

One Night's Mystery.

By May Agnes Fleming.

PART II.

CHAPTER V.

"ONE YELLOW NEW YEAR NIGHT."

After that November afternoon Miss Owenson complied many times with Mr. Nolan's request that she would "sometimes steal an hour from her multiplicity of engagements, and come to see Lucy." Twice, at least, every week, brought her to the little cottage in the shabby, out-of-the-way street; and with every visit her strong first liking for mother and daughter grew stronger. Bouquets, luxuriant and rare house-plants, baskets of luscious white grapes, new books, and beautiful engravings, new music, all the refined and delicate things the invalid best loved, began to find their way to the cottage. It was easy for Sydney to imagine her taste, for they were her own. It was understood, also, that these things were not to be mentioned at the donor's next visit; and thanks and gratitude were to be understood, not expressed. Best of all, work never dragged now; all the time the widow and her daughter could spare from their regular customers, Miss Owenson filled up.

During these weekly visits the son of the house was but rarely met. A byness altogether new in Miss Owenson's experience of herself made her shrink from meeting him when she came to see his sister, although always very frankly and cordially glad to meet him elsewhere. They did meet tolerably often in this way—most often of all at his friend Mrs. Graham's, rarely at the Macgregor's, and occasionally at concerts or opera. Mrs. Graham, like most happy little wives and women, was a match-maker by instinct, and conceived the happy idea, from the very first night, of marrying Miss Owenson to her favorite Lewis.

"It arranges itself as naturally as life, John," says Mrs. Graham to Mr. Graham, in confidential confidence. "Both are young—he clever, she handsome—he struggling for fame and a start in life, she with more money than she knows what to do with. She is the sweetest girl I met for many a day—simple, unaffected, intelligent and lovely. She is even worthy of him. All is said in that."

"I feel," observes Mr. Graham, calmly, "that if this sort of thing goes on much longer I shall become a victim of the green-eyed monster—ferociously jealous of Lewis Nolan."

"Nonsense, sir! You know you are as fond of him as I am, and just as anxious to see him marry well."

"Ah! but heiresses don't throw themselves away, as a general thing, on impetuous young attorneys. Money marries money. He that hath a goose shall get a goose." This Miss Owenson was of English descent—lays claim on her father's side, so I understand, to birth and blood, and all that. And everybody knows that Lewis—my junior partner at present—began his career as my office boy. That sort of thing tells with women."

"It does not with Miss Owenson," cries Mrs. Graham, with spirit. "Don't class her with the ordinary run of young persons—that fast Katie Macgregor, for instance."

"Fast, my dear? remonstrates Mr. G. "Certainly; she is audacious enough for anything. Did you hear her discuss that odious divorce case last night with Mr. Cuyler?—Van Cuyler, of all men, with his high and mighty notions of womanly delicacy and dignity. And the way she angles for Mr. Vanderdonck—the way she has been angling for the past six years! It is a thousand pities so pure, so thorough, so thoroughly sweet and womanly a girl as this Sydney Owenson should be among them."

"She is one of the family, and they are going to marry her to Dick," says Mr. Graham. "Ah! Dick? I hope your head won't ache until they do, darkly retorts Mrs. Graham. "She will no more marry Dick Macgregor than I will if I were single."

"Thank you, my love," says Mr. Graham, and falls asleep.

Mrs. Graham, acting on this philanthropic idea, took every opportunity of throwing these two young people together. She conceived a great and sudden passion for the orphan heiress, carried her about with her wherever she could induce her to come, had her at her house a great deal, and gave Mr. Nolan ample opportunity, if he so desired, to win his way to the heiress's favor. But favors are vainly thrust upon some people. Mr. Nolan showed himself insensible, in a most exasperating degree, to all this loveliness and wealth. He and Miss Owenson got on remarkably well in a general way, danced together, talked together, even sang together, on very private evenings. But of love-making, the alphabet was not yet commenced.

"Perhaps Mr. Nolan's modesty stands in the way, my dear," is what Mr. Graham said, soothingly to Mrs. Graham, when that best of women bitterly complained of her favorite's defection. "Bashfulness is the bane of most young barristers' lives."

"Bashfulness!" cries Mrs. Graham, with ineffable scorn. "The remark, sir, is too contemptible to be answered. The worst of it is that I think—"

But here Mrs. Graham paused, too honorable to betray even to her husband the secret of a sister woman's heart.

"You think you Nolan might go in and win, my dear, if he liked?" insinuated Mr. Graham, with coarse remark his wife disdains to answer.

Many new friends were being made in the December weeks, many invitations pouring in for the fair heiress, many engagements for every day. A net of entanglement seemed to be closing around Sydney, in spite of her rebellious protests and chaffings. Invitations could not be rejected without rudeness, and although for general society Sydney did not much care, she found herself being drawn into the maelstrom, whether she would or no.

It was most difficult, at times, to keep up her visits to Lucy Nolan, and in these latter weeks Lucy was ailing and in pain.

The wan, patient face saddened when Sydney went, and lightened into temporary forgetfulness of suffering when she came. Some of the December sunshine seemed to enter in her face, the little sad house grew glad with her presence. "Sydney's days" were the sunniest days in the week to Lucy; and Sydney realizing it resolved that no engagement should hereafter interfere with those visits.

The place that Cyrilla Hendrick had once held in her heart, vacant ever since, was rapidly being filled by this wan, gentle Lucy.

The great trial of The State vs. Harland was to commence about the close of December, and Lewis Nolan became so busy and absorbed that he no longer was visible even in the drawing room of Mrs. Graham.

He came home very late, to sleep, let early, and was seen no more until the following night. Mrs. Graham poured her complaints into Miss Owenson's ear.

"He is working himself to death. I saw him last evening. I went down to the office for Mr. G., and Lewis lifted such a wave of face from a pile of hideous law papers—those

great eyes of his, hollow, and with *bistre* circles beneath. I miss him so much at my receptions, that tall black head of his towering over the heads of his fellow men."

"He seemed the godliest man that ever among ladies sat in a hall. And nobler—when she lifted up her eyes, and loved him with a love that was her doom," said Mrs. Graham, gushing out in the most unexpected manner into blank verse. Sydney laughs—rather unsympathetically.

"Dear me! how very tragic. With a love that was her doom! You do not mean yourself, I hope, Mrs. Graham? For the sake of morality, and my friendly regard for Mr. Graham—"

"Ah, you are like the rest," says Mrs. Graham, shaking her head; "the girls of the present day have no heart. When I was young we would all have lost our heads for such a fellow as Lewis Nolan."

"What very ill-disciplined heads must have been in vogue. And how odd it seems to be talking sentiment at the fashionable hour, and on the sunny side of Broadway," answers the heiress.

Mrs. Graham might have her own ideas, but Miss Owenson baffled even her. Certainly the bright face of this stately young heiress betokened anything but love-sickness and that frank, rather satirical laugh must come from a heart-whole maiden. The gentleman was immersed in a horrid murder case, the lady in running the round of a New York season—yes, it seemed a hopeless affair.

Sydney's acquaintance had come long ago to the ears of her family. And Katie Macgregor had looked up from a fashion book and the latest style of coiffures, and given her blonde cousin a long, peculiar glance.

"So that is where you go?" she said, slowly. "Do you know it has rather puzzled me lately where so many of your afternoons were spent?"

"Indeed," said Miss Owenson, going on with her knitting in untroubled calm. "How very unnecessary for you to have puzzled yourself. Had you enquired I would have been most happy to have told you."

There was silence. Miss Macgregor looked back at the heads of hair with compressed lips.

"You went first with Uncle Grif, to have your torn tunic repaired."

"Yes."

"I knew they were seamstresses of some sort—dressmakers or shirtmakers, I fancied. What kind of people are they? Vulgar, or like Lewis?"

"Vulgar is the last word I should think of applying to Mrs. or Miss Nolan. If I ever saw ladies, they are ladies."

"Ah! persons of education."

"That is understood."

"But it must be a very unpleasant neighborhood for you to visit—some low street, is it not, near the North River?"

"It is a street of poor people, if that is what you mean. Does poverty inevitably include lowness? I do not find it at all unpleasant."

"And then, of course, Lewis is always there to see you safely home," carelessly suggests Miss Macgregor.

Miss Owenson lifts her eyes from her work—a gray and crimson breakfast shawl for Aunt Helen—and looks across at her cousin.

"Mr. Lewis came home with me on the evening of my first visit, as Uncle Grif had forsaken me. Since that day I have not had the pleasure of meeting him once at his mother's house."

"Was there a ring of defiance in Sydney's tone. Instantly Katie became cheerful and apologetic."

"Uncle Grif always said they were the nicest possible people, the Nolan family. I never met any of them but Lewis. He was a protégé of uncle's, as I have told you, and it was uncle who first got him into Mr. Graham's office to open and close, sweep, go errands—not a very dignified beginning—and finally sent him to the same school with Dick. Dick used to bring him here at times and we all romped in a friendly way together but as we grew up, of course, our paths diverged. I have no doubt, however, that Lewis Nolan will one day be a well known name throughout the land."

"One, two, three, four, five—seven—twelve loops of gray," is Miss Owenson's answer to this, as she bends over the breakfast shawl.

"The trial begins to-morrow," pursues Katie. "How I should like to go."

"Should you?" growls Dick, rising suddenly from his seat in a distant window and throwing down his paper. "I dare say; women are always fond of going where they are not wanted; divorce trials, murder trials, everything new and nasty. They go to hangings, sometimes, and bring their babies. I don't suppose it would do you any harm; but, for all that, you won't go."

"Don't attempt sarcasm, Dick, at least until you grow a little older. I want very much to see Mrs. Harland, and hear Mr. Nolan's speech. Mrs. Graham is going, Mrs. Greenson, and lots more. Why cannot you get Syd and me admission, like a man and a brother?"

"Would you go?" asks Dick, looking at Miss Owenson.

"No," says Sydney, quietly.

"Ah! Captain Macgregor's manly brow clears; 'I thought not. You may go if you choose, Katie; you're big enough and old enough to look out for yourself; but I wouldn't if I were you. Fellows talk about that sort of thing, and it spoils your chances.'"

"Mr. Vanderdonck wouldn't care," responds Katherine, with unruffled good temper.

"No, but Van Cuyler might. You've been making eyes at Van Cuyler lately, haven't you? Not that it's any use, mind you," says Dick, darkly. "He has registered a vow, has Van Cuyler, like those fellows with crosses on their legs—cross-legged, eh?—Crusaders, never to marry. He'll take all the love-making you can do—he's used to it, bless you—and never think once you are out of his sight."

"What a blessing in disguise is a brother," observes Katie as the door closes after Captain Dick's stalwart form. "He is right to a certain extent, after all; I should like to go."

She did not, however; but the papers and Dick brought daily reports of the trial. The opening speech for the prosecution was crushing—the learned council inveighed against the man or woman who anticipates the great prerogative of the Almighty, and sends a soul from time into eternity! Great interest was felt on all sides, for Mrs. Harland had youth and good looks, and many friends.

The trial lasted a week. Mr. Nolan came to the fore nobly, and displayed a forensic skill and acumen that would have done honor to twenty years' experience at the bar. That was what the papers said, and Dick and Mrs. Graham endorsed. He arose and spoke for his client in a way that brought tears to every eye. He pointed a long catalogue of wrongs she had endured, the nameless insults she had undergone, the outrages of every kind that a brutal husband can inflict. His speech, Mrs. Graham declared, was one outburst of impassioned eloquence—his whole heart and soul seemed to be in it. Sydney listened and approved sympathy. Mr. Nolan himself could hardly hope more ardently than she did now, that the unhappy prisoner might go forth free. But the hope was in vain, the trial ended, the sentence was a light one most people thought—four years.

"She heard it with stony calm," narrated Mrs. Graham, with a half sob, "but she grasped Lewis Nolan's hand as he held it out to her, and kissed it. 'I will never see you again,' she said; 'I will never live to come out. My sentence is just; but all my life I will think and pray for you.' I cried I assure you, as if my heart would break," said Mrs. Graham, who cried as if that organ would break on the smallest provocation. "Death was imprinted on her face, poor thing, and for Lewis himself he hardly looked better."

That evening a little note from Lucy reached Sydney.

"Dear," it said, "come to-morrow. I am sick in body and sick at heart. Let me see your bright face, and tell you my troubles."

It was so rare a thing for patient Lucy to complain that Sydney was troubled. She went to the opera in the evening, and the celebrated Mr. Van Cuyler, the pet of this winter of the best metropolitan society, came into their box, and in a Sultan-like way made himself agreeable to her; but she was *distrain*, answered at random, heard the singing as in a dream, and had a restless and broken night, haunted now by the pale face of the sister, now by the dark face of the brother. It was a relief when, lucid over, she could start for the cottage.

She invariably walked now; she liked walking for walking's sake, and reached the house with cheeks like pale pink roses. The house-door was only closed, not locked. She never waited to knock now. She opened it, and entered, opened the parlor door, and looked in. The blinds were closed, green dusk filled the room; but through the twilight she could discern a figure lying on the sofa. She went forward softly, and knelt down.

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"It is a night I will remember when my life in New York is a dream of the past. I am going away, Miss Owenson—has Lucy told you?"

"Yes she has told me," the young lady answers, in a curiously constrained voice.

"It is rather an effort to pull up stakes and go; rather a wrench to tear myself away from poor Lucy and my mother; but I feel my chances are better there, and have many reasons to urge me to go."

"Your friends will miss you very much—we will all miss you," Miss Owenson says. "All?" His dark eyes flash for a moment and he looks at her. "Do you mean that I wonder, or is it only the proper thing to say?"

"I mean what I say, as a rule, Mr. Nolan. I certainly mean that. We will miss you—some of us—notably Mrs. Graham—will break our hearts."

A little tremor, with the soft laugh. Mrs. Graham has been my very good friend always; I owe her and her husband more than I can say, Mr. Nolan answers in a tone of feeling.

There is silence, and they walk on, and Sydney seems to feel—to feel that a sharp, swift pang altogether new—that it is her last walk.

"When do you go?" she inquires.

"The first of March, probably five weeks from now, if I can be ready; and I think I can."

"Then this is good-night and not good-by?" she says.

"Good-night, certainly, and not good-by," he answers, smiling.

There is an unconscious wishfulness in her tone, but he does not detect it.

"Shall you be at Mrs. Graham's to-morrow evening?"

"I think not. These evenings out unfit me for work, and I shall not have an hour to spare before I go."

"Good-night," she says abruptly. She runs up the steps, rings, is admitted, and goes at once to her room. Her heart is full of bitterness, full of impatient pain, full of wounded pride and feeling, full of anger at herself. She sits down and knows her hand miserably on the table, and knows fully for the first time that what Sir Harry Leonardi has sought for in vain Lewis Nolan has won, unsought.

CHAPTER VII.

"FAIR AS A STAR."

Love troubles are like other troubles, they seldom come single. Lewis Nolan might exasperate his best friends by his stoical indifference to beauty and fortune, but other gentlemen possessed more appreciative taste. Foremost among them was the son of the house, Captain Macgregor. Early in February Captain Macgregor was to go where glory awaited him; his furlough would expire, and he must return to his duty and the banks of the Potomac. This was why, perhaps, so gloomy a change came over his warlike brow, why he fell into moody reveries, and sighed like a furnace, why he lost his appetite, and weighed five pounds less than his usual one hundred and sixty, why he sat like a death's head at the family banquet, why melancholy had marked him for her own. On the other hand, as Captain Dick liked his camp life, with all its hardships and skirmishes, much better than the switch-cane and kid-glove swindle of Broadway, it is just as likely it was not. But spirits and small talk, appetite and airy laughter, the young man had lost, beyond doubt; and instead of awaking sympathy, his altered visage was made game of in the social circle.

"And 'mid his mirth 'twas often strange,'" quotes Miss Katie Macgregor, doubling up her hand and gazing at her brother as if he were a work of art.

"How suddenly his cheer would change, His looks o'ercast and lower."

"Where has your appetite gone to, dearest Richard? It has struck me of late that green and yellow melancholy, like the worm in the bud, is preying upon your damask cheek. How does it strike you, Syd?"

"It strikes me," says Miss Owenson, "that Dick is growing unpleasantly like the misanthropic skipper in the poem—"

"His arms across his breast, His stern brow firmly knitted, and his iron lip compressed."

"That sort of gentleman has heretofore been my ideal, but I begin to find ideal in real life are mistakes. If pouring your sorrows into our sympathetic ears, Dick will relieve you, you are at liberty to pour."

Captain Macgregor looks gloomily toward Miss Owenson. The hour of his departure is here, he may never return, and she can chaff.

"Knitted?" pursues Katie, still regarding Dick with an eye of a connoisseur. "Well, yes, he does remind one a little of the industrious old lady, who, when she had nothing else to knit, knit her brows."