HER HUMBLE LOVER

"I expect! I knew," he says, with cold, slow emphasis, "that you would fly from him as from some wild beast. Do you think that I do not know you—that I am not as sure as that I am standing here, that your pure nature could not endure contact with his after you had learnt his true character?"

She shrinks and hides her face as a shudder sweeps over her, but with an effort she regains her self-possession. After all, it is but the malicious figment of a disordered brain, or at the worst a wild story built upon some slight foundation. What she has to do is to be patient with him and to get rid of him—to get rid of him at once.

"Sir Frederic," she says, slowly, as if every word cost her an effort, "you expect some response, some answer to this—this story of yours. Let me be plain with you. I—before Heaven I do not wish to wound you—but I can only say one word: I do not believe you."

He opens his lips, but she goes on with a gesture of infinite dignity dignity and patience:

"I do not say that you have lied willfully or wittingly—I say that you have been deceived. Some idle tale—this is a land of fiction—has misled you into this grave error. Let us say no more. I—if I have been hasty, and have said in my surprise anything to wound you—I beg you to forget it. If you will also forget that such a person as myself exists it will be better for both of us—all of us. And now—you must go, please."

He stands motionless, and with a stern, determined look on his white face.

"It is what I expected," he says, in a low, set voice. "It is almost word for word what I told myself you would say; it is consistent with your purity, your loyalty, your stanchness. But do you think that I should be so mad as to come to you with such a denunciation without bringing my proofs?"

She falters, and the dread begins to seize her again, but she struggles against it.

"You say that I have been deceived, misled! Good. If it be so, you will have no objection to becoming acquainted with the process by which I was deceived."

"No—no! I do not care—I do not wish——"

"Your husband's good name is of so little value in your eyes that you will not investigate the story?" he says, with calm intensity.

She springs to her feet.

"You have stung me at last!" she says, almost wildly. "Bring me your proofs!"

He inclines his head. All throughout the interview he has spoken and moved like a man wound up to maintain his self-command; he moves now to the door with the stiff gait of an automaton.

"Stay—where?" she falters.

"I am going to produce my proof. It is a living witness."

"No, no!" she says; "not here—not in this house! There are people——"

"Who will hear," he says. "Will you come with me, then? It is but a few steps; or are you afraid?" hoarsely, and with a spasm of humiliation.

For a moment she pauses, then she snatches up her hat.

"I am not afraid," she says, coldly. "I will go with you. Where is it?"

He points to the old fountain, and standing aside, allows her to pass.

With swift, firm steps, Signa reaches the fountain, and stands with one hand resting upon it, her face set and cold. He follows her slowly, with a motion of his hand signs to her to wait, and goes into the wood. A moment afterward he returns with the young girl, whom Signa had been watching, by his side.

Never while life lasts will Signa forget this moment; the white, haggard face of the man, the wild, dark, mournful eyes of the girl. Instinctively she draws back a pace, and at the movement Sir Frederick lays his hand upon the girl's arm, and motions her to seat herself on a stone at the foot of the fountain. She drops mechanically, and sits looking from one to the other.

Signa waits in silence for a moment, then she asks, in a hushed voice, that sounds like a distant echo of her own:

"Who is this?"

"Listen. She herself shall tell," he says. He bends down and lays his hand upon the girl's shoulder. "Lucia," he says. She looks up as if awaking from a reverie, and waits. "Lucia, you remember me"—he speaks slowly, as if to make his English intelligible to her Italian ears—"you remember my coming here a little while ago, and the story you told me?"

She nods wearily.

"Ah, yes," she says, slowly, her accent blurring the English words in the way peculiar to foreigners, and which Signa never hears hereafter without a pang of misery.

"This lady," he says—the girl turns her head and lifts her eyes to Signa's white face with the dull, apathetic stare of a dumb animal—"this lady wishes to hear it. Will you tell it to her just as you told it to me? Who knows—perhaps she may help you to find the one you are seeking."

A gentle light comes into the girl's eyes, and her lips twitch.

"Yes. Ah, signora! you are of his country, you are English—surely you must know him! If he would but come back to me! I have been so patient! He said that I was to be good and patient, and have I not been so? Ah, signora, I am so wretched!"

With a shudder and a thrill of coming evil, Signa draws back out of the reach of the dark eyes, and signs to Sir Frederick with a swift, frenzied wave of the hand that he is to make her speak quickly.

"Yes, yes, Lucia!" he says. "But this story! Come."

The girl sighs and is silent for a moment; then she begins.

It is a long, rambling, sometimes incoherent story, but it is all to clear. It is a story of a man's treachery, of a man's crime; sometimes it is broken with sobs, and the tears roll down the girl's cheeks and fall upon her heaving bosom; when she comes to that awful encounter between the bridegroom and the betrayer her face grows white, her hands unclasp suddenly, and fling themselves before her eyes.

"He—he shot him!" she says, in a wild, tremulous whisper. "Ah, yes! he was brave, was the signor! He shot him!"

There is an awful silence; benumbed, frozen. Signa leans against the fountain; Sir Frederic's presence is forgotten; everything in her life goes by her as if in a dream; all that she realizes is the girl's voice telling its awful story. She does not doubt it; she cannot, strive to do so though she may. There is truth in the accents of the wild voice—truth that will take no denial.

"Go on," says Sir Frederic, hoarsely, his eyes fixed on the ground as if to avoid the agonized face opposite him.

The girl stares at him, then her head droops, and she sighs wearily.

"There is no more," she says hopelessly. "The signor went—he left me—telling me to be patient and good, and I—I have been so patient. I have waited—ah, yes, I have waited—but it is so long, so long! Why does he not come back? Has he forgotten me? You—you are English; tell me, are all your people so?"

Silence; her head droops lower, as if she had not expected an answer; then Sir Frederic raises his head and looks at Signa; her lips have moved, but though she has said no word, he understands her.

"Lucia," he says, bending down, "you have not told us his name, this English signor. Do you not know it Try and remember.

She looks up.

"Do you think I forget?" she says, with dull wonder and scorn. "He was an English lord. He was Milord Delamere!"

Signa closed her eyes, and holds on to the fountain with both hands. Sir Frederic makes a slight movement toward her, but it is sufficient to recall her to consciousness and self-command.

Faintly she motions him back, and with a bitter smile he stops. Then he touches the girl on the shoulder.

"Lucia, did this Lord Delamere give you no nome—no place where you could write to him? Do you understand me?"

"Yes, yes," she answers, heavily. "And I did write—ah, yes, so many times!"

"And he, did he never reply—never send a letter back for all yours?"

A quick light comes into her eyes, and her hand goes to her bosom.

Sir Frederic glances at Signa, whose eyes are fixed upon the girl with the expression of one who sees some awful apparition.

"Lucia, will you show me the letter? You would not let me see it when I asked you before. Will you show it to the lady?"

The girl turns her eyes to Signa, questioningly, then slowly she takes the folded paper from her dress, and reluctantly as one parts even for a moment with a treasured relic, she hands it to him.

He takes a glance at it and extends it to Signa.

"It is in Italian," he says, in a low, cold voice. "I do no understand it. If it be forgery it is not forged by me."

Signa scarcely hears or comprehends. With a shudder she takes the letter and unfolds it For a moment her eyes refuse to do their task, a film seems to cover them, the paper is just a square, misty spot of white. Then with an effort she looks at it.

It is only a few lines in Italian:

"Dear Lucia,—I have received your letters, and they have given me much pain. Be patient and all will be well. You must try and forget all that has happened. Do not write to be again, Lucia, as writing will but help you to remember.

"Always your friend,
"Delamere."

This is it; and in the midst of her anguish, as she recognizes Hector's handwriting, she is conscious of a feeling of horror at the unnatural coldness of the letter.

With a shudder she lets it drop from her fingers, as a man might do the empty vial from which he had drunk the fatal draught.

Sir Frederick picks it up and gives it back to the girl, who receives it eagerly, but a moment afterward stares at it vacantly, and then slowly returns to its hiding place.

He stands looking at her for a moment, then he says:

"Lucia, you may go now. You know your way? You remember what I told you—that I will be your friend? That is well. Go now".

The girl rises and looks absently, then seeing Signa she makes a rapid movement toward her, and taking her hand it about to lift it to her lips. With a faint cry of horror, Signa snatches it away and flings it above her head, shrinking back against the fountain.

The girl's eyes flash and she stares vacantly at her, but Sir Frederic has her arm in his grasp and muttering:

"Come with me," leads her away.

When he returns alone, Signa is still leaning against the cold stone as if she had become part and parcel of it. Her eyes are fixed on the steel-blue sky, her lips tightly shut, her breathing scarcely perceptible.

He waits a moment, with white face and heavy eyes, then he speaks her name.

"Signa!" a slight movement of her eyes shows that she hears him. "Signa, I have brought my proofs. Do you still think me a liar? Have I been deceived; are you? This girl you will say is half insane. It is true; her wrongs have made her so. So much the darker is this man's sin. Was I right here when I said you would fly from him as from a monster? Speak to me! I—have borne so much; my misery has been as great as yours, for the sight of your agony has doubled mine. Speak to me! There is no time to lose! He may return at any moment."

She starts and presses her hands to her brow, then lets them fall, and moves slowly away toward the inn like one in a dream. He walks beside her, his eyes fixed on the ground.

"What will you do?" he says, hoarsely; "there is but one thing you can do—you must leave him."

She does not speak, but her eyes turn to his face with a look awfully like those of the miserable Lucia's.

"Listen to me," he says, speaking slowly and as clearly as he can "You must leave this accursed place at once. My carriage is here; you must take it——"

She flashes upon him a look of scorn and loathing.

"With you!" she says, in a dry, hard voice. Only those two words, but they make him writhe and bite his lips till the blood comes.

"No," he says. "No. You shall go—alone. I will arrange everything. My man is trustworthy. You will reach the station at Aletto before—before he can overtake you. Go—go to England to—to Lady Rookwell—"

He stops, for it is evident that she does not follow him. In silence they reach the inn. He waits in the passage for a moment, sees her drag herself up the stairs to her own room, then with bowed head goes to the stables and mechanically helps the men to put the horses to.

Signa goes upstairs, and like one moving in her sleep, takes off her dress. Then she sinks on her knees beside her traveling trunk, and with heavy, faltering hands turns out the contents until she comes to a plain, black dress; it is the one she wore that day—the happiest in her life—when she sailed for St. Clare. Mechanically she puts this on; then she stands for a moment as if trying to grasp some idea, some motive. As she does her hand wanders to her pocket, and, still like one in sleep, she takes out the contents—poor trifles that recall the day, the very hour, a thimble, a knife Archie had consigned to her charge and forgotten, a piece of—"Ah!" with a sudden cry as of something had struck her to the heart, she stares at a fragment of biscuit wrapped in a fragment of an old letter.

Back it all comes to her. She sees him kneeling over the fire, his handsome face turned to hers as he bids her keep the biscuit in case she should need it! With trembling fingers she unwraps the letter and glances at it; as she does so, the cry goes up again, but this time with an undertone of horror. The letter is in Italian, in a woman's handwriting; it is one of the girl Lucia's!

With a wild, despairing gesture she flings it from her and drops on her knees. It is all true, beyond the shadow of a doubt. All true, and she—she is the most wretched of all creatures.

For half an hour, perhaps, she kneels, fighting with her agony; then she rises, white as death itself, but calm, too calm, wraps her traveling cloak around her, and with steady, leaden feet goes downstairs.

Sir Frederic stands at the bottom, his arms folded, his head bent. He looks up, he does not speak, and with the faintest motion of the hand guides her to the door.

Before they reach it the landlord comes out.

"Miladi," he says, "milord here tells me that he brings you bad news band's return! Is that so? It is so strange—so, by Heaven, yes!"—he searches for a word—"yes, so novel!"

Signa's lips move. Sir Frederic and the landlord wait.

"It is quite true," she says at last, and the voice is like that of an automaton.

"And milord, what shall I tell him when he returns? How explain this surprise?" demands the landlord.

Sir Frederic answers.

"I shall remain and explain," he says, coldly.

The landlord bows and looks somewhat relieved from the dread of having to face Milord Delamere alone.

"Very good, milord," he says. "I have but to express my sorrow at the bad tidings, and to trust that miladi will make a safe journey. But it is bad! Haste there, Baptiste; haste!" And he begins to hurry up the men.

Sir Frederic holds the door of the carriage open, and Signa, with heavy, faltering step, enters. As he closes it, he looks at her and murmurs hoarsely:

"Be brave, Signa! Oh, Heaven!"

He stops, for she does not hear him.

With an inarticulate groan, he shuts the door and goes to the coachman.

"You know what to do," he says, sternly. "Drive for your life. You must catch that train."

The man touches his hat, and an instant afterward the horses dash down the street, and Sir Frederic is left gazing after them.

CHAPTER XXXI.

Sir Frederic has conquered, he has won all along the line, but his victory does not seem to bring him much satisfaction, and certainly no happiness. He has convinced Signa at very great trouble and at the most of much anguish to himself and her, that he was right that night on the tower in warning her against Hector Warren. He has proved to her that she has given her pure heart's love to a cold, heartless wretch, scarcely worthy the name of man: he has convinced her that it would be better to die rather than to live with my Lord of Delamere, and yet Sir Frederick is far from happy, to put it in the broadest sense, he is wretched and miserable. The white face, that he had found so beautiful and left so worn and haggard with agony, haunts him like a spectre.

"I only did my duty, he mutters, drawing his cloak round him, for the afternoon draws in and the evening chilliness makes itself felt. "I only did my duty. I could not let him go on living with her, the wretch who is unfit to touch the hem of her dress! The world may say it was my spite, my vanity, my jealous nature, but it was duty that nerved me. And yet—great heaven! how she must have loved him!" and he strides up and down outside the inn, his face working, his lips pale and dry with the inward fever that consumes him.

The landlord, watching him from the little latticed window, comes out, with a grave, deferential air, and asks him, with the deepest respect, if he will not enter and eat of something, but Sir Frederic shakes his head. He has eaten nothing since morning, and he feels that a single morsel would choke him.

The landlord shakes his head.

"At least," he says, in his excellent German-English, "milord" — every well-to-do Englishman is "milord" in the remote parts of the continent—"will take some wine?"

Sir Frederic assents absently, and the landlord places a blash of red wine on the table of the sitting room, and announces the fact to his guest.

(To be continued.)

GREAT CITY'S WANE.

Ispahan, Once the Proud Capital of Persian Empire.

A report from Constantinople to the effect that the Persian city of Ispahan had been freed from Russian rule by an uprising of tribesmen who had waged "holy war" against the foreigners, failed to attract more than casual comment in the news despatches from the war front of Europe and Asia. Yet had this city retained in the twentieth century the power and magnificence which were hers in the seventeenth, no news in the world not even that affecting Berlin, London or Paris, would have been of greater interest, for in that era Ispahan, the capital of its country, had a population variously estimated between a million and 600,000, while its palaces, gardens and wonderful bazaars were without rival in any clime.

To-day Ispahan is scarcely the proverbial "shell" or "shadow" of its former greatness and the prestige that was hers as the capital of Persia has been transferred to Teheran, 210 miles to the north. Although the population still numbers between 80,000 and 100,000, and the traveler might be deceived by the spectacle of its crowded covered bazaar which runs for three miles through the centre of the place, dividing it into a north and south side, yet all beyond this thoroughfare of barter is desolate and in ruins. Palaces, once the pride of shahs and the delight of harem favorites, are crumpling into decay; of the 210 mosques scattered over the 20 square miles which the city covers only a few have retained an appreciable part of their original richness and impressive grandeur; the 150 public baths have fallen into disuse; the wonderful gardens and avenues of luxuriant trees, caressed by cascades of purest water, are overgrown with weeds and scraggy shrubs.

With the invasion of the barbarous Afghans under their youthful leader Mahmud, just a hundred years after the brilliant reign of Abbas the Great, the glory of Ispahan faded rapidly. This ruthless soldier, at the head of a desert-scorched, ragged army of less than 25,000 men, met the richly decked Persian army of 50,000 on a plain about nine miles from the walls of the capital. The defeat of the defenders was overwhelming, 15,000 Persians being left dead on the field. Shah Hosain succeeded in staving off the evil day for six months, but in September, 1722, he went himself to the camp of the invader, and with his own hand fixed the royal plume of feathers in the turban of Mahmud. Hosain had the year before appealed to Peter the Great, Czar of Russia, for aid in driving back the Afghans, and the Russians, in answer to this invitation, had embarked a force upon the Volga. This army reached the Caspian in July, 1722—the first time in history that the flag of the Muscovites had floated over the great inland sea—but succor never reached the hapless Hosain.

Mahmud's sway of less than three years—happily for the world, he died at the early age of 27—was a period of frightful cruelty and bloodshed in Ispahan. The length of the Afghan regime was only eight years, but in that time the heart of Ispahan had been so bruised that it was never healed.—Buffalo Express.

NEW SLEEVES.

All the Way From Wrist Length to Shoulder Straps.

Not that there is any change in sleeve widths—the changes are more subtle, though none the less radical.

Lengths, however, are experiencing the change that usually comes with the rising of the thermometer, and in the late spring and summer dresses, particularly in the latter, one finds them varying according to the type of frock to which they are attached and adapted to the age and plumpness or slenderness (to put both kindly) of the woman to wear them. Consequently, they range and dwindle from demure lengths that modestly cover the wrist to mere armholes and shoulder straps. Some of the sleeves in summer frocks are three inches above the elbows. Yet others, in both summer and spring frocks, are long, transparent and bishop in line. Lanvin favors a comfortable and conservative seven-eighths length.

Bernard sanctions a plain, half-length bell sleeve, using it for all his blouses and sports dresses. Bernard's full-length sleeve is given a novel aspect by means of a deep cuff in contrasting color. Many of Lanvin's seven-eighths tailored sleeves have a full lingerie undersleeve puffed at the wrist.

Evening gowns are in nearly all cases sleeveless. Beer, however, compromises with a mere cap of lace.

Both dresses and sports blouses are fitted with sleeves in full length or half length.

The kimono line seems to have come to stay, and it is probable that fir many seasons to come we shall have a choice between inset sleeves and that Oriental line.

Bulloz has an odd sleeve suggesting the Empire. It has a bag-over cuff made to harmonize with a Zouave skirt. Lanvin shows a transparent barrel sleeve reaching to the whist, but so cut as to show the bare arm half way to the elbow.

Muggins—Do you think the Germans are really looking for peace? Buggins—If they are, it's through a periscope.

Baggery.

Lacquered wooden handbags.
Wristbags made of millinery posies.
Striped silk, rose-embroidered in wool.
Colored pipings on tiny black patent leather satchels.