

the request. You had better have help at hand in case he should attempt violence, though that is hardly likely."

"I am not afraid," said Gillian. "Thank you and good evening."

She pressed his hand, and acknowledging Mr. Herbert's embarrassed bow, turned to her husband.

CHAPTER XXII.—FACE TO FACE.

They stood face to face for a minute in silence, with the aspect of two duellists taking their places sword in hand. In Gillian's intense face and in the free and strong poise of her figure O'Mara read a more decided courage than that she had shown in their earlier intercourses. His face wore its habitual expression of tired cynicism, touched by the admiration he felt despite himself for her undaunted bearing and by appreciation of her beauty. He carried in his hand a bunch of field flowers which he held out to her with a gesture of chivalrous deference.

"You used to like them, Gillian," he said. "It was one of the many ties between us in the dear old days before our dissensions began. Will you not take them?"

"Enough of this," she answered. "Why are you here?"

"Why? what a question! Why, because—"

"Because the report of your death was a falsehood invented to destroy me. Because you know that I have money; not much, but enough to draw you towards me—because all else failed with you, and in despair you come back to me."

"Permit me," said O'Mara, "to set you right on one point. The report of my death was none of my doing. The facts are very simple. I was robbed by a desperado, and stripped of all I possessed, even my clothes. In my pockets were letters I had received from you during our courtship, the only possessions I had clung to during all the miserable time that I was separated from you. The man was shot with those letters in his possession. He was unknown, and it was supposed, naturally enough—for people do not, as a rule, trouble to carry old letters addressed to other people—that he was Philip O'Mara. So much for that. I came back to you, you say, because you have money. An accusation like that is hard to fight, but consider the circumstances. I knew nothing of your whereabouts, nothing of your accession to fortune. It is purely by chance that I am here. Being here, I claim you, Gillian, I am your husband! I claim your obedience."

"You are not my husband, you are only the man who betrayed, degraded and then abandoned me."

"You put it harshly, Gillian. I had my faults, I admit; I have deplored them during many a bitter hour of our term of separation with tears. I repent them. For our child's sake—"

"For our child's sake?" asked Gillian. "If every fibre of my body and every inch of my soul did not loathe you, the thought of her would be as fatal to any idea of reconciliation with you. My life is ended—it would matter very little whether I dragged out the remnant of my time in solitude or again became your drudge and slave. But she—I will keep her clear of the pollution of your influence, God helping me, with my life! When I look into her face and see in it any likeness to you, I say to myself, better that we both were dead."

"Gillian, you horrify me; you cannot understand what you are saying."

"I understand well, and I have resolved to say it once for all. Equivocation is useless between us; as long as we lived together your life was infamy, mine was misery and shame. You left me; I thought you were dead, and I rejoiced—yes, I rejoiced. You have returned, and the old horror comes back upon me tenfold. Take everything that I possess; let me go and live my own life in peace, and promise me that I shall never see your face again."

"I will promise nothing of the kind," answered O'Mara. "The sacred tie of wedlock is not to be broken so easily. Gillian, my darling, cease these reproaches, and be reasonable. I am a changed man. My old ways are repented of and aban-

doned; I swear it. You are what you were, only, if possible, more beautiful." The admiration that shone in his face was real enough. She felt it; his glance seemed to burn her. "Let me, by devoting my life to yours, atone for the past, Gillian—I love you."

"After what I have suffered from you, you dare—"

"To love you! Who could help it?"

"Silence! Not another word. Turn your eyes away. If you look at me like that—"

"Forgive my admiration. You never looked so beautiful! The same soft eyes and thoughtful brow, the same golden hair, the same fair form that I have clasped to mine." He came forward with extended hands. She made a step back, with so evil a glitter in her unchanging eyes that he paused.

"Don't prompt me to forget my sex," she said, "as I fear I shall if you attempt to lay a hand upon me. I have been free from you too long to fall under your power again. I remember too well the shame of our life together."

"I remember only its happy moments. Why torture yourself and me by thinking of these little indiscretions, long since repented, which caused an occasional estrangement. Come, let us be friends. What, will you not even take my hand?"

"Not even that! You know well what you were and are! You taught me long ago to know you also. You can deceive the world, perhaps, but you can never again deceive me. Do not approach me! Go your way, and let me go mine."

"May I ask," said O'Mara, with a sudden coldness of tone—"forgive the question—if you are quite ingenuous. Is not your present conduct the consequence less of my misconduct, which I have amply admitted, than of the fact that another man has supplanted me in your affections?"

"Infamous! Be silent."

"No, my dear Gillian, I will not be silent. You ask too much; you would have the charity all on one side. I must remind you of your duty, and command you—yes, *command* you—to admit my authority as your lawful husband. No, you shall not go, I have not yet done. If you insist on a separation *a mensa et thoro*, which I deeply deplore, I shall require at least one solatium, the custody of my little daughter."

Gillian staggered as if the words had stabbed her.

"Take my child from me!" she gasped. "Yield her up to you! I would rather see her dead."

"You compel me to remind you again of my legal position. Do you think a fellow has no rights? Do you mean that I will suffer my darling child to remain under the care of one who has taught her to hate and despise her father?"

"I have not done so," said Gillian. "Philip, I swear to you, until to-day I had never breathed your name to her. She had never heard of your existence."

"That is even more unnatural. Gillian, I repeat it, you shock me exceedingly."

"Hypocrite!" cried Gillian.

"Ah, you do not know me!"

"To the inmost fibre of your being! To the very core of your false and cruel heart! My little child! Oh, God! Philip," she cried, with outstretched hands and with a sudden intensity of pleading passion, "have pity! Listen to me. I will believe all that you say of your repentance. I will teach her to pray for you night and morning. Have pity! Take all that I possess, but leave me my child."

"You ask too much," he said again. "The bribe you offer is a greater insult than any you have yet put upon me. It is not for the sake of money that I shall desert my child, or give up my rights as a husband. I cannot compel you to believe in the sincerity of my repentance, the ardour of my affection, but I can at least take care that my child is not schooled to detest and abhor her father, or permitted to grow up in ignorance of his mere existence."

"Will nothing move you?" cried Gillian. The threat about the child had frightened her horribly. She had, if such a thing were possible, exaggerated

O'Mara's cunning and cruelty, and her thought was that before she could procure the legal protection she needed he would steal Dora from her side.

"Nothing!" he answered. "I stand here on my rights. You are my wife, Dora is my child. This house is mine; nothing but process of law can eject me. I see by the unaltered stubbornness of your demeanour that soft measures are of no avail. I might as well have acted decisively this morning as now." He took a seat, crossed his legs easily, and took a case from his pocket. "You don't object to a cigar, if I remember rightly. Oh, by-the-bye, you had better send up to the Pig and Whistle for my portmanteau. You are nearer the bell than I, might I trouble you to ring."

Showing unconsciousness in every line of his face and curve of his body of Gillian's horrified gaze upon him, he kept his eyes fixed on the flame of the match at which he lit his cigar. His voice was purely commonplace, and having thrown aside the match he stretched out an indolent hand for a book on the table beside him.

A knock came to the door, which Gillian scarcely heard and left unanswered. Barbara entered the room with a card upon a salver. Her mistress took it mechanically. For a second or two the name it bore meant nothing to her, but at a second reading she cried to Barbara with a stifled pant in her voice:

"Yes, show him in."

She stood erect again, and quivering as if some galvanic influence flashed from the scrap of paste-board held between her fingers. Thirty seconds later Sir George Venables entered the room. He stopped at sight of O'Mara, who looked up at him from the page of the book with an abominably acted cool stare of non-recognition.

"A friend of yours, my dear Gillian? Pray present me."

"I am Sir George Venables," said the baronet, "I desire to speak a few words with Mrs. Dartmouth."

"There is no lady of that name here," returned O'Mara. "Do you know her address, Gillian? Perhaps you can direct this gentleman to find the person he requires."

"Gillian!" began Venables.

"Pardon me," said O'Mara. "That lady is my wife. May I ask what right you have to address her by her Christian name?" he continued, dropping his bantering tone, and speaking angrily. "Don't you think, under the circumstances, that your visit is misplaced and impertinent, and that you had better go? I am not of a jealous temperament, but I decidedly object to the presence here of one who proposed taking my place and usurping my privileges. To put it on the lowest ground, it is hardly becoming."

"I came here—" began Sir George.

"As cavalier in ordinary. Just so; but the proper guardian of a wife is her husband."

"You cur!" cried Sir George, making a step towards him. "Utter another word of insult and—"

"Oh, pray, strike me! You are powerfully built, I am physically delicate; don't doubt you would be the stronger. But morally and legally, young man, I should be a giant, you a pigmy."

"My object in coming here to-night," said Venables, restraining his passion with a strong effort, "was to offer that lady my protection against a scoundrel."

"Indeed! Highly chivalric."

"I know what she has suffered. I know the misery you have brought upon her; and now, if she said the word, I would avenge her wrongs upon your miserable body."

"George, be silent; let me speak."

"Wait, my dear Gillian," said O'Mara, "I shall have the greatest pleasure in listening to any remarks you may have to make when we are quit of the presence of this intruder. Sir, I am master here, as you will find if you intend to deny my authority. That lady is my wife. This is my house. Your presence here is an outrage. Be good enough to make yourself scarce."

"I shall not stir a step while you remain."

(To be continued.)