

TRUE TO HIS WORD.

A NOVEL.

CHAPTER XXII.

BANISHED FROM EDEN.

Notwithstanding the reputation which Lady Selwyn had acquired for a prolonged toilet, she was the first person to come down to the drawing-room, where Walter had been "kicking his heels," as the phrase goes, while the others had been dressing for dinner. As a matter of fact, he had not been kicking his heels, but taking up book after book—profusely illustrated, and wholly unreadable, as most drawing-room books are—after the dissatisfied and changeable fashion of all too early guests; but in his case there was not only his "too earliness" to render him uncomfortable. It was impossible for him to avoid the conviction that, except to one person of that household, his presence had become unwelcome, and that it has been resolved upon by all the rest that this evening was the last that he should spend as guest beneath that roof. He was a high-spirited young fellow enough, and, under similar circumstances, would have put on his hat and marched out of any house in London, there and then, without inflicting his company further upon unwilling companions: he was not so fond of a good dinner that he would eat the bread of humiliation with it; but though very sore at heart, he could not make up his mind thus to leave Willowbank. I there was but one within its walls who was glad to see him, she, at least, he felt sure, was very glad; if to others he was an object of suspicion or dislike, to her he was a trusted friend. She had confided to him her troubles and would that very day have even taken counsel with him upon some important domestic matter had she not been overruled by her sister. He had no desire to know what it was—unless his knowledge of it might enable him to give her aid—but it was delightful to him to think that she had thought him worthy of such confidence. Possessing her good opinion, he could afford to despise the distrust of all the rest; and if he felt indignation against one of them, it was less upon his own account than because that one had rendered himself distasteful—nay, abhorrent—to Lillian. As for the old merchant, he only pitied him for his weakness in having been so ensnared by his son-in-law, and dazzled with his fire-new title; and as to Lotty, though he felt she had become inimical to him, he well understood that she was no free agent, but a puppet in her husband's hands. It was impossible that he could ever be angry with her, or regard her otherwise than with tenderness and compassion; and if his feelings towards her had changed, it was that respectful devotion for her which he had once entertained, no longer existed, it was not from any conduct of hers, but simply that his allegiance had been transferred elsewhere. It was impossible any longer to conceal from himself that another now reigned in her stead; if he had had any doubt of it, the fact that he no longer felt any bitterness or disappointment about Lotty's having ignored himself and his service during the time of her elopement—that she had not even mentioned his name to Lillian—should have convinced him of this. He cared no more for her indifference or forgetfulness, but only pitied her woes. As she entered the room now, beautiful and elegantly attired, and smiling—though not with the frank smile of old—he experienced none of those sentiments which her presence had once inspired; she seemed to him no longer herself at all; the very words she spoke to him—some conventional apology for his having been left so long alone—were not her words; she was at the mouthpiece and the messenger of another.

"Reggie ought to be ashamed of himself for not having been down before, Mr. Litt n; he would finish his cigar, though I told him it was time to dress; but I have hurried over my toilet, in order to keep you company, so you must forgive him, for my sake."

"I would forgive him much more than that, Lady Selwyn, for your sake," said Walter; the words had escaped him without his reflecting upon their significance, and the next moment he was sorry he had so spoken, for poor Lotty's face grew crimson from chin to brow. "As to your toilet having been hurried," added he quickly, "I should never have guessed it, had you not told me so. May I compliment you—as an artist—upon the color of your dress?"

"It is Japanese," said Lotty, "and a present from papa. He is never tired of giving me little caudexes of that kind. Reginald says I am like the Prodigal, whose return was solemnized by having beautiful robes given to him; only, in my case, there is no one to object to it: dearest Lillian is not one bit jealous."

"I can well believe that," said Walter enthusiastically. "She has no thought of herself. Before your reconciliation with your father was effected, her heart and head were busy with that only; she scarce seemed to

live for herself; and even now it is your well-being—your happiness—which concerns her more than her own."

Lotty's pale face flushed, and in her eyes the dewy pearls began to gather, as she sighed: "I know it, ah, how well I know it! and if I could but see her happy—in her own way! O Mr. Litt n, if I had but the power, as I have the will, to serve you both!" Here she stopped, frightened, as it seemed, by her own words. "Hush!" whispered she, with her finger on her lip; "don't answer me; I only wish you to know that I am your friend. I can do no good, but you must never think that I mean to do you harm."

"I should not think that, even if you did me harm," said Walter softly. Her words had gone to his heart; not—just then—because of their significance, though they were significant indeed; but because this tender timorous woman had ventured thus to express her sympathy.

"Do not imagine," she went on, in hurried tones, "that Lillian has told me anything; alas! I have read her secret for myself. I can give you nothing but my prayers—not even hope. She is not a girl like me, ungrateful and undutiful, who would leave her father or her home—you must give her up, or she will suffer for it."

"Lady Selwyn!"

"Oh, I know, I know; it is easy to offer such advice as mine. But, since this can never be, be generous, and spare her all you can. I hear her step upon the stairs—pray, promise me." As Walter bowed his head, Lillian entered the room.

"I hope her ladyship has been affable, Mr. Litt n?" said she, smiling.

"My dear Lillian," exclaimed Lotty, "how can you be so foolish!"

"Indeed," answered Walter gaily, "I should scarcely have guessed, had I not known it, that there was any social gulf between us."

Then, as they all three laughed, Mr. Brown entered: "Come, come; tell me the joke, young people, or else I shall think you were laughing at me behind my back."

"Mr. Litt n has been complimenting me, papa, upon my magnificent apparel," said Lady Selwyn promptly; "and we all think it a little grand for the occasion."

"Not at all," said the old gentleman seriously; "I always like to see people dressed according to their rank."

"But the Queen does not put her crown on every day, papa," said Lillian.

"Well, this is not an everyday coincidence; we have honored guests to-night. And, besides," added he hastily, "my picture—yours and mine—has come home from the Academy, and such makes the date important."

"Now, I call that very pretty of papa," said Lady Selwyn. "Don't you, Mr. Litt n?"

"Indeed, I do," said Walter.

"Yes, yes; I shall always value that picture, young man, and, I may add, the artist who painted it."

Walter expressed his sense of the compliment, though, truth to say, the valedictory air with which it was expressed had rubbed the gift off sadly.

"I hope the other picture will please you equally well, sir, when it is finished."

"I have no doubt of that; I will leave directions with the housekeeper about it, so that you can send it home when it is done."

This was another blow to Walter; for he had secretly intended to keep the Joan in his studio till his patron had returned from abroad; he had felt that that would be a solace to him, and besides, when they did return, it would have provided an excuse for his paying a visit to Willowbank. His chagrin was such that the entrance of Sir Reginald into the drawing-room was quite a relief to him, since it at once gave a turn to the conversation.

"Your guest is late, Mr. Brown," said the baronet.

"Yes, yes," said the merchant, who had already pulled out his watch with some appearance of impatience. "I hope they understand below-stairs that our party is not complete."

This was a good deal for Mr. Brown to say, since it was his invariable principle—or so at least he had told Walter—to wait dinner for nobody. "Why should the rest of the alphabet have their meat done to rags, because Z is always behind-hand?" was one of his favorite sayings.

"My aunt is generally punctual as clock-work," observed Sir Reginald.

"So I should have inferred, from what I have seen of her character," answered the other. "Ah, there's the front-door bell."

It was curious to see how fidgety was Mr. Brown, and still more so to observe, now that the cause of his anxiety was removed, and his expected guest had come, how he abstained from any demonstration of welcome. He re-

ained, as if by design, in the further corner of the apartment, when Mrs. Sheldon was announced, and the rest of the company stepped forward to greet her. At the moment, Walter thought this was for the purpose of observing how he himself should first meet the lady; that it was a sort of trap, laid for him, by which his host might be certified of some suspicion that he and the widow were old acquaintances. In that case, he resolved to shape his conduct by her own, which would doubtless have been decided upon beforehand. If she shrank from recognition it would be easy for him to ignore her acquaintance; but he would no more initiate deception.

Notwithstanding her recent bereavement, Mrs. Sheldon was not in widow's weeds; she refused, it seems, to wear the customary garb of woe for a husband who, in his lifetime, had treated her so ill; or, perhaps, she knew that crape was unbecoming to her. She was dressed in gray silk, trimmed with black lace; and in the soft lamplight of the drawing-room, looked quite bewitching. She embraced Lotty with great effusion, kissed Lillian on the cheek, nodded familiarly at Reginald, whom she had met before that morning, and then held out her hand to Walter, with a "What! you here, Mr. Litt n?" Both speech and action were so marked, so evidently designed to attract attention, that it seemed almost impossible they should have escaped Mr. Brown's notice; yet they did so. He could not, of course, but have heard and seen, but the circumstance did not appear to strike him as remarkable; doubtless, he concluded that Mrs. Sheldon and Walter had met during one of her recent calls at Willowbank, and therefore thought little of her claiming acquaintanceship with him. By the expression of the widow's face it was clear to Walter that her intention, whatever it was, had missed fire in the performance. The spectators, too, had evidently expected some result: the baronet frowned and bit his mustache discontentedly; Lotty, who had cast down her eyes, as though to avoid some unpleasant scene, looked up again with an expression of relief; Lillian, who had turned a shade paler as the newcomer addressed Walter, but had never taken her eyes off her face for a moment, wore a look of disdain. Quite unconscious of all this, Mr. Brown himself had at last come forward to greet his guest. He did so with warmth, yet, at the same time, as it seemed to Walter, with as little demonstrativeness as possible. His words were conventional enough, but his voice was unusually soft and low, and he retained the widow's hand in his much longer than is customary. Perhaps it was for this purpose that he had not greeted her earlier, since, when other people are waiting to shake hands with a lady, you can scarcely keep her fingers prisoners beyond a second or two. How often, or on what occasions, Mrs. Sheldon had been a guest at Willowbank, since her memorable letter had been received, Walter did not know, but she had evidently made the best use of her time with Mr. Brown. It was borne in upon the young artist at once that what Lillian had said he was old friend enough to be told, and which Lotty had objected to being revealed to him, was that a certain tenderness had sprung up between the old merchant and this newly-made widow. That Lillian should regard it with aversion was natural enough, and that Lotty, being under the dominion of Sir Reginald, this lady's favorite nephew, should not so regard it, was also explicable. He felt that those who were already his enemies in that house had recruited a new ally, more dangerous to him, perhaps, than any one of them, in the person of the handsome widow; for during their previous acquaintance with one another had he not shown himself proof against her charms; and had not her farewell words to him been such words of bitterness as only the tongue of a slighted woman knows how to frame! He had then been able to despise her charge that he had fallen in love with his friend's wife, but his heart now sank within him at the thought of how she might abuse another's ear with the same calumny; not Mr. Brown's, nor Selwyn's, nor Lotty's, but Lillian's ear. Had he been a wiser and a less honorable man, he would have known that he had it in his power to set himself right—and more than right—with Lillian, by simply revealing the cause of this woman's malice, but such an idea never entered his mind. He felt that there were overwhelming odds against him, and that, probably, though the first blow had missed its mark, he would undergo their onset that very night, but he had no thought of any resistance such as would compromise even the most cruel of his enemies. He had promised Lotty to "spare" her sister; that is, as he understood it, to make her no offer of marriage, since such a union must needs be utterly hopeless; and he had made a promise with himself to spare Lotty; that is, not to imperil by any revelation—however such might excuse his own conduct in Mr. Brown's eyes—the reconciliation that had been effected between herself and her father. His foil, in fact, had the button on, while those of his antagonists were bare.

Mr. Brown of course took Mrs. Sheldon into dinner, while Lillian fell to Sir Regi-

nald's lot, and Lady Selwyn to Walter's. The conversation was lively enough and, though not very general, still, more so than on the last occasion when he had sat at that table; for the baronet's sallies were seconded by his aunt, who, as the merchant admiringly remarked, was a "host in herself as well as a guest," a stroke of pleasantry that Sir Reginald applauded very loudly, and of which poor Lillian looked utterly ashamed. That the widow was "making the running" with the owner of Willowbank very fast indeed could not be doubtful to any one that heard her; but, nevertheless, the whole company was taken by surprise by Mr. Brown's suddenly saying—apropos of the contemplated trip to Italy—"And why should you not come with us, Mrs. Sheldon?"

It had seemed to Walter, whom this speech had positively electrified, that Lillian was here about to speak; but Sir Reginald, with his quick, "Ah, why indeed?" was before her, and she said nothing, only casting despairing look across the table to her sister.

"Well, well, that is a very tempting proposition, Mr. Brown, I own," answered the widow gravely; "but it will need a good deal of consideration."

That she intended to accept the invitation, no one present, except, perhaps, the host himself, who was very solicitous to extract an assent from her, had any doubt; but she declined for that time to give a definite reply. "It was a delightful idea," she said—"perhaps almost too pleasurable a one, it would be thought by some, to be entertained by one in her position"—and here she sighed, as though that allusion to her recent bereavement had set some springs of woe flowing—"but it would need very serious reflection before she could say 'yes' or 'no.' She would make up her mind by the next Sunday afternoon, when she had engaged to meet dearest Lotty in the Botanical Gardens at three o'clock."

"Dearest Lotty," instructed by a glance

from her lord and master, promised to be punctual to that appointment, and expressed her hope that Mrs. Sheldon's decision would be in the affirmative. Most of this talk had taken place during dessert, and again and again Lillian, from the head of the table, had looked towards the widow with significant glance, that even the youngest housekeepers can assume when they think that a change of scene will be desirable. But the other had steadily ignored it, and, in one of her endeavors to catch the widow's eye, Lillian caught her father's instead.

"Why should you be in such a hurry to leave us, my dear?" said he testily; "we are quite a family party; and neither Sir Reginald nor Mr. Litt n are three-bottle men."

Of course both gentlemen hastened to say that they had had wine enough.

"Very good," continued the host. "Then why should the ladies part company from us at all?—What say you, Mrs. Sheldon, to our forming ourselves into a hanging committee, and criticising the new picture that has just come home from the Royal Academy?"

"I should like it, of all things," answered she; "that is, if such an ordeal would be agreeable to the artist." It was the first time since their meeting that she had looked Lillian in the face, and she smiled as she did so very sweetly.

"It is not a very good time to judge of a picture," observed Walter; "not that he cared about that matter in the least, but because he saw that the proposition was, for some reason or other, distasteful to Lillian."

"But the less light there is, Lillian, the more your blushes will be spared," said Sir Reginald gaily.

"Oh, there's plenty of light," returned the host; "I have had reflectors contrived expressly to exhibit it.—Come along, Mrs. Sheldon, and pass judgment."

And with that, he gallantly offered his arm to the widow, and led the way across the hall into the breakfast-room, where the picture had been hung. The gas apparatus which had been made to throw its beams upon the canvases was soon lit, and certainly Walter's handiwork looked to the best advantage.

(To be continued.)

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