

"I'll go straight to old Glynford, who is the best of the lot, and tell him we've settled it; and ask him to have the wedding from his house. That would have a better look, as Maria's my own sister; but, if you prefer it, I'll pay your expenses to Seaton-by-the-Sea, and we can be married from your mother's!"

Then Laura spoke, and in quick and passionate accents.

"It cannot be, Mr. Bingley," she said. "I am grateful to you for your proposal, but I cannot be your wife."

"How do you mean? What for?" said Bingley, roughly, and with an angry scowl.

"Because," answered Laura, gaining courage, "I do not care for you as a woman should care for her future husband. We— we have nothing in common with each other."

"What d'ye mean by that?" asked Bingley, very angrily. "Nothing in common! D'ye mean that I'm not as good as you are?"

"Oh, no!" said Laura; "but we should not suit each other."

"Rubbish!" retorted Bingley. "Just a girl's romantic nonsense, and nothing else. But I'll tell you what it is, Miss Laura," he continued, with a darkening countenance; "I'm not a fellow to be trifled with. D'ye suppose I would give myself all this trouble, and go to all this expense, for nothing? Not I! I got you out of this confounded scrape about the notes for a purpose; that purpose was that I had taken a fancy to you, and intended to marry you; and I'm not going to be cheated, I tell you very plainly."

"But I never promised to marry you!" said Laura.

"No, you did not," answered Bingley, "because I hadn't asked you; but you must have understood very well. I'm not a particularly philanthropic man, and d'ye suppose I would have wasted all this money, and lost the chance, too, of finding out the scoundrel who robbed me; for it must have been some one in my own establishment. D'ye think I would have done this out of pure benevolence?"

"I—I hoped so," faltered Laura.

"Then I wouldn't," said Bingley. "I did it because you are a pretty girl, and I wanted a pretty wife, and I took a sort of fancy to you. There, that's honest, isn't it?"

"But—but, Mr. Bingley, I can't marry you!"

"You must!" said Bingley, frowning.

"Come, I don't want to threaten you! I don't want to remind you that, but for me, you would have had a policeman's hand on your shoulder before now. I don't want to say that even now—now, mind you—a word from me would place you in a common goal! But it's true, all the same. You are in my power as much as on the day when you first came here and paid in the marked and stolen notes; as much as on the day when I went to Seaton-by-the-Sea, with the detective's letter in my pocket, to tell me that two of the lost notes had at last been paid into a bank by one Johnson, a grocer. D'ye see the situation now? But I don't want to be unpleasant. I only want to make you understand why I did all this for you, and that I mean to have you in return for my money."

Laura had grown paler and paler during this long speech, and as Bingley ended she burst into tears.

"But what happiness would it bring you?" she said, with a sob, almost choking her utterance. "If—if you did force me to marry you, only misery could come of it."

"That's my look-out," said Bingley; "and if I choose to run the risk, I must take the consequences. But why shouldn't we be happy? I'm well off. I can give you as good a position as my sister Maria has there at Bridgenorth House; and—well—hang it! If you object to my establishment here, I can afford to retire from business any day. How can a man say more! I offer you a good home—a gentleman's mansion, in fact—a carriage and every comfort; and I don't think any reasonable woman could require more."

"But I don't want anything, Mr. Bingley," said Laura, imploringly. "Please don't ask me to be your wife, and I'll work, I'll beg—do anything, in fact—to repay you this money!"

Bingley's evil-looking countenance flushed, and a hard expression passed over it.

"If you mean by that," he said, "that you'll borrow this money of Mr. William Glynford, or some other of your admirers, I may as well tell you at once that I won't take it. No, my young lady; I don't want the money; I want you. That's my price for keeping you out of the clutches of the law, and I mean to have it. As I told you at Seaton-by-the-Sea, neither William Glynford nor all the Glynfords that ever were born could save you if I chose to speak the word. I've no doubt he'd advance this money for you—no doubt of that!" And Bingley laughed unpleasantly. "You are a pretty girl, and he's a rich man, they say; but if he were twice as rich, and ready to marry you—ay, ready to marry you to-morrow—he could not help you. You have committed an offence against the law—an offence that would look very dark after I had given my evidence against you, and after Johnson, the grocer, had said his say. D'ye think," continued Bingley, scowling, "that I am a man to be turned from my purpose by a few tears? No. I give you your choice, and that is, to be my wife, or pass the next ten or twelve years of your life in penal servitude!"

Laura sank down on a chair near her. What a choice was hers! A goal, or this coarse man, against whom her very soul revolted! But a

goal—the girl shuddered as she thought of it—and shame, shame, and William Glynford's contempt and scorn for evermore!

"Will you give me time—time to think?" she said at last, looking up in Bingley's hard and angry visage.

"Reasonable time only," he answered. "Come, Laura," and he laid his hand upon her shoulder; "don't you act like a fool! You have got to marry me, so you may as well make the best of me, and I'll be a good husband to you, if you'll be a good wife to me. There! that's fair enough, isn't it? I wasn't a bad husband to poor Sarah; she's dead and gone now, but she was glad enough to have me, I can tell you. But we needn't talk about that. I'm in a different position now." (And Bingley drew himself to his full height, and felt full of pride as he thought of Willoughby Hall.) "I've a bit of land now I can call my own, and a house that no lady in the land would be ashamed to enter. And I offer all this to you. Come, my girl, don't let's have any more words, but name the day, and you'll never regret it!"

"Let me have time, at any rate?" said Laura, rising.

"Well, what do you call time?" answered Bingley. "Let me see; to-day's Thursday. Well, then, on Sunday afternoon I'll call openly at Bridgenorth House to get your answer. Don't forget that your choice is whether you will marry me or go to Farnham Gaol. For I would do it, girl," he continued, almost fiercely. "Before William Glynford, or any other young fellow, should come between you and me, I would see you taken away in the prison van! But there, there; don't cry! It will be all right, if you are wise, and don't throw away a good chance when you have got it!"

CHAPTER XV.

LAURA'S CHOICE.

Laura scarcely knew how she got home after her painful interview with Bingley—scarcely how the rest of the day passed after she had listened to his proposal and his threats.

She went and sat by the sick children, and heard their fretful complaints as if in a dream. She knew her situation, and yet could hardly realize it. To marry Bingley! It seemed too monstrous, too hideous a thing to be true, and yet she knew that true it was.

She sat up that night with the children, and each hour that struck seemed to her to sound like a knell. One hour nearer Sunday afternoon, and then another!

"But no, no; I cannot do it!" she thought, starting up. And then, remembering the choice she had, sank down again with a groan.

She looked so ill when morning came that the trained nurse spoke to Mrs. Glynford about her during the forenoon. "That young lady isn't strong enough to sit up, Mrs. Glynford," she said.

"Why not?" answered Mrs. Glynford, sharply. "She must sit up—she's paid for teaching the children; and when they are too ill to be taught, it is her duty to nurse them. Don't put any folly of that kind into her head, please, nurse."

But, during the day, Laura grew so ill in her miserable little attic upstairs that even Mrs. Glynford was forced to admit that "she was fit for nothing—a poor, useless creature, not worth the money she cost."

Some such hard, cold words as these were spoken by the selfish woman, and were heard with no small disgust by her husband.

"Maria," said Mr. Glynford, senior, "if I were you I would be a little more civil to this young lady; she is not unlikely to be your niece-in-law some day."

"What do you say?" exclaimed Mrs. Glynford.

"William admires her very much," answered Mr. Glynford, significantly.

"Nonsense! I don't believe it," said Mrs. Glynford. "If I did believe it, I would turn her out of the house to-day."

"And so induce William to publish the baits to-morrow!" said Mr. Glynford, senior. "Don't be absurd, Maria. William is not the man to stand by and see a girl he likes ill-treated. You remember that locket you made such a fuss about?"

"Yes, certainly. William did not give her that?" said Mrs. Glynford, eagerly.

"He just did, then!" answered her husband. "And William is too good a fellow to play fast and loose with a woman's heart; and so I just advise you to be civil with Miss Keane."

Mrs. Glynford felt very angry, but had enough sense to see that her husband's advice, in a worldly point of view at least, was good. What made the idea of William Glynford marrying her governess more galling to her was that her nephew-in-law held a higher social position in the town of Farnham than she did, and was a welcome guest in several houses whose doors were closed against herself. The Glynfords were, in fact, an old and respectable family, and Mr. Glynford, senior, was considered to have married beneath him. Then Mrs. Glynford was not popular. She was good looking and rich; but the higher classes in Farnham justly called her vulgar. People of taste shrugged their shoulders sometimes after a visit to Bridgenorth House. With less finery and ostentation she would have made her way better; but she, of course, did not see this, but thought money the grandest and most imposing thing in the world, and she was constantly (virtually) showing her

purse. But she had always courted William Glynford. She hoped he would marry well, and thus improve her own position. But she was rather afraid of him; never quite understood whether he was in jest or earnest; and knew that, in the Glynford character, there was a vein of obstinacy which was apt to develop itself very unpleasantly upon certain occasions. She felt, in fact, that if she turned Miss Keane out of the house, William Glynford (if it were true that he admired her) would be almost certain to take her part—perhaps, even as her husband suggested, marry her governess at once.

Mrs. Glynford was furious at the very idea; but what could she do?

She was cold and haughty in her manner to Miss Keane at times during the next two days, and then tried sometimes to be civil.

And for poor Laura to give up William Glynford was the least bitter, perhaps, of the agony that she was called upon to endure. Her life might be all gray, and cold, and sad, without his love; but she could have gone away and worked, she thought, and lived on quietly, loving him in secret and to the last.

But to be forced to marry Bingley; to live in the same town as another man's wife, or to have her name branded and disgraced for evermore!

This was her choice as Bingley had put it before her, exaggerating, perhaps, the consequences of her breach of the law to suit his own purposes.

But even in her misery she thought of Mud. She wrote to her young sister on the Friday morning, breaking as gently as she could William Glynford's opinion that it would be well for her to wait a year or two before venturing to brave the ordeal of public criticism.

On the Saturday night she received an answer to this letter, written while Maul was in a state of intense excitement and disappointment.

"It was cruel, worse than cruel," she wrote, "of Mr. Glynford to raise hopes in my mind if he only meant to disappoint me. I could not wait—could not live through long, dreary years."

Such, and more to the same purpose, was the letter which Laura held in her cold, trembling hands on the Sunday when Mr. Bingley had said that he was coming openly to Bridgenorth House in the afternoon to learn her choice.

The dinner-hour was an early one on Sundays at Bridgenorth House, and upon this particular Sunday William Glynford was coming to dine there.

Mr. Glynford, senior, had announced, on Sunday night, to his wife, but before Laura, that William would dine with them the next day.

Thus, on the Sunday morning Laura knew that she would see William Glynford during the day, and made up her mind to give him Maul's letter to read.

She knew also that this would be her last chance of doing so.

If Bingley came in the afternoon to ask for her decision, she knew well, whatever way she made it, that William Glynford's regard and friendship for her would be a thing of the past.

Could she expect him not to despise her if she married Bingley? Could she expect him not utterly to scorn her if she were arrested for a breach of the law?

A few minutes before the early dinner-hour she saw William Glynford arrive.

The poor girl, pale and miserable, watched him, from her attic window, come slowly down the avenue, and went at once quickly downstairs in the hope of seeing him a few minutes alone.

She did see him alone. Mrs. Glynford had been at church, and had taken a drive after her return, and was, therefore, not ready to descend when her nephew made his appearance.

Thus, when Laura entered the drawing-room no one was there but William Glynford.

He turned round as she went in, and came forward, holding out his hand, and then saw how strangely she was altered, and how very ill she looked.

"Are you not well?" he asked. "But I need not ask; I am sure you are not."

"I have been ill," answered Laura, pressing her hand against her side to still its painful throbbings. "But—but, Mr. Glynford, I wish to speak to you. I wish to say one word before Mrs. Glynford comes in—about Maul."

"Yes; certainly!" said William Glynford, gently.

He was thinking, "What can have happened to her?"

"This is her letter," said Laura, in the same nervous, agitated way in which she had before spoken.

"Poor child!" said Glynford, when he had read the epistle. "Poor, impulsive little girl! Well, Miss Laura," he continued, "let it be as she wishes. I will write to my friend, the publisher, to-day, and she shall have the pleasure of seeing her thoughts in print before three months are over. Tell her so, will you, when you write, with my kind regards; and tell her also it was only on her own account that I advised her to wait."

Laura held out her cold and trembling hand to Glynford.

"How can I thank you?" she said, in a faltering and broken voice. "Mr. Glynford, whatever may happen—however badly you may learn to think of me—will you promise still to be kind to Maul; not to let anything that I may do influence you against my poor young sister?"

As these agitated words fell from Laura's

lips, William Glynford looked at her in the utmost surprise.

"I do not understand you!" he said. "Laura, what have you done—what are you about to do?"

Before Laura could reply, the drawing-room door opened, and Adolphus John, arrayed in ruby velvet and white lace, was ushered in by his nurse.

"Ma said, Cousin William," he began, "I was to go beside you at once!"

"Indeed! And why, pray, Master Dolly?" asked William Glynford, trying to appear at ease.

"Ma said you had been long enough alone with that pale-faced hussey!" answered Adolphus John; "and that was the reason I had to go into the drawing-room at once, and stay till she was ready to come. Didn't she say that, Bessie?" added Adolphus John, appealing to his nursemaid for confirmation of his words.

"You shouldn't repeat tales, Master Dolly!" said the nursemaid, with a giggle.

"She did say it! It isn't a tale!" reiterated Adolphus John.

"What isn't a tale, Dolly?" asked Mr. Glynford, senior, now entering the room.

"What 'ma said about Cousin William and—"

"Hush, my lad!" cried his father, catching Adolphus John in his arms, and throwing him in the air.

"Have you got another kitten yet, Dolly?" said William Glynford, also trying to distract Master Dolly's attention.

"No," answered the boy. "Ma said—"

"Here is mamma to answer for herself," again interrupted Mr. Glynford, senior; for Mrs. Glynford now appeared, looking rather flurried and red.

"I must apologize for not being ready, William," she said, as she took her nephew's hand; "but we had a longer drive than usual."

"You are in very good time, I think," answered William Glynford; and then he offered his arm to his aunt, and then led her into the sumptuously furnished dining-room.

When the dinner was over, and while Mr. and Mrs. Glynford were freely indulging in the dessert, Laura heard the hall door-bell ring.

A few minutes later the butler entered the room, and said something in a low tone to Mr. Glynford.

"Tell him to come in here, of course," said the master of the house, in reply. "Why, Maria," he continued, looking, looking at his wife; "it's your brother—Mr. Bingley!"

"Maria's" red cheeks grew redder at these words. Never before had Bingley intruded himself at his sister's board since the Glynfords had lived at Bridgenorth House.

William Glynford gave one glance—just one—at Laura when Mr. Bingley's name was mentioned by his uncle, and never forgot her look at that moment. It haunted him for months afterwards, and always filled his heart with pain.

"Mr. Bingley," the next moment announced the butler, and Mr. Glynford rose and shook hands kindly with his uninvited guest.

"Ah, Bingley!" he said; "glad to see you. You should have come an hour sooner, and taken pot-luck with us at our Sunday dinner."

"Thank you, Mr. Glynford," said Bingley; "but as I wasn't asked I dined at home. And how are you, Maria?" he went on, looking at his sister, who coldly held out her hand.

Bingley just took it, and then went round to the side of the table where Laura Keane was sitting, and shook hands with her, and then boldly drew a chair to her side.

"I didn't mean to intrude myself at your table," he said, looking again at his sister, "for I had no idea that such great people as you would dine in the middle of the day; but I called to see this young lady." And he glanced at Laura as he spoke.

"Indeed!" said Mrs. Glynford, in a tone of intense surprise and disgust.

"Yes," continued Bingley; "and I shall be glad to have a little private conversation with you, Miss Keane, when it suits you."

Laura opened her white lips, but no sound came forth, and Mr. and Mrs. Glynford alike stared at her in astonishment.

"Oh, indeed!" said Mr. Glynford, after a moment's pause. "Well, pray retire, Miss Keane, if you have any secrets to discuss."

"I'll not keep you long," said Bingley, again addressing Laura, who now rose, and a minute later she and Bingley had left the room.

Then a torrent of words broke from Mrs. Glynford.

"Well, of all the extraordinary things," she said, "that ever happened, that is the most extraordinary! What can Richard have to say to Miss Keane? William," she went on, addressing her nephew, "do you know anything of this?"

"I knew that Mr. Bingley was an acquaintance of Miss Keane's, that is all," answered William Glynford, in a husky, altered voice.

"How did he get to know her?" cried Mrs. Glynford. "And what can he be going to say to her?"

"Perhaps he is going to propose for her," said Mr. Glynford, senior, with a laugh.

"Nothing of the kind," said Mrs. Glynford. She got nervous with anxiety at last, and told her husband that she was determined to go and look after her brother and Miss Keane.

Just, however, as she rose from her seat for this purpose, Bingley himself returned to the