or been taken so quickly at his word. I did not speak of Mary, I hastened to disengage him of his great coat and hat, to seat him in his old place by the fireside, with his bronzed, good-looking face full of the ruddy haze before me.

"To think you are back again!" I said, exultingly. "And for good, is it?"

"I am not certain," was his answer; "not half so certain as I was an hour ago, when it struck me how lonely you must be in the old home, and how I might help to cheer it for you."

"And now?"

"And now I am not half sure of myself, and may want cheering instead," he added. "That's my luck—'Fred's luck,' as you would say, if you remember."

"Yes, I remember."

We were silent for awhile. He sat drawing patterns with the muddly end of his great coat, my crumple-sock, to my maidenly discomfiture, but I had not the heart to scold him.

"I have come back rich—that is, tolerably rich, for me," he said, suddenly, "and you do not congratulate me."

"I congratulate you, Fred, with all my heart."

"Thank you."

"And how—" I began, when he interrupted me.

"Oh! never mind that. I had grown desperate; it was sink or swim—a wild plunge to the other side, or a cool drop to the bottom—and I changed it at the table of Monaco. By heaven, 'Fred's luck' turned at last, and I made a heap of money in three hours, and came away before fortune deserted me. In its scurvy old way. Have you ever known me exhibit as much prudence as that?"

(To be continued.)

Montreal Daily Star

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