

We planned social evenings for the ensuing winter, in which, when he came in, Mr. Rivers cordially joined.

"And I hope we shall see the doctor too, madam," continued he breaking out into impropriety, and disarding laconicism; "there isn't a man alive I respect more than your husband."

She colored vividly, but merely observed, "You are right—I thank you."

We were all standing at our door, she being just about to take leave. Suddenly she drew back within. At that moment there passed close by—so close that he must have touched his wife's dress—Dr. Merchiston.

"He looked in, distinctly saw us all, and his him."

"Doctor—doctor!" cried my husband.

In crossing the street, Dr. Merchiston turned, bowed in reply, but did not stop.

"Excuse me, I had something to say to him," cried James, and was off, without a glance at Mrs. Merchiston.

But when I looked at her I was really alarmed. Her limbs were tottering, her countenance pale as death. I helped her back into the parlor, and made her lie down; but all my efforts could scarcely keep her from fainting. At length she said, feebly—

"Thank you, I am better now. It is very wrong of me. But I could not help it. Oh, Mrs. Rivers—with a piteous, bewildered look—"if you had been his wife, and had not seen him for two whole years!"

"Him! Is it possible you mean your husband?"

"Yes, my own husband—my dear husband, who loved me when he married me. God knows what I have done that he should not love me now!—Oh me! what have I been saying!"

"Never mind what you have been saying, my dear lady, I shall keep it all secret. There now, it will do you good to cry."

And I cried too, heartily. It seemed very dreadful. That young, fond, pretty creature, to live under the same roof as her husband, and not to have seen him for two whole years. Here was explained the mystery of the Double House—a confirmation entire of those few straggling reports which, when I caught them flying abroad, I had utterly quashed, denied, and disbelieved. I was greatly shocked, and as was natural, I took the woman's side of the question.

"And I thought him so good and you so happy! What deceivers men are!"

"You are mistaken, Mrs. Rivers, in one man at least," she returned with dignity; "my husband spoke truly when he said, there was no man living more worthy of respect than Dr. Merchiston."

"He has not lost yours, then?"

"In no point."

"And you love him still?"

"I do; God pity me—I do." She sobbed as if her heart were breaking.

There was then but one conclusion to be drawn—one only reason for a good man's thus mercifully putting away his wife—some error on her part either known or imagined by him. But no! when I looked down upon her gentle, innocent, childlike face, I rejected the doubt as impossible. Nor had I detected in her any of those inherent, incurable faults of temper or character, the "continually dropping that weareth away the stone," which, if divorce be ever justifiable for any thing short of crime, would have justified in some marriages I have seen.

"Does any body know?" Not that I mind, but it might harm him.

Mrs. Rivers, do you think any body at Apsdale knows?"

"Alas, in a village like this, there can be no such thing as a secret."

She wrung her hands, "I thought so—I feared so. But he came to live in the country because the doctors said London air was killing me. I wish it had killed me—oh, I wish it had!"

I have seen the look of despair in many a wronged, miserable wife's eyes, but I never saw it so mournfully plain as in those of poor Barbara Merchiston. I took her to my arms, though she was older than I, and asked her to let me comfort her and be her friend, if she had no other.

"Not one—not one. But"—and she started back with a sudden fear—"you will not be my friend by becoming an enemy to my husband?"

"I have no such intention. I condemn him not; to his own Master let him stand or fall."

Probably this was harshly spoken, for she took my hand, saying impudently, "Pray do not misjudge either him or me. I was very wrong in betraying any thing. But my life is so lonely. I am not strong; and this shock was too much for me. How ill he looked—how gray he has grown! Oh, Evan, my poor husband!"

To see her weeping there, without the slightest anger or wounded pride, roused both feeling in me. I determined to fathom this mysterious affair; and having the usual fate of those who interfere between man and wife—namely, being hated by both parties—to try and remedy it if I could.

"Tell me, my dear Mrs. Merchiston—believe me it is from no idle curiosity I ask—how long has this state of things lasted?"

"For five years."

"Five years!" I was staggered. "Entire separation and estrangement for five years! And for no cause? Are you sure—oh, forgive me if I wound you—but are you sure there is no cause?"

"I declare before Heaven—none! He has never blamed me in word or deed."

"Nor given you reason to blame him?" said I, with a sharp glance, still strongly inclining to the rights of my own sex.

"Me blame him?—blame my husband!" she answered, with a look of half-reproachful wonder. "I told you he loved me."

"But love changes," continued I, very cautiously, for it was hard to meet her large innocent eyes, like gazelle's with your hand on its throat. "Men sometimes come to love other women than their wives."

She flushed indignantly all over her face. "You wrong him—you wickedly wrong him. His life is and always has been, as spotless as my own."

Well, thought I, I give it up. Either she is extraordinarily deceived, and the hypocrisy of that man is such as never was man's before or the problem is quite beyond my solving. Yet—one more attempt.

"Just a word. Tell me, Mrs. Merchiston, how and when did this sad estrangement begin?"

"Six months after our marriage. We married for love; we were both alone in the world; we were all in all to one another. Gradually he grew melancholy—I could not find out why; he said it would pass away in time. Then he had a fever—I nursed him through it. When he recovered—he sent me away."

The brute! I thought. Just like a man! "But how?" I said aloud. "What reason did he give? What excuse could he offer?"

"None. He only wrote to me, when away on a short journey, and told me that this separation must be—that it was absolutely inevitable—that if I desired it he would leave me altogether—otherwise, it was his earnest wish we should still live under the same roof. But never never meet."

"And you never have met?"

"Very rarely—only by the merest chance. Then he would pass me by, never lifting his eyes. Once—it was in the first few weeks of our separation—I met him on the staircase. I was different from what I am now, Mrs. Rivers; very proud, outraged, indignant. I flung past him, but he caught me in his arms. I would not speak; I stood upright in his clasp like stone. 'We have been happy, Barbara,' but never can be again," I cried, passionately. 'No, he said; 'I know that—never again.' He held me close a moment or two, then broke from me. We have never met since."

Such was her story, which the more I dived into it, became the more incomprehensible. No condemnatory evidence could be found against the husband; in all things Mrs. Merchiston's comforts were studied, her wishes gratified. She said it often seemed as if invisible watch were kept over her, to provide against her least desire. I could only counsel the poor wife to patience, hope, and trust in God.

(To be continued.)

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