

Continued from Tenth Page. It was the day after the one on which Naples had been electrified by the news of the death of Lady Vere, and he was hastening to that city in response to the telegram he held in his hand.

"Will you come to me? Lady Vere is dead?"

"That was the telegram, and it was signed—Gerald Vere."

Morewood might well obey it without a moment's delay.

He might well wear that shocked, grief-stricken look upon his face.

He was bewildered, as well as shocked, and grieved.

He could not realize that the beautiful Lillian he had seen in such radiant health scarce six weeks ago, had passed away from life like a flower that is cut down in the day of its fairest bloom.

And, above and beyond this, it seemed passing strange to him that he should be the friend sent for by Sir Gerald.

In the old days, such a summons would have been natural enough; but after that mad suspicion of Sir Gerald's, it seemed strange indeed.

"How he even knew I was at Nice, I can't imagine," thought Morewood; for he had only left England two or three days ago, intending to spend a summer holiday in Northern Italy and Switzerland.

When he left the train, at Naples, he was met by a liveried servant with a carriage.

To him Morewood put a few hurried questions.

"Is it really true that lady Vere is dead?" he asked.

The man was English, and responded readily.

"Yes, sir. My lady is dead. It has been a great shock to us all, sir. My lady was so good to everybody. There was none of us but loved her."

"And what is the cause of her death?"

"An overdose of chloral, sir. My lady had suffered a good bit from sleeplessness lately, and had been in the habit of taking a little chloral. Her maid found her quite cold this morning when she went to her room to help her to dress. The doctor was there in less than ten minutes; but he said she had been dead several hours."

"And how does Sir Gerald bear it?"

"Well he seems dazed like. He bears up wonderfully in a way, for he's quite calm and nobody's seen him shed a tear. But he looks terribly bad. I never saw a gentleman look so bad as he does. His face is as white as chalk, and his eyes look as if they'd go through one, as the saying is, I'm sure I shouldn't wonder if he was to do something to himself—I shouldn't indeed, sir."

They soon reached the house, and Morewood sprang out of the carriage and hurried into the hall.

A door opened on his right hand, and Sir Gerald stood before him.

The servant's prescription had prepared Morewood, in some measure, for a terrible change.

Nevertheless, it was with difficulty he repressed a start as he gazed on the countenance of his friend.

Sir Gerald had lost so much flesh, that he looked absolutely emaciated; he was ghastly pale, and his eyes glowed like fire from out of their hollow caverns.

Thrilling with sympathy, and wholly forgetting, in that moment, the unhappy estrangement which had risen between them, Morewood took his hand and grasped it with a strong, yet tender pressure.

"Vere," he said, huskily, "I wish I could tell you how grieved I am—how grieved for you."

"I knew you would be," said Sir Gerald, with unnatural calmness.

"It touched me a good bit, Gerald," went on Morewood, still holding his hand, "to know that, in the first moment of your bereavement, you thought of sending for your old friend."

"Yes, I wanted to see you," said Sir Gerald, in that curious tone of unnatural calmness. "I'm glad you've come. You are the only being on earth to whom I can fully unbuckle my mind. It does me good to open feel the grasp of your hand. Perhaps it will be the last time you will ever touch my hand in friendship, Morewood. When you know all, it's likely enough you'll cease to be my friend."

"Never!" said Morewood, warmly.

A suspicion crossed his mind that his great loss had affected Sir Gerald's brain.

The London doctor had declared there was no tint of insanity about him; but, surely, such an overwhelming shock might be expected to affect the soundest mind.

One thing seemed certain, and Morewood rejoiced at it.

Sir Gerald had quite put away that unreasoning jealousy of him which had possessed him before he left England.

That cloud, at any rate, was gone, and their intercourse might be free and frank, as it had been in the dear old times.

Sir Gerald had said: "When you know all, it's likely enough you'll cease to be my friend," and Morewood thought—

"He means to confess to me all about his foolish jealousy. Poor fellow! he little knows me if he thinks I could resent that now."

There was silence for a moment or two, then Sir Gerald said, in a dull, sombre tone—

"You would like to see her, Morewood—for the last time? She has lost none of her beauty. Nay, I think she looks even lovelier in death than she did in life."

"If you are sure it will not be too painful for you—"

Sir Gerald smiled—a strangely wan and bitter smile.

"Painful!" he repeated. "There is no new pain for me. I have sounded the deepest depths of human agony. There is nothing more for me to suffer than I suffer now. Come!"

And he led the way upstairs.

The death-chamber was a very large one.

Its window opened to the west, and rays of the setting sun pierced through the shrouding curtains, as Morewood and Sir Gerald entered.

On the bed lay the coffin, and, within it, all that was mortal of the beautiful Lady Vere.

Beautiful indeed!

Sir Gerald was right when he said she looked even lovelier in death than she had done in life.

She lay like one asleep, her snowy lids drooping softly over her eyes, the long lashes resting lightly on her cheeks.

Her lips still tinged with color, wore that happy smile which one sees not infrequently on the faces of the dead, and her golden hair gently shaded her brow.

Her hands were folded meekly above her breast.

Flowers—all of purest white—covered her almost from head to foot.

Morewood, with difficulty, repressed his emotion as he gazed.

At such a moment he could not but remember how near he had been to giving his whole heart's love to this beautiful creature.

And how unflinchingly she had turned to him as a friend.

Sir Gerald stood at the foot of the bed, his head bowed above his hands.

The silence lasted so long that it became oppressive.

Breaking it, with an effort, Morewood said—

"Come, Gerald."

And, very gently, he put out his hand, as though to lead him away.

Sir Gerald raised his head, and looked at him with a wildly haggard look.

"Stop!" he said. "You must not go. I have something to say to you, and I can only say it here."

He paused, pressed his hand to his brow, like one in deep mental agony, then suddenly stretched out his hand, and pointed to the coffin.

"Morewood, do you know who it is that is lying there?"

Convinced now that his mind was unhinged, Morewood answered, in a voice of gentle soothing—

"Yes, Gerald, I know only too well. It is your poor wife."

"My wife! yes; but do you know who it was I married? Morewood, listen, and do not think me mad; for, what I tell you is the truth, as surely as there is a God in Heaven. You remember Madeline Winter?"

"Well, it is she who is lying there!"

More than ever convinced that his friend had lost his senses, Morewood, laid his hand gently, yet firmly, on his arm, and attempted to lead him from the room.

"Vere, try to calm yourself," he said kindly.

"The shock has unnerved you, and no wonder; but try not to dwell upon it more than you can possibly help. Try—"

Sir Gerald stopped him with a look so stern, so terribly earnest, that he all but quailed beneath it.

"Let me here no more of that," he said. "I have been thought mad too long, Heaven knows I have had enough to send me mad; but, for all that, I am as sane as you are. I tell you again, Morewood, calmly and solemnly, that the woman who lies there is that same woman you rescued from a hideous death. She was Madeline Winter, and I—Heaven help me!—I made her Lady Vere."

Morewood was filled with horror.

A subtle something in Sir Gerald's manner convinced him that he was not mad, and that he was speaking what he believed to be the truth.

But a thing so ghastly—so unspcakably horrible—could it be true?

No, no! Impossible!

This was what Morewood tried to say; but, even as he made the effort, an icy chill wrapped his heart, and he stood quite silent, stricken dumb with horror.

"It isn't an easy thing to believe—is it?" said Sir Gerald in a voice of moody bitterness. "When I first knew it, I thought I had gone mad. I thought only a distraught brain could have imagined such a thing of my beautiful Lillian—my pure, perfect wife!"

The mockery in his tone, as he spoke—the look on his face, as he gazed at the dead woman—were something unspcakably terrible.

Morewood shuddered as he saw and heard.

"Gerald, I can't believe it!" he exclaimed almost passionately. "What proof have you?" For Heaven's sake, tell me."

"Proof! Ay, you may well ask for that! I asked for it, too; ay, and had it given to me in plenty! But if she, that beautiful sorceress—and he pointed towards the coffin—were still alive, she might so cajole and fool you, that you would tell her you cared nothing for my proofs. Likely

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enough you would say she was pure as the driven snow, and that my proofs were only the ravings of a madman."

Sir Gerald spoke without the slightest trace of excitement in either look or tone.

He seemed like a man who had borne the extremity of human woe, and was calm simply because he had nothing now to fear.

A conviction that the awful thing he said was true forced itself on John Morewood's mind.

"Gerald," he said, in a hoarse, agitated voice, "for Heaven's sake, give me some explanation of all this. Tell me just what it is that you mean."

For answer, Sir Gerald strode to the door, turned the key in the lock, and came back to the foot of the bed.

"No ear but yours must hear this," he said. "I need not ask you for any promise of secrecy. I know I may rely upon you."

"Of course you may."

"Well, then, listen, and prepare to hear the most horrible story that was ever poured into the ears of man."

He stood for one moment in silence, his hand pressed to his head, as though he were debating within himself how he should commence his story.

At last he spoke.

"Up to the day of my marriage, I believed, implicitly, that the woman I loved was the purest, the noblest, the most absolutely unselfish, as well as the most beautiful, or created beings. Some men might have been charged with the crime of murder; but I, as you know, was so often far from this, that, on her bare word, and in spite of overwhelming proof to the contrary, believed in the sisters' innocence. In this fool's paradise I lived until—my wedding night!"

Very sombre was Sir Gerald's voice as he spoke these words.

For a moment he let his eyes rest on the dead face in the coffin.

"That night—the beginning of it," he resumed, "was one of perfect happiness. I might have known that last—was not, and never could be, the lot of mortal man. Between ten and eleven, Lady Vere retired to her room. I put on my hat, and walked to the wood, which is just across the road from the Dower House, you remember?"

Morewood assented, with a movement of the head.

So breathlessly anxious was he to hear his friend's story, that he could scarcely command his voice.

"It was my intention," went on Sir Gerald, "to walk in the wood for a quarter-of-an-hour or so, and then return to the house; but, before I had gone very far, I heard something that sounded like a human groan, and, hurrying to the spot it seemed to come from, I found poor old Madge lying on the ground, where she had fallen, with her head resting against one of the seats. I saw, in a moment, she was dying!"

"Horried and aghast, as you may suppose, I yet retained presence of mind to do everything I could for her. I raised her in my arms, and would have tried to carry her to the Dower House, but she implored me not to do so, and I placed her on the seat."

"I can feel that the end has come," she said. "Let me die here. Don't move me. I might die on the way, and I need my every breath now. I want to tell you the truth about Madeline Winter before I die. It is she who fired this shot!" and she pointed to her breast.

"I was dumb with grief and horror, as you may believe; but imagine, if you can, what my feelings were when the old woman raised her hand feebly towards Heaven, and said—"

"Sir Gerald Vere, I am a dying woman, and you will surely believe me now. Tell me—tell me truly—whether you know who the woman is you made your wife this morning?"

"I began to tell her that I knew Lillian was the sister of the reputed murderess, Madeline Winter, but that she herself was the sweetest, noblest, purest of beings."

"Merciful Heaven! what an intuition mind was! Never shall I forget the look of poor old Madge, as she cried: 'Did I not prophesy aright? Did I not say that, if she crossed his path, she would blight his life?'"

"Then she repeated: 'I am a dying woman, and, standing face to face with death, I tell you that it is Madeline Winter herself who is your wife!'"

"Gerald, are you sure it was not a dying woman's ravings?" said Morewood, anxiously. "Surely you have not believed such an awful thing on such testimony as that?" I myself can tell you Lillian had a sister. I have seen her more than once, and as far as I can remember I should say she was certainly the woman I rescued from the coffin that night. Lady Vere resembled her greatly in the eyes, but that was all. And then the ages! Consider! Madeline Winter would now have been thirty. Lillian, when she came to the court, was scarcely out of her teens!"

Sir Gerald gave an intensely bitter smile.

"I will tell you about that presently," he said. "Let it suffice now, that Madge gave me proof enough to convince any ordinary man, inasmuch as I was mad with love, was for a moment, convinced of it."

"Poor old soul!" she had little breath to spare; but her indomitable spirit gave her up. She told me what had passed between her and Lillian at the cottage, how Lillian had implored her to keep her secret and how, for answer, she had told her she was the enemy of all her race."

"The enemy of her race! Madge! exclaimed Morewood, in amazement.

"Yes. More than half-a-century ago the enmity had begun. Madeline's grandmother had taken Madge's lover from her and from that hour, she swore undying hatred to the race. When Lillian heard of this, she resolved upon her murder!"

CHAPTER LXX.

THE END OF SIR GERALD'S STORY.

Sir Gerald paused.

There was a dead silence in the room. Morewood was too horrified to speak.

The tale to which he was listening seemed so outrageous a one that he could not bring himself to believe it.

And yet, there was that in his friend's face which made his heart almost still with horror lest it should be true.

A minute or two of silence, and then Sir Gerald resumed, in the dull level tone in which he had spoken throughout—

"Yes, she—my wife, you understand, Morewood—resolved to murder the poor old woman who knew her secret. The taking of a life was to her, a mere nothing. She would have murdered either you or me with as little compunction as she would have killed a fly, had we stood in her way."

"Gerald, for God's sake stop!" exclaimed Morewood. "How can you say such horrible things? Above all, how can you say them here?"

And he pointed to the beautiful dead face inside the coffin.

Morewood, for eight months I have lived side by side with that woman. I have seen her inmost heart. I have learned for myself, how possible it is for one to have the face of an angel and the mind of a fiend. You, as yet, have not learned this, and, therefore, you are shocked and horrified to say that she—that beautiful angel-faced being—thought lightly of the crime of murder. But so it was; and again I tell you that when she found old Madge knew her secret, and was her enemy, she straightway resolved to take her life."

"You must understand that when Madge first asked me if I knew who it was I was marrying, I answered in such terms that the old woman believed Lillian had told me she was Madeline Winter."

"Afterwards, at the cottage, some word was said which showed Madge her mistake—showed her I simply believed she was the sister of the murderess not the murderess herself. When she knew that, she was determined I should hear the truth. This, of course, was what she—and again he pointed to the dead woman in the coffin—was determined to prevent."

"She wrote a note, purporting to come from me, and sent it to Madge, asking her to be at a certain spot, in Upton Wood, as I wanted a secret interview with her, and preferred not to come to the cottage, where I was sure of being seen by some of the tenantry."

"Madge fell into the trap. She thought my suspicions were aroused and she was all eagerness to verify them. She went to Upton Wood at the time appointed—very early in the morning of my wedding-day. My bride met her there, and—think of it, Morewood!—shot her, and she imagined, through the heart."

"Believing her quite dead, she left her, and returned to the Court, and, a few hours later, I received her at the altar as my bride. Morewood, do you think mortal man has ever had stranger experiences than I?"

Again that intensely bitter smile crossed Sir Gerald's face.

Morewood, as he watched it, thought irresistibly of Cæsar's description of the smile of Cassius—

"Seldom he smiles, and smiles in such a sort, As if he mock'd himself, and scorned his spirit, That could be moved to smile at anything."

"You will have judged," Sir Gerald resumed, after a slight pause, "that Madge, when left for dead, was only unconscious, the bullet had not pierced the heart. You, perhaps, remember that the circumstances which so greatly puzzled everybody, was the fact of her being found so far from home. The doctor was quite certain a woman of her age, could not have dragged herself very far after receiving such a wound."

"But he underrated Madge's wonderful constitution. As a matter of fact, the spot where the shot was fired was not more than two miles from the Court, scarcely so far, and she had, during the day, dragged herself self nearly to the other extremity of the wood. The thirst for vengeance inspired her. She wanted to crawl as far as the Dower House—to which she knew I was coming with my bride."

"This much the poor old soul told me before she drew her last breath. I will not attempt to describe my state of mind. I believe I looked and acted like a madman. If ever my brain might have been in danger of giving way, it was that night. But, I thank Heaven, I have kept my reason through it all."

"I went back to the Dower House, where my bride was awaiting me! First getting the servants out of the way, I went to her

chamber, and had her leave her bed, and dress and go out with me. What she thought, I know not—probably, that her crime was discovered, or that I had suddenly gone mad. But she obeyed me, and I got her outside the house, and dragged her to the spot where I had left the old woman's body. Then I set her down in front of it, and had her lood upon her work."

Again Sir Gerald paused.

Again there was silence.

Morewood broke it.

"Vere," he said, "you cannot really believe that this is true. It must be a hallucination of your brain. Consider how long after this you loved and idolized your wife. Could you have so loved her, if you had believed she was a murderess?"

"Morewood, don't think I wonder at your incredulity. It is impossible for you to be half so incredulous as I was; for, in spite of the proofs Madge had given me, I was fooled once more—fooled so utterly and completely, that for weeks I humbled myself to the dust for having dared to so much as for one moment doubt the goodness of my angel bride!"

"Then you told her what it was you had suspected?"

"I told her everything."

"And what did she say?"

"Say! She clung to my arms, and looked up into my face, and wept—oh, how she wept!—to think that I, her husband, should have harboured a thought against her truth."

Sir Gerald's tone was one of derisive scorn—scorn of his own credulity.

"I don't want to dwell upon that," he added, almost fiercely. "It maddens me. Suffice it that she fooled me once again. She made it seem as clear as daylight to me that it was her half-sister, Madeline, who had worked all the misery and crime!"

"Even that was a blow to me, but it was as nothing compared to what I had been dreading. A man doesn't like his sister-in-law to commit a murder on his wedding day; but he prefers that to having it committed by his wife."

"And, surely, that was the truth, Gerald," said Morewood, anxiously. "I tell you again, Lady Vere had a sister, and I have seen her. It would be madness, on the bare testimony of a dying and perhaps delirious old woman, to believe such horrible charges against Lady Vere. Her very face disproves such charges. Did Nature ever give a wicked woman such a face as that?"

"In this case Nature did. Morewood, I have asked myself, thousands of times—as I looked on that serene brow and those lovely eyes—how it was a soul so black was suffered to disguise itself under so fair a form? And it was not her face only—it was her powers of assuming virtue which was so wonderful. I should say there has, perhaps, never been a more consummate actress in the world."

"For instance when I first asked her to marry me—yes, and many times afterwards—she seemed all unselfishness, as sweetly as purely disinterested as an angel. And yet I know, now, she had fully made up her mind to marry me; may had come to Vivian Court with that very purpose. In everything it was the same. She affected great simplicity of taste in matters of dress, and seemed literally devoid of any wish for splendour; but, in reality, she loved dress and jewels, and, for a time, sheajoled me into actually thinking it was to please me, and to gratify my pride in her, that she dressed so richly. I see it all now. Fool that I was, not to clearly long ago!"

"And when—Morewood spoke doubtingly, for he still thought his friend was laboring under a hallucination—and when did you finally alter your opinion of Lady Vere?"

"Early in the spring. Madly as I loved her, I could not but, at times, think of that awful tale Madge had told me. I should, scarcely have been a man if I had not. And thinking of this, and watching her closely, day and night, I sometimes thought I detected a something false in her character, which made my heart stand still with fear."

"In her sleep she would look troubled, as if her dreams were evil; and now and again she would murmur a word or two, such as a murderess might have uttered."

"Little by little a suspicion that old Madge's tale was true crept in upon my mind. Now you understand why I was moody and unlike myself in those days. Many a man would have gone mad. As it was people thought me mad, and I was content to let them think so. It accounted for many things for which I did not choose to give any other explanation."

"But, at last, my suspicions became a certainty. You remember the night you slept at the court?"

Morewood looked assent.

"Was he likely ever to forget that night?"

Greatly he wondered what it was he was about to hear.

The day before that night, she had all but convinced me I wronged her by my suspicions. Never had she seemed so good so altogether incapable of evil. My love for her awoke as strong as ever. Sometimes I think she had hypnotic powers, and by means of them, could mould me to her will. But, however that might be, she had gained almost the old ascendancy over me, and I was ready to fall at her feet, and ask her to pardon me for having ever wronged her by so much as a single thought."

"This happy delusion lasted till we retired. But that night I bade an eternal adieu to happiness."

To be Continued.

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