

A Broken Vow;

—OR—

BETTER THAN REVENGE.

CHAPTER XV.

It was a dull little house—No. 3, Greenways Gardens. To put it bluntly, it had settled back into the ordinary prosaic order of things—just the average everyday life that doesn't spell romance. After emerging in that glorious fashion from the common round of things, and touching the real beauties of a life that came from the world outside, it had dropped back again to commonplace, and was trying hard to forget.

First, as to Odley. You would scarcely have known her for the same Odley who had been so violently pursued in the past, and who had, according to her own showing, played the butterfly with such conspicuous success. For this new Odley was a tame one, who crept about through the house on necessary duties, and forgot to be cheerful; who looked with wistful eyes at that other shadow—Lucy Ewing—and wondered if things would ever come right again. Then as to Lucy herself. She had accepted what Odley had told her with a dim, dull wonder; almost she saw that this thing they called love was a thing of disappointment and heart-breakings, just as the wonderful Odley had once suggested it must be. The weeks had gone by, and nothing had been heard of Christopher Dayne; he had vanished as completely as though Greenways Gardens had never known him. The world was just to wag on as it had done before, and everything else to be forgotten. Love had flitted once across Greenways Gardens, and in a manner of speaking, made a mistake, and called at the wrong house. And he had left without even an apology for his blunder.

The curious thing had been in regard to the mysterious Aunt Phipps. She had been astounded to discover herself swept out of the house, as it were, at a moment's notice by that impetuous young man, Mr. Christopher Dayne. There had been no time for explanations; Christopher had been given notice to quit, and quite naturally and necessarily he took his aunt with him. At the scheming and the planning in the world could not have anticipated; Olive Varney had thought to separate the lovers, and had been successful; but incidentally she had found herself of that position in the house she had striven so hard to obtain. Chris went, in obedience to the demand of Odley; but he staggered Olive by requesting her to accompany him. And she dared not, of course, refuse.

From that point her difficulties had commenced. Hitherto the boy had been a mere cypher in the game she was playing; now he suddenly took the business into his own hands, and played the game for himself. He had borne her off to a hotel on that night of their sudden departure from Greenways Gardens, and he was evidently prepared to live in a style befitting his supposed new fortune. When, in some alarm, she suggested that a more modest establishment would be better, he told her with some bitterness that he had no need to be careful, seeing that there was no particular prospect of happiness for himself; and, in effect, that nothing mattered. And that again was quite unanswerable.

If Olive Varney had desired to spread ruin and disaster all about her, she could not have succeeded better. Chris had ceased work. His days were passed in idleness; it seemed impossible for him to settle to anything. Olive had to face the fact that, although she had succeeded in striking out that love-story from the girl's life, she had also injured this innocent boy, against whom she had no quarrel. And each day that she met him she came to recognize that, but for her, he would have been a bright, hard-working fellow, certain to make his way in the world. That dawning thing, her conscience, began to stir unpleasantly; for the first time she grew afraid. The money was nothing; she did not count that. But the woman was, apart from what she had promised, essentially pure-minded; whatever had been stifled in her, there certainly never had been stifled that desire for something better and brighter than her own life had known. She touched it here for the first time; saw herself again in Lucy Ewing, and some dear impossible lover out of the past in the person of Chris. It was a glimpse into a strange world; and it was her fate to sweep through that world like a blight, spoiling everything.

So the time went by, and nothing happened, and she grew impatient. A bitter battle was being waged between her pride—and her loyalty to her dead father—and that growing conscience which taught her how vile a thing she had done; a sort of three-cornered duel. So that at last her reluctant feet took her back to Greenways Gardens.

Odley, looking out hopelessly over the Gardens, saw her coming, and fled to the deepest recesses of the house; for Odley was dreadfully afraid of what she had done. Thus it happened that Olive Varney presently found herself facing that timid enemy of hers, Lucy Ewing. And in the pale face of the girl was a great expectancy—and something of a dawning tenderness; for had not this

wonderful Aunt Phipps been near the boy quite recently, and might she not bring a message from him.

"Well—what do you expect me to say?" asked Olive, in a low voice.

"Nothing that is not kind," said the girl, with a quivering lip. "You are a woman; you should understand. I've waited alone in this house for weeks past—never hearing a word. You don't bring any bad news, I hope?"

"No—my—my nephew is well—and happy. You needn't be surprised at that," she added, curtly—"anyone can be happy in this world who has money. What are you going to do?"

"Do? I don't understand you," said Lucy.

"I mean," went on Olive roughly—"I wonder if you're like most other women; will you go after him—and plead with him—and try to take your place in his life again? Don't you understand how pretty you are?—don't you see that if you went to him, with your eyes full of tears as they are now, he'd come to your feet at once. Only just a little matter of swallowing your pride. Besides, he's rich, you know; don't forget that."

She spoke perhaps more roughly than she had intended; for to her surprise she found it necessary to keep down a rising tenderness within herself. The girl looked so forlorn, and so young, and so weak; such poor sport it was, and yet so necessary, if Olive would keep her vow. But there was a new spirit in Lucy Ewing; it was to be a battle of pride against pride.

"I'm afraid you don't know very much about me, Mrs. Phipps," said the girl, "if you think that I should do that. I have not asked you to come here, and I don't see why you came. If, because I believed in him and loved him, that gives you the right to come and insult me, I am sorry. But if you come from him—"

"No—no—I don't do that," broke in Olive quickly.

"I hoped not," said Lucy. "Understand, then, that I wouldn't go back to him under any circumstances; understand that he has killed all the love I ever felt for him. You began that; if you hadn't come back here he would have worked hard, and we could have been happy. Fortunes were not for us; love makes its own fortunes, Mrs. Phipps."

Olive was silent; that curious feeling of shame was creeping over her again. She thought moodily of the father lying in his grave; of her promise; and of how poor and pitiful a thing it seemed to fight against this child. If the girl had wept and prayed, she might, temptuously enough, have had an answer about the matter; but this pride was a thing greater than her own, and it gained at least her respect.

"I didn't want to insult you," she said slowly. "Some day, perhaps, you'll understand better about it all. Were you?" she hesitated, and tapped nervously on the floor with her foot—"were you fond of him?"

"You're no right!" began Lucy. "Why do you come here at all—can't you understand what you're doing? Have I ever done you any wrong? As you say you do not come from him—what right have you to say a word?"

"None, I suppose," said Olive, looking at her quietly. "That's another matter you'll understand better some day. I shan't trouble you again—at present," she added, as she walked out of the room.

On an impulse afterwards she came skilfully back and looked into the room again, perhaps with some intention to smooth away what she had said. She saw the girl seated by a table, with her arms flung out upon it, and her head buried on her arms. Olive softly came away again, and out of the house, and so into the street. And it was a new Olive that trod the deserted pavements of Greenways Gardens.

She felt suddenly old, and very, very lonely. That scene at the death-bed of her father, which had at the time burnt itself so strongly into her remembrance, now seemed set far back in an age she had forgotten. Before her, as she walked through the streets was the homeless figure of this girl, whose life had been bright and happy before the disastrous shadow of Aunt Phipps had come into it. All about her seemed suddenly mean and sordid; she seemed to have crawled to her vengeance, in a fashion totally unfitted to her nature.

She had walked on without taking thought of where she was going, and had walked mechanically in the direction of Martin Blake's studio. She remembered, when she saw the name on the corner of the street, to have heard the address from Chris. Scarcely knowing why she did so, she went on to the studio itself, and knocked at the door. Perhaps in her mind was the thought that here at least was a strong, sane man who might help her.

Martin seemed a little surprised when he opened the door; but he stepped back and made way for her to enter. His palette was on his thumb, and he had obviously been at work on a picture then hanging on his easel; on hearing the knock he had apparently covered it up. Without saying anything himself, he stood idly balancing the palette and waiting for Olive to speak.

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