

# STELLA: OR, AT CROSS PURPOSES.

## CHAPTER XXX. (CONTINUED.)

### LADY HONORIA DOES HER DUTY.

"I shall get over it very soon," she said to herself once more, "and I am glad no one need ever know the truth—everybody will believe that I pilted him—that is bad enough, but not so bad as the truth. I could not bear to be pitied as a forsaken damsel—that would kill me!"

It will be seen that it was Lady Honoria's vanity that suffered throughout far more intensely than her heart.

Presently Mrs. Norton came into the room.

"Is Sir Edward gone already?" she asked her, kindly.

Lady Honoria did not lose a minute in telling the truth to her hostess.

"Yes, he is gone. He will not dine here to-night, Mrs. Norton. The fact is, I have just broken off our engagement altogether."

"Oh! my dear!" cried Mrs. Norton, aghast, "how dreadfully sorry I am for you!"

"You need not be sorry for me," said Lady Honoria, quietly, "because it is entirely my own doing. We found that we were not likely to make each other happy, so I thought it best to break everything off. I have done quite right, and require no pity at all. Will you please tell your husband and daughters, Mrs. Norton; and would you kindly send these letters to the post for me?"

And that was all the information the family at the Rectory ever received concerning Lady Honoria's broken engagement. Only long afterwards, when they heard of another event, which as yet was in the dim future, then the two girls, talking the matter over to each other, thought that they could put two and two together, and a little more of the truth of the business became clear to them.

Meanwhile, in the desolate little sitting-room in Mrs. Wilson's green-shuttered lodging-house there were that morning two people who were very happy indeed, in spite of many stabs of conscience for the mistakes of the past on one side, and for sundry misgivings concerning the troubles of the future on the other.

"I think I have behaved abominably throughout both to you and to her," said Edgar to the little head that lay safe and happy upon his shoulder. "I wish I could feel more penitent and more unhappy; but just now, I can only feel insane with joy and delight!"

"Oh! what will Lady Dyson say!" cried poor Lily, for the hundredth time.

"Well, I think she will forgive you, Lily. Do you know, that I believe she got very fond of you during your illness?"

"She was very good to me," murmured Lily.

"And now, my little darling, I must go—I shall have Sandport this afternoon; and when you are quite strong again, and the whole of this business has blown over, then you will come back to Barfield, and then—and then—"

"Please do not do that any more," was Lily's only rejoinder to a course of action which, to people accustomed to the manners and customs of lovers, may be better imagined than described.

He left her and went back to the inn, and there, upon his table, lay a telegram awaiting him.

He tore it open. It was from his mother, and ran thus:

"Please come home at once. Your brother has left home with Miss King."

## CHAPTER XXXI.

### HER LAST CARD.

Old Mr. King left his bed unusually early on the morning of the 1st of May, wrapped his dressing-gown about his lean figure, and went eagerly to the window and looked out. It was a lovely spring morning; the trees were all covered with tender green leaves, the dew lay thickly upon the grass, the hawthorn and laburnums were fast bursting into bloom, and the birds carolled gayly their greeting to the new-born summer.

Never had Mr. King felt happier or in better spirits. It was Norman's wedding-day. Everything had been settled according to his wishes; there had been no hitch

and no disturbance in the programme he had laid out for his grandchildren's lives. Within a few hours he would stand within the flower-decked chancel of the village church, and he would give Cecily away to her cousin, and the "Wedding March" would strike up, and the wedding-bells would ring, and the darling wish of his old age would be fulfilled; and then the bride and bridegroom would be whirled off in a carriage and four to the station, on their way to the Continent, for their wedding-tour, and he and his Stella would be left alone in the big house together. He would send Harriet Finch away, and Stella should keep house for him.

"It has all gone off well," said Mr. King, to himself; "but I am glad I put that codicil into my will—it will do no harm—by twelve o'clock to-day it will be invalid, and it has kept my mind easy all this time, for I had a misgiving that the girl was going to play me false, but I suppose I was mistaken; still it has kept me from fretting, and, as Graham is always telling me, if I want to go on living I must not fret myself. Ah, well, I am happy enough now! Everything has turned out just as I wished it!"

At that minute a slender figure, wrapped from head to foot in a long cloak, and wearing a thick veil, was creeping slowly and cautiously across the dew-drenched grass at the back of the house.

She went very slowly, turning round every now and then to listen and look back at the house. It was quite early—only about half-past six—and nearly all the blinds of the house were drawn closely down. Only from one distant window there was somebody with sharp eyes, and a keen, eager face, who saw that solitary figure stealing along under the shadow of the orchard wall. And the owner of those sharp eyes, who had only just got up out of bed, straightway began to huddle on the first clothes that came under her hands at her utmost speed.

But Cecily, who was creeping along under the shadow of the orchard wall, did not know this.

Cecily was playing her last card. She had come to the end of the serio-comedy she had been acting so long—and now she was ready to stake everything she had so long striven for upon this last desperate action. Last night the will that was to do so much for her, was signed. So far all was safe. Now nothing was left to her save to deal the death-blow to the old man whose house had sheltered her treacherous and wicked self for so many months! All night long she had sat up writing—writing the letter that she had laid on his library table before she stole forth from the house, so that he might see it the first thing when he came down stairs—and writing too, to Stella, to tell her the truth of everything. As to Norman, she had not even gone through the form of writing to him—"Norman," she said to herself scornfully, "will console himself very easily; he and Stella will never be rich—but then they are the kind of people who do not care in the least for money; they will be perfectly content to be poor all the days of their lives—whereas I—I could not have done without it. I have worked hard for it too—oh! what hard work it has been!—but thank goodness, it is all over now!"

She had got safely round the corner of the orchard wall by this time, and she was out of sight of the house. She walked quicker and breathed more freely now. She carried a heavy dressing-bag in her hand; into it she had crammed all the jewellery that had been given to her as wedding presents, including the family diamonds from her grandfather, and the set of pearls and rubies that were Norman's wedding-gift to her. Cecily had no remorse of conscience at all in doing this. She had also a little money, about ten pounds, with her.

Presently she reached a low wooden gate that led out of the park into the road; here, behind a clump of trees that had hidden it from her sight until she came close to it, stood a Stanhope phaeton with the hood drawn up. As she reached the gate, Walter Dyson's face peered out from behind it.

"Here you are at last," he said, in a whisper. "I thought you were never coming—is everything right?"

"Yes, so far all has gone well—the will was signed last night."

"Is this all your luggage?"

"Oh! my boxes are ready packed; I dare say I shall get them to-morrow. I have got the diamonds here!" tapping the bag with a laugh.

"You are an uncommonly clever girl, and I must say I am very glad to get hold of you at last. Now jump up quickly, and let us be off before the alarm is given; and besides, we have not too much time to catch the train at the Junction—it is ten miles at the very least."

There was no servant, and he helped her up into the phaeton. She drew herself as far back as she could into the shadow of the hood, and Walter Dyson took his seat by her side.

"Off at last, my dear wife!" he said, bending down to her with an affectionate smile, for he was fond of her after a fashion. And then Cecily uttered a cry.

"Good gracious! there is Mrs. Finch!" she exclaimed. "Drive faster, Walter, or we shall be stopped!—hateful woman! she must have followed me!"

The phaeton dashed off rapidly, and was soon whirled out of sight round a sharp corner of the road.

And there stood Mrs. Finch by the gate, in the long damp grass, in a short, dark woollen petticoat and a red flannel dressing-jacket, with her scanty hair all flying loosely in the wind about her thin neck, shouting and waving her hands vainly after the departing couple.

But for all her shouting she was not able to stop them. When the phaeton was quite out of sight, Mrs. Finch turned round and fled to the house. There was a glance of malicious delight upon her face.

"Wicked, abandoned girl!" she cried to herself, triumphantly; "I always knew she was false and deceitful. She has eloped with one of the Dysons! I could not see which, but I know the gray horse and harness well enough. And now, at last, I can be revenged upon the old man who has ground down my life for so many years, and treated me like an upper servant instead of a relation! Now, at last, I can repay him all the rough words and the insulting sneers he has cast at me for so long! Oh! what a blow this will be for him!—his darling schemes overthrown—his nephew tricked out of his bride—his beautiful plans for everybody all shattered at a stroke! How delighted I am to think I shall be the first to tell him—perhaps even he will be grateful to me for revealing to me this iniquitous proceeding to him, and he will add something to his will in acknowledgment—who knows!"

And this latter thought still further quickened Mrs. Finch's returning footsteps towards the house.

In another minute she was knocking loudly at Mr. King's bedroom door, quite oblivious, in her excitement, of her own very remarkable, and not very presentable costume.

"Mr. King, I must speak to you at once!" she cried.

"My good woman, I am just out of my bed—you must wait."

"I cannot wait a moment, my dear cousin—I positively must speak to you! I have something of the utmost importance to reveal to you!"

"What a nuisance an impatient woman is!" grumbled the old man from within. "Wait a moment, then, and I will open the door."

After a few seconds he did so, and appeared enveloped in a long flowery dressing-gown, in which his gaunt figure looked leaner and more attenuated than ever.

"Now what on earth is it?" he began, confronting the strangely-attired figure who came in as he opened the door, "what have you got to say that you couldn't wait till I was dressed? I suppose the confectioner hasn't sent the cake, or the cook has spoilt the jellies, or some such rubbish?"

"Mr. King, it is no rubbish at all," said Mrs. Finch, eagerly. "I have a very terrible piece of news to tell you!"

The old man frowned uneasily; but he had no serious apprehensions as yet.

"You women think everything terrible—there is no end to the fuss made about every trifle. Out with it, then!"

"I assure you this is no trifle," she said, earnestly, and with such evident agitation, that his attention was arrested to it. "You must prepare yourself for a great shock, Mr. King."

The old man trembled.

"Don't go beating about the bush," he said, hoarsely, "but in Heaven's name tell me what has happened at once! Is it Norman?"

"Norman is quite well. It is Cecily King who has gone away."

"What!" shouted the old man, wildly, catching hold of her hands.

"She has run away with one of the Dysons—I am not sure which—I could not see; but they have driven off together not ten minutes ago."

The old man was livid.

"They must be folked at once—instantly; they can be stopped! Where is Norman? Ring the bell. What are you standing staring here for? Let me go!" He was struggling to reach the door; he shivered from head to foot. Mrs. Finch tried to quiet him; he shook her off wildly. "They must be followed at once," he repeated. "It is not too late; they can be stopped."

And then suddenly Stella, white as a sheet, stood behind them on the threshold, holding an open letter in her hand.

"Oh! grandpapa—dear grandpapa—it is no use!" she cried; "they cannot be stopped—it is too late. Cecily has deceived us all; she has been married to Walter Dyson ever since she came here!"

He stopped short and gasped for breath; the blood rushed back in a flood to his face, his eyes stared blankly for one minute before him. Then he flung up his arms wildly into the air; one short gasping cry burst from his lips; and he fell face forward all his length upon the floor.

Cecily's evil work had prospered. She had killed her grandfather, but it was Stella's loving lips that all unwittingly had given him his death-blow.

From that instant all was confusion and terror; the fugitive couple were forgotten; there was a wild hurrying to and fro through the flower-decked house. Instead of the merry laughter, and the good wishes, and the happy faces that were to have filled Wrexham Hall that bright May morning, there were scared looks and terrified whispers, and the grave face of the hastily-summoned doctor pressing through the frightened cluster of servants towards the chamber of death.

By and by Sir Elgar came over from Barfield, in great distress of mind concerning his brother's conduct, but the greater anxiety about the master of the house had absorbed all lesser troubles.

They had got the old man into his bed; he did not die at once; he lingered till the afternoon, but he was never conscious again. At three o'clock he died, and Norman led the weeping Stella away from his death-bed.

These two, who had comforted each other throughout these terrible hours of horror and misery, had no other consolation upon earth now save each other.

Oh! how horrible it was to Stella to pass along the passages and staircases all wreathed for the marriage festivities with satin ribbons, and trails of flowers and greenery; to see the long table laid out in the great dining-room below, and the waiters, with white and hurried faces, clearing away the preparations for the wedding-feast! And then there was the open door of Cecily's room, and her boxes standing already packed in the middle of the floor.

"She has killed him—she has killed him!" moaned Stella in her misery. "Oh! Norman, what did she do it for? How could she deal him such a cruel blow?"

Stella, in the absorption of her grief, did not even think of how great an alteration in her own life Cecily's conduct was likely to effect.

"She could not have known that he had heart disease," said Norman, gravely; "She could never have realized that such a shock would kill him."

But Dr. Graham, who stood by the sorrowing cousins, and who heard the words, remembered very well that Cecily knew all about her grandfather's heart-disease, and he could have told them so, had he not been too kind-hearted to make unnecessary mischief in the already afflicted family.

"What did she say to you in that letter?" asked Norman of his cousin, as he stood at the door of her room with her.

"I think you ought to read it," said Stella.

She went into her room and found it, and bringing it out to him, placed it in his hands.

"Thank you," said Norman, simply.

And then he took the letter out of doors and read it by himself in the garden among the budding trees and the carolling birds, and all the bright summer sights and sounds that were going on without, just the same as if death and sorrow did not come to visit Wrexham Hall.