

A WILD PROXY.

BY MRS. W. K. CLIFFORD.

(Continued.)

'Child, you talk like an idealist or a poet,' he answered, scornfully, 'and you will get more pain out of that than from anything else that is going.'

'How do you know?'

'I tried it. Most men do once, then stride on into the future with the knowledge of things left behind—that is my experience. Oh, my sweet coz, how you would hate and curse me if you knew.'—It was nearly said.

'I think you are so kind and generous'—she broke out.

'Eve probably thought the same of the Serpent when he obligingly helped her to the forbidden fruit. No doubt his manners were highly agreeable, or she would have been satisfied with Adam. Well, and when you had made yourself clever, and all the rest of it, what would you do next, write a novel? That's a woman's usual resource.'

'No, I think I should go on the stage. I have sometimes thought I should like it.'

'I hope rather that you'll go on a pair of trestles after you have been arranged white and still in your coffin. The stage is not the place for you, poor baby.'

'Why not?'

'Never mind. It's a bad place, though 'ots of the right sort of people take to it now.' She looked up at him wonderingly.

'I never did anything very wrong,' she said simply, so I suppose I belong to the right sort, and the more of those who go on the stage the better, because it will help to make the theatre a good place instead of a bad one, as you think it now. It ought to be good, it ought to be splendid,' she went on, with a little glow in her voice, 'for Shakespeare wrote his plays for it, and they are full of beautiful things; only the best people should act them.'

He laughed out, but his laughter had lost its ring of merriment.

'Oh, good Lord, to think that women are all idiots, and the world is more than half full of them. Come to dinner; eating is a loathsome amusement to me just now, but the bell rang five minutes ago.'

'This girl will think by and by and live,' he thought as he drank his coffee in the smoking place on deck; 'she will do better than read books that are merely speaking tubes from the first men of all. I knew the first night I met her that she would not merely sit down to rock babies and devise clothes. Oh, fool and idiot that I was to see a woman I could love and not get her, though I killed every man within a mile of her.' She had been very grave at dinner. He felt that for the first time she had been facing an awful possibility; but a blind jealousy was taking hold of him. He could not bear that she should even think of Lal now, though he knew that he was never for a moment entirely out of her thoughts. He finished his smoke and went to look for her. It was nearly dark, the air was soft and still, the lower deck deserted. He found her near the bows.

'Come and walk about,' he said.

'I can't,' she whispered helplessly.

'Come!' She wearily rose. They went up and down for a bit in silence. Then he looked round at her.

'Poor baby!' he said gently. 'Is she fretting for her mate?'

The answer was only a little sob. 'I know, I know,' he said; and his heart smote him. Oh! brute, wretch, pig that he was, why had he done this thing, and now how could he bear to tell her; still less how could he let her go? 'He'll be here in a week,' he said, hopelessly.

'A week,' she cried, under her breath. 'He will never come. I know it. It will break my heart.' She tottered, and nearly fell. He longed to tell her all he had done, and then to die for love of her.

'Come and sit down here, away from everyone.' They went to the upper deck.

'There. Is she comfortable, my sweet little coz?' She found the last word more soothing than ever since she had taken an interest in his eyes, for it sounded brotherly, or, at any rate, relationly.

'Now, let us talk it over again. Do you care for him so much—so much still, dear Nell?'

'Yes; oh, yes!' she said passionately twisting her wedding-ring round on her finger. He hated the sight of it. 'There was no one like him in the world. He seemed so grand, so different from other men; they were—oh, just men! It has been rather difficult to distinguish one from another. But Lal I have looked up to and revered.'

'Suppose you found out that a man who loved you was a brute, a scoundrel, and only fit to be kicked—he was white with rage against himself.'

'Frank, what do you mean?' Lal is not—'

'I mean if you did,' he said quickly, wondering what his own chance would be if he confessed everything and pleaded his love as an excuse.

'It would be dreadful. Much worse than seeing him die.'

'That is what a woman says who has never looked on death.'

'And as for loving him, I couldn't; and I should hate myself if I did. But why do you ask this? Lal is a thousand times too good for me.'

'Oh! yes,' he said bitterly, 'but I think if you had been mine I should have found you by this time, or pulled the sky down.'

She sobbed in her little berth half through the night, in spite of the Italian woman who snored unreservedly above her, for she felt there was truth in Merreday's words. Her head ached in the morning, and her eyes were red when she appeared on deck. He was divided between the desire to kneel at her feet, implore pardon, and then jump overboard, or to strangle her in his arms, and kiss her madly till she died.

CHAPTER VIII.

Their ship was moored at Genoa, three days before Nell supposed her husband could arrive there. As they neared the shore she looked up ruefully at the white villas against the green background, and grugged herself the sight of everything that she was to have seen with him. Still it was a wonderful thing to be in Italy, and she walked up and down the gold and silver street with Frank, hardly believing it could be true. He bought her some figs, and took her to the Campo Santo, 'Though why we who love life should go among people who seem to love death I don't know,' he said. 'The people beneath these wonderful monuments must have led beautiful lives,' Nell said, fascinated by the marble. But Merreday walked past the tombs half scoffingly.

'I hate them,' he said, 'stuck all round as if they belonged to an aristocracy that had drawn itself back into ghastly country seats, while the populace struggled in the town. I would rather be one of the people in the centre, Nell, under a little black cross. Let's go back to Genoa and see the cathedral. I've looked it up in the guide book—black and white stone from Almeria, brought by the Moors. Don't suppose you know any about the Moors; but they were men who lived.'

'Lived?'

'You don't understand what I mean by that yet, but if ever you do you will feel that the world has altered for the worse since their days. It has been turned into a cage with bars for the like of you then, and me now, to beat our heads against. I shall beat mine against them till I'm stunned. After all, the only thing to do in the world is to laugh.'

'I don't understand—'

'Of course not,' he answered, wearily, 'so let us drive back. Nearly opposite the red palace there is the most meritorious cafe in Genoa; they give you a divine breakfast, and let you eat it in a garden.'

So they rumbled away from the cemetery; but, instead of driving as near the cafe as possible, they got out at the flower-sellers, close to the Doria Palace, and he bought her a little bunch of starry-white blossoms for the front of her dress. Afterwards, in looking back, she remembered that there had never been a day on which he had not bought her flowers. They went into the church of St. Matteo, and looked at the Doria hero's sword. 'The man it belonged to is dust, but its power to kill remains when any idiot, with a passing spell of life, who can get at it chooses to use it,' he said bitterly as he walked away. 'A hero is the finest thing fashioned by God, yet he is more impotent after all than the bit of steel he calls a sword. The power in the one remains, in the other vanishes.'

'But the man's power goes into the thing he does, whether it is a sword or a deed, and a deed once done is done to all eternity; that is how he gets his immortality and is proved to have been good or bad.'

'Nell, Nell, what do you mean?'

'It is not mine, she said, colouring, someone said it to me once.'

'I'm glad of that,' and he thought, 'O, my sweet! my sweet! it would be sad indeed if you had taken to philosophy already.'

They walked to the Cafe Concordia. It has a garden; they went down the steps to it, and sat under some orange trees and ordered breakfast to be brought out to them there. Behind was the restaurant and some rather gorgeous rooms belonging to it. They could hear the voices of the unseen people through the open windows.

A dreamy meal in a dreamy garden with the palms and the orange trees, the laburnums and the pepper trees, making a sweet tangle overhead.

'You are so very silent now,' she said; 'are you unhappy?' She was beginning to consider his looks, and to hang upon his words. It was a sign of many things.

'I never talk in a church or insult good food by trivial remarks,' he answered, looking at her with an expression she was learning to understand only too well. 'Let us eat and be thankful, sweet coz, for we are in Italy together, and the time may be short and the chance never with us again.'

Some people in the room behind settled themselves by the window, a little above the garden, but having looked down for a moment drew back and probably began their breakfast. Merreday and Helen could hear nearly all they said.

'Are you well?' she asked; for in the last few hours his face had grown whiter than usual.

'Not very, my head is like a windmill; but it's only the heat. I am glad to be here with you, only I wish the Lord in his infinite mercy, had seen fit to transport those chattering idiots up there to the desolate land of Jericho: they jar on my nerves.'

'I am sure you are ill,' she said, looking at him anxiously.

'Oh, no; only a few shreds of fever—the old fever of last year. I was thinking just before they came that no matter what yesterday contained or to-morrow may bring, we are very happy here to-day. It is good to sit in this garden, and to listen to the hum of insects and stirring of leaves—pro-

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