

A CRUEL DECEPTION

OR WHY DID SHE SHUN HIM? BY EFFIE ADELAIDE ROWLANDS

(Continued)

Taunton understood the purport of this letter perfectly. It had been written simply and solely to convey this last piece of information. Who shall say that woman monopolizes all the sympathy and tact in the world?

There was a letter from Lady Augusta, too, all splashes and dashes:

"Can't send you much of an epistle, dearest, and sweetest of brothers. I am in the most awful muddle! I am painting some of the rooms upstairs—have got in about a ton of Aspinall, and have nearly poisoned myself. That would be a small thing if Shola had not tried to follow my example, only more so, inasmuch as he has tried to swallow a whole tin of the best china blue. Honestly, I thought it was all over with the little chap, and he is now tied up in his crib so that he can't crawl after more! He appears to have a depraved appetite, for he declares he liked it! Of course, Jack says it is all my fault, and calls me a murderous mother! He is a brute!

"No news; Blanche is still here as beautiful as ever, and longing for you to come back. Oh, and my lovely little Mrs. Hunter has been very ill—her husband was in despair about her, has carried her away today—Jack says 'tarted' is a very vulgar expression—to get some change of air. I only saw her once. I called the day after you left, but she seemed very weak and languid then, and I had no opportunity of a chat with her, for she could hardly speak, and he was fluttering about her all the time, needless to say, in a great state of agitation. How nice it is to be a bride! One always has so much made of one! I don't quite know what her illness is—something of a neuralgic order, I think. She looked as though she had awful pain in her head and eyes, poor thing! I am so sorry I can't see more of her. I have fallen in love with her, she is so exquisitely beautiful.

"But there, I must pull up, or I shall make this letter as long as one of the gospels. I hope Hugo, dear, you are having a festive time. If you see any lovely frocks you can buy them for me. I know I am a middle-aged matron, but what woman ever grew too old for a new frock? Sholto is roaring like a bull of Bashan. I must fly. Ever your loving, devoted sister,
Gus.

"P. S.—Don't stay away too long. We can't do without you, dear old thing!

"Second P. S.—Bring some bonbons. Blanche is fond of them!" The smile called up by Lady Augusta's effusion was lingering on Lord Taunton's face when his man came in, bearing a telegram in his hand.

The smile gave way to a sudden look of pain as he opened and read the frantic entreaty:

"Come at once. Jack has had a dreadful accident; was thrown from his horse, unconscious; does not know me. I am distracted.
Gus."

Preparations were immediately made for a hurried departure, although there was no prospect of crossing the Channel till next time. Taunton felt his heart heavy in his breast as he thought of his sister's trouble. It seemed such an anomaly that trouble should come to Gus, bright, happy, sunny Gus—she who had never known suffering or anxiety, save, perhaps, on his account, during the whole of her life. Poor little Gus! In imagination he could see her pretty, piquant face drawn and haggard with sudden grief. His first thought was for her, but the sympathy that filled his heart overflowed as he remembered the cause of this grief. He knew no man whom he esteemed and liked so well as he did Jack Trevelyan. He had given his sister willingly, gladly, to the fine, manly, honest young fellow, and he had never once had a moment's regret or uneasiness since the first day of their marriage.

Hugo's face was full of questioning anxiety, as he gazed at

Westchester Station. Even Alwynne and all the miserable dread and suffering that circled about her was forgotten in this moment, as he looked the inquiry his lips could not utter of the chauffeur who had brought the motor to meet him.

"Mr. Trevelyan is still unconscious. He ain't neither spoke nor moved, my lord," the man said quickly; and there was almost a weakness in his voice and a tear in his eyes as he spoke, for Jack Trevelyan was beloved by all who knew him, big or small.

Lord Taunton drove to the Abbey in silence. He made no effort to question the chauffeur further. He felt something of a vague reproach in his heart as he drove through the now luxuriously leafed park and grounds. Perhaps had he been at home the accident might not have occurred. It was one of those fleeting thoughts that are always the accompaniment of heartfelt sorrow, the natural attendant, as it were, to the regret that harm has come to any dear one.

The very walls and windows and doors seemed to speak in sympathy in the grief that had fallen upon the big house—all was so still. No pretty, piquant, fluttering figure at the doorway; no tall, broad form and heavy laugh and voice to welcome him as he alighted; only the grave face of the butler, who spoke the same message as the chauffeur.

As he passed through the hall Taunton saw through an open doorway a tall, white-robed figure. It was Blanche Glendee. He meant to pass on, as he did not think she saw him, but she turned and came to him hurriedly.

"Oh, Lord Taunton!" she said, her voice no longer hard and stern, but changed, and changed with emotion. "I am so glad you have come. Poor little Gus! I is so terrible! She has not shed one tear; I have not known what to do with her. I am so glad you have come!"

Taunton held her hand gently. For the first time he had a feeling of liking for her; she seemed so womanly, so tender—quite another creature to the big, handsome, languid, social woman whom Lady Augusta had admired so much. He said some words to her. What they were he hardly knew, for his thoughts were with the sister upstairs, and he was also unconscious that he held her hand in his while he spoke.

Blanche was perfectly conscious of this slight breach of etiquette, but she made no effort to remind him of it; and as he loosened her fingers at last and turned away, moving hurriedly up the stairs, a gleam of something like triumph, and most certainly intense satisfaction, came into her big blue eyes. It certainly was gratifying to feel that, after all, she had not wasted herself in vain in having remained on at the Abbey during his absence.

Hugo made his way up to the sick room. He stood for a moment contemplating the scene before him till, a mist of tears rose before his sight, and blotted it out.

All was so still. In a vague sort of way it struck him as being so strange that it could be so still with Gus in the room—Gus, who was usually surrounded by an atmosphere of bustle, and laughter, and life!

It was hard to realize that that small, crouched-up figure beside the bed could be Gus. He had never thought it possible that grief could work so swift a change. In that white, set face, with the blue-shaded eyes, the hair pushed back from the brow, he could trace not even the faintest likeness, the sunny, merry, happy sister he knew so well. He went up to her softly, touching her hand, and whispering her name.

She turned with an inarticulate cry, and flung herself into his arms, clinging to him like a little child.

"He will die!" she whispered hoarsely. "Look—look at him,

Hugo. He has never moved, never stirred. I have spoken to him so often—so often, and he does not hear me, and Jack always answered me. I know he will die! They say kind things to try and comfort me, but I know better!"

Taunton held the trembling little form to his heart. Words would not come easily, and the consolation his heart desired to give her seemed so impossible as his eyes went to the bed where lay that still figure—as stiff and silent as a figure-hewn of marble.

Lady Augusta lifted her anguish-stricken, tearless face to his.

"You will not leave me, Hugo! You will stay with me always—now! I—I have no one but you!"

He kissed her old brow. "Darling, I will stay with you always!" he answered, the reproach he had before felt coming back fourfold.

What, after all, were his grief and disappointments before such a sorrow as this? And then came another thought, that if Alwynne could know, would not her first tender remembrance be for this poor tortured woman, on whose life's sunshine the shadow had fallen so swiftly, so dreadfully.

It was not the moment to nurse selfish feelings. What though he must live here with the knowledge of Alwynne's presence perpetually beside him? What though his eyes must rest on her lovely form and face, growing so unendurably dearer to him, and fall also on that strange, false other to whom she belonged—what then?

He was not the first who had had to live side by side, as it were, to an open grave, in which hope, love, happiness were forever buried.

The power of responsible acting was taken from him now. Even though his whole soul craved to put space between himself and his lost love, human nature, affection, sorrow, sympathy, duty, all rose before him to hold him back.

Temptation might be thrust in his path. His heart forewarned in quick precision he foreshadowed the suffering that would and must come to him through Alwynne; but—he must withstand the temptation, he must be strong as iron—the weakness and longing in his heart must be crushed under foot and be forgotten.

His sister looked to him for comfort and help, and in a sort of premonitory way it came to him that Alwynne would look to him as his sister did. He must be true to his honor, to his manhood, and help them both.

Alwynne sat by the window of the lodging house, and looked out at the sea. The sun was shining on it, and the white-crested waves rolled and murmured a sort of joyous song in the sunlight. A book lay on her knee, but she was not reading; she was not even thinking.

Conscious or definite thought was something that never seemed to come to her now. Her mind was in a perpetual haze, in a sort of dream, in which everything was vague and indescribable, save only one feeling, a dominant, overpowering feeling that when something—some one, some strange, invisible influence—drew near to her she must arise and obey its mandates, whatever they might be.

She had grown very thin, and her lovely face was worn and strangely altered, but there was no diminution of her beauty. As one of the most extraordinary writers of the day says:

"Pain and time, which trace deep lines and write a story on a human face, have a strangely different effect on one face and another. The face that is only fair, even very fair, they mar and flay, but to the face whose beauty is the harmony between that which speaks from within and the form through which it speaks, power is added by all that causes the outer

man to bear more deeply the impress of the inner. The pretty woman fades with the roses on her cheeks and the girlhood that lasts an hour; the beautiful woman finds her fullness of bloom only when a past has written itself on her, and her power is the most irresistible when it seems going."

Alwynne's beauty was not material, but of the soul. Despite the dreamy haze that had come into her eyes, clouding, as it were, their exquisite intellect, the fragrance of her young soul was breathed throughout her individuality.

She sat looking at the sea, yet seeing it not. The sunshine, the murmur of the waves, the laughter of the children, all were there, but the sense of none of it came to her. She sat back, her eyes full of soft beauty, with the book open on her knee. Suddenly she aroused, as with the touch of some strong magnetic thrill, and turned her head.

The floor flashed in her face, then died away as her husband came toward her.

"Put on your hat and come out!" he said, and as he spoke he passed his hand softly over her beautiful hair. "The sunshine is lovely! You sit here too much." He laughed softly as she rose with docile obedience. "What a good child you are, Alwynne! You do all I tell you!"

She put the book on the table without a word, and went to the door. Just as she reached it he called her back.

"Come and kiss me!" he said, in the same laughing sort of way. She turned at once, and went up to him, lifting her lovely face to his.

He touched her lips lightly, and then dismissed her.

Left alone, Blair Hunter stood in front of the window and smiled to himself. He appeared to take a deep interest in the maneuvers of some children who were erecting a huge castle of sand.

"Everything comes to him who knows how to wait," he said to himself. "Well, God knows I have waited a good century. Thought at last my luck was buried forever. The devil takes care of his own. A good, sound, true proverb that, for he has taken pretty good care of me all through my life, bar a few ups and downs."

He left the window, and began pacing to and fro the long, narrow room.

"It works well," he muttered to himself, and there was a look of suppressed excitement in his face. "I can almost see the future. What chance was it that threw Alwynne in my path just at this crisis?" He shrugged his shoulders. "Chance! Why, it was fate—my life itself—my very life!" He stood silent for a moment, and then stretched out his large white hand and laughed.

"They shall dance like puppets to my tune; and, by gad, I shall play a big time! It looked a safe game before—having all the tricks—but this will be safer. Thanks to that boy's information I can hold his lordship pretty much as I choose. He won't be able to refuse Alwynne, and if I fail to extract what I ask from him—well, Alwynne will be more successful."

He leaned against the window still smiling.

"What curious fools so-called good people are!" he mused, deeply interested in the sand castle beyond. "This wife of mine, for instance—what an extraordinary creature! What quixotic madness! To turn her back on luxury, to cut herself off from the man she loves, and all for what? A few paltry principles, a sense of honor, which may mean a good deal in sound, but certainly won't put food into one's mouth. Well, it's an ill wind, and I am not going to grumble, since her folly has driven her into my hands. She wants working, though!" He turned from the window, and his smile went. "She is dazed and overwhelmed just at present—she has not had time to recover; but—she frowned slightly—"she will make an effort to recover, and there will be a struggle." He paused a moment. "Well, let the struggle come! I can meet it, and end it, too. I am too strong

for them all! I must always win!"

CHAPTER XXIII

The sun played on the rippling waves, and turned the sand into streaks of dull gold.

Alwynne sat leaning against an old wrecked fishing boat. She was not reading, not even glancing at the book that, as usual, lay open on her knee. She was gazing far across the sea to where, on the distant line of the horizon, she could discern the full sails and tall masts of some giant ship, outbound for a foreign land and clime.

The girl's eyes followed that far off object, that moved so slowly as to seem to be a fixture on the mass of rolling waters. There was a quiet, subdued look on her lovely face; but the whole expression was changed from that which it had worn the day she had sat by the window, and her husband had come toward her.

Then, there had been an extraordinary expression on the girl's countenance, a sort of dreamy unconcern, a heaviness, a lassitude, a look as of a person who is bound and fettered, and who struggles with an enemy that is too powerful and potent to be overcome.

Now it was almost the face of the Alwynne of old. The beauty was as great, and the extreme pallor that had shadowed it was gone, being replaced by a delicate coloring of something like health in the softly tinged cheeks.

She looked as though a burden had fallen from her shoulders, as though the mere fact of existence was in itself a pleasure, and not a weariness. She was herself again, as we first saw her on board the Atlantic steamer—herself, and yet with a subtle difference that is the close attendant on great mental suffering.

Wondrously young and fair she was, in her white serge gown and broad-brimmed hat. The year was advanced now, and spring had given place to summer. Down here on the sands, sheltered from any wind by the high, steep cliffs to the right and left, it was quite hot. Alwynne did not object to the heat, however. She was only conscious of a pleasantness in seeing the waves sparkle, and in feeling the sea air come softly about her, moving the tendrils of her brown hair on her brow, and murmuring gently about her ears;

and the laughter and shrill voices of the children in the distance, who built their castles to a phenomenal height and demolished them ruthlessly, only to build new ones, was a sort of pleasure to her also. For it spoke of life and enjoyment that was in the world, though it might not be for her individual share.

Alwynne sat watching the big ship. She wondered about it vaguely. What it might be? Where it was going? Who was aboard it? She could conjure up an intimate picture of its deck and saloons so easily. How many of these ships had she called her home, for days, sometimes for weeks at a time!

She turned from looking at the ship after a while. A mist had come over the horizon. She could not see the white wings of the outward bound vessel. She could see nothing for the tears that welled into her eyes.

Her thoughts were so clear and concise today; she did not remember when she had been able to think so distinctly as during the last two or three days. She was not certain as to what had come to her in the days just before these last; but she felt she must have been ill, and so have had her mental strength enfeebled.

Somehow, the sight of that ship was very sad to her. It brought back a banished memory. A wet deck, with dark clouds flying before the wind, the sea choppy and muddy green—a storm threatening in every gust, and a man standing beside, as she leaned over the rail, looking down into the depthless waters, his brown hand resting close to hers, his wondrous dark-blue eyes searching her downcast face; as it were, to her very soul itself; as she uttered the words which were farewell between them—not for a day, an hour, but forever.

Alwynne had not gazed upon this memory for a long, long time. Things were strangely clouded in

her mind; some were obliterated, others mingled in a chaotic manner. She felt unequal to the task of sorting them out, there was so much to confuse so much to wound; but this remembrance was clear enough—it had no need of unravelling. It was stamped on her heart, and was there indelibly fixed until the end.

Thoughts followed quickly one on another. Her mother's face, haughty, pale, cold, and cruel as a mask, flitted before her; then a jumble of horrible words, then her flight from the hotel—her search for Basil, and her success there. Here she pressed her small hand over her eyes. Then so much that was strange—real and yet unreal—pleasant at first, in a sense of protection and comfort, found when least expected, and with this pleasure a strong, indefinite repugnance—a fear, a shrinking from an incomprehensible desire to escape from some thing or somebody, and then a middle—a tangle of thoughts, ideas, dreams.

Alwynne sighed, and then looked around and smiled. Basil had come up and sat down beside her so quietly. She had not known he was so near till he was come.

"How far have you read?" he asked her, looking wistfully at her between his gently.

"How far have you walked?" Alwynne replied, with a question and a smile.

"I have been up to the top of the cliff."

"Basil, how wicked you are!" "It is not far, really, Alwynne."

"It must be quite three miles," Alwynne said, regarding him with a most portentously severe expression.

"Two and three-quarters," Basil corrected her, laying his check on her small unglowed palm.

Alwynne disengaged her hand, drew his head down on her knees, and touched his fair hair with a tender loving caress.

"And just two miles and a half! Too much for an invalid like you, Basil!" she said. "It is hot. Alwynne did not object to the heat, however. She was only conscious of a pleasantness in seeing the waves sparkle, and in feeling the sea air come softly about her, moving the tendrils of her brown hair on her brow, and murmuring gently about her ears;

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for there was a tremendous lot of work going on at the office when I was taken ill. Mr. Stopford was not at all pleased at having to give me a holiday.

"You were not fit for work!" Alwynne said hurriedly. "You frightened me, Basil, you were so ill; but oh, I was so glad to see you! It was so unexpected, and I did not know you knew where I was!"

"Blair told me," Basil said. He was silent a moment. "It was a wonderful thing for a youngster like me to get a fortnight's holiday. All the other boys were so jealous. It was Lord Taunton's doing!"

Alwynne's pale cheek flushed a little.

"Have you seen Lord Taunton lately?" Basil nodded his head.

"He ran up to town one day. He has been at Torre Abbey; some one is there very ill. I think it is his sister's husband, and Lord Taunton has had a lot of things to look after. He came to look me up when he was in the office; he heard me cough, and he went straight off to Mr. Pen-

nell. I do not know what he said, but I do know that I was told to stop work immediately, and go away to the seaside, if possible, and then when I got back to my bedroom in the boarding house I found the note from Lord Taunton that I told you of, enclosing me a bank note for ten pounds—a bank he called it, and telling me to take care of myself, and let him know how I was. What a real, true friend he is, Alwynne! I don't mind letting him help me, though you know I am a bit proud, because I know he really calls me his friend, and it is an honor to be the friend of such a man!"

Alwynne's face was bent down. She did not speak for a moment. When she did, her voice had a sort of stifled sound in it.

"And then—then you determined to come to me to be taken care of!" Basil was flinging bits of broken wood and seaweed out to catch the inflowing tide.

"I did not know what to do," he said. "Of course, I thought of you, and I had a sort of half idea of going down to Torre to be with you; and then, in just one of those strange chances that come in life, Blair came to see me, and told me you were here at Fordsea, and packed me off without delay to keep you company; and you know, Alwynne, you look ever so much better since I have been with you! Now what do you say to my conceit, eh?"

Alwynne was looking out to sea again. The big ship had moved a very little way; the sun was striking the white sails aslant now she was making for a course that would bear her out of sight before long.

"I wish," Alwynne said, in a low, dull sort of way, "I wish you were with me always, Basil, always!" Basil flung another and larger piece of wood into the white foam of the waves; then he turned around and faced the girl. His cheeks had a bright spot of color and his eyes were full of light.

"Look here, Alwynne!" he said in a boyish way, full of eagerness. (To be continued)