

A CRUEL DECEPTION

OR WHY DID SHE SHUN HIM? BY EFFIE ADELAIDE ROWLANDS

(Continued)

Before she went from him he must try and smooth some of those lines away. Perhaps she would speak out to him, tell him what this burden was. There was so much to tell. How came she here—a wife scarcely a fortnight, yet a wife whose marriage had no suggestion of happiness in it. That was only too clear to him, only too sure!

Brought in direct contact with her sorrow, his own faded away and was lost in his desire to befriend her, to give her some comfort, some gleam of pleasure. After all, he had no right to question. If she chose to hold her silence, he must submit without a word. But she would not be silent. He felt that her whole soul longed to pour forth its burden to him, to let him know that if a hurt were done to him that hurt was not desired by her.

She found her voice faintly as she ceased speaking.

"I—I wanted to see you to explain," she said. "You would think it so strange, so—so wrong, that I should have come here to your home, to yours." She clasped her hands together. "If I had only known, but I did not know. I was not told. I—do not think. Perhaps I should not have comprehended it even if it had been told me. I awoke last night to all."

"Alas, poor child! the whole volume of her misery was conveyed to him in that whisper."

His heart gave one mighty throbbing, and the blood in his veins coursed madly, wildly, for an instant. He moved his feet and stood upright.

"I awoke last night to all!" Last night as she had stood in his home, as her eyes had held his, the veil had dropped from her senses, the dream had cleared from her brain. She had awakened to know—all! What all? Taunton did not dare let that question assume a definite shape in this moment—this moment of torture and of temptation.

CHAPTER XX

He turned from her suddenly and walked away a few paces. His face was very pale as he came back to her.

"Something within me, I scarcely know how to define it, Alwynne," he said, as he stood before her again, "seems to pardon what might otherwise seem an intrusive curiosity. I think, little as you really know of me, you yet know enough to be certain that it is not curiosity which prompts me to question you now. Will you answer my questions?"

She lifted her eyes to him. "I want you to know all," she said simply. "It is your right."

He gave a great start. He had a sort of impatience take hold of him. "Do not let such an idea come to your mind," he said hurriedly. "Right! I have no right even to speak to you without your permission. Once and for all dismiss such a thought!"

He was glad of the impatience to cloak his real feelings. Her eyes filled with tears, but she bent her head so that he should not see them.

He went on swiftly. "I know what you wish to explain. You do not want me to think you guilty of a lack of kind thought, of a sort of cruelty in coming to my home, being near me so—so soon after your marriage. I assure you, on my honor, I had no such thought of you. I am convinced you would never be guilty of cruelty to me or to any other man."

"To you! Ah, no, no!" The words escaped her involuntarily. Again that wild rushing in his heart, that wild rushing in his veins. He checked his feelings with all his strength, and sat down beside her.

"Let me be your friend," he said. "Tell me all. Your heart is full. I can read its story in your face. Forgive me for saying it, but you seem to need a friend. Give me the happiness of feeling I can serve you a little—a very little!"

She put out her hand, and he held it in his for an instant, and then gently released it.

"Where is your mother?" he asked. "Why are you not with her?"

"We are parted forever. She will never speak to me again." Alwynne clasped her hands together. "Oh!" she said, all the pent up agony in her heart rushing forth at last. "Oh, if you could know all, would you condemn me—would you?" The struggle was so terrible, so horrible. She was my mother; she is my mother, and yet—and yet—

Taunton paused a moment. "Your mother disapproved of your marriage?" he said gently.

Alwynne conquered her emotion. "I do not even know if she has yet heard of it. It will make no difference now. She has disowned me. She will never willingly see or hear of me again. See—see, this will tell you better than I can. You will read these how much my mother is to me!"

She thrust a crumpled letter into his hand, and rose hurriedly, walking unsteadily a few paces away from him.

Taunton opened the letter. His brows were contracted almost to severity. He knew Mrs. Brabant's large writing well. He recalled to him just now how often he had longed for a glimpse of it in the days that had just gone.

There was no commencement, no terms of endearment: "You have chosen your own path. You have deliberately set your face against me. Be it so, Alwynne. We part, but understand me clearly, we do not part for a day, a month, a year—we part forever. Homeforth you have no mother, I have no child. Send me no more letters. Do not attempt to approach me. I shall from today hold no further communication with you; in fact I have arranged to leave England for a lengthened period, and I shall, therefore, put it out of your power to molest me either now or at any future time."

The letter was signed "Louise Graham."

Lord Taunton sat looking down at it. He could not—he dared not—let himself speak, for he feared to betray himself.

By and by, as she came back to him, he spoke, not looking at her, however, but keeping his face bent.

"What does this signature mean?" he asked. "Has she changed her name?"

Alwynne's voice was low in answering him. Her words conveyed the whole story in that answer.

"My mother is now Sir Henry Graham's wife," she said.

He gave a great start. Henry Graham's wife! Louise Brabant! Mrs. Brabant, the handsome, aristocratic mother of the girl who had won his heart! He felt a cold shiver pass over him.

There was not a club in London that had not tossed the name of Henry Graham to and fro as a savory scandal for many a year past. The story of the clever man's extraordinary fascination had been something Taunton had learned almost on his first introduction to the world. It had been such an old scandal—such an old infatuation! But Taunton remembered now as clearly as he had done in those youthful days of his, how hotly his sense of honor and justice had denounced the clever politician whose heartless neglect and humiliation of his wife, all through the influence of an unscrupulous adventuress, had been the common gossip of the time. And this woman had been Alwynne's mother! As with a flash of lightning he knew—he understood everything.

He rose suddenly, and held out his hands to her.

"Why did you send me from you? Oh, my dear—my dear! Did you think my love so poor a thing—did you doubt its strength! Oh, Alwynne! Why—why!"

Her hands rested in his. She was weeping silently. She could not speak. His words were only the echo of what she had been saying to herself all the miserable night through—the realization of the horrible mistake she had made that beat in her brain since the first moment her eyes had rested on him.

He held her hands so closely, his grip almost crushed her fingers.

"It was for me," he said, "for my sake—for the sake of my name, my position. Oh, Alwynne! What have you done? What have you done?"

He ceased suddenly, and loosened his hold. "You loved me," he said, and his voice was thick and hurried. "You loved me! You could send me from you because you loved me too well to risk a chance of harming me? You could do this, Alwynne—and yet—and yet—this man, your husband?"

He could say no more, but Alwynne's courage broke through her tears.

"I did not know what I was doing," she cried wildly. When I left my mother I had but two friends in the world. Marie, my faithful maid, and Basil Canning. Ah! do not look at me like that. You know I could not come to you. Marie could not help me. To quarrel with my mother meant starvation for her; and—and then she had been with my mother so long, and it seemed wrong, cruel, to take her away. I went to Basil. He gave me shelter—he gave me love and pity. God bless him for his goodness! He spoke of you! He begged me to let him send to you—I—I made him swear he would do me even if you mentioned his name! Yes—Yes. You remember one day you did speak. He suffered, poor Basil! He is so true—so true! He took me to the house where he lived, but I saw he had not enough money for us both. His cousin came to see him, and met me. The rest does not seem comprehensible to me now as I try to look back."

The poor girl was standing with her two old, trembling hands pressed over her eyes. She was shivering with the magnitude of her conflicting, overwhelming emotion.

"I—I think I must have been in a dream. When I am away from him I—I realize the madness—the horror!"

She stopped suddenly as Taunton uttered a sharp exclamation. "What have I said? she asked, in a dull sort of way. "I—I don't remember! I seem to be always dazed—always in a dream!"

The man beside her took her two hands. "My heart!" he said tenderly, yet with a touch of command in his voice. "My love, you must be brave. You must control these moments."

He was distressed beyond measure at her words, at her demeanor. She seemed indeed to be as one who acted under some spell—some other influence. There was something to know, something in her strange, sudden marriage to Blair Hunter, which she, poor child, could not—at least could not for the moment—explain, something which, maybe, she would never be able to explain.

Taunton detested all mysteries—all vague, indefinite movements. He had a hearty contempt for all sorts of mental tricksters, and this feeling came hurriedly into his mind as he recalled Blair Hunter's curiously handsome, unsatisfactory face and the distrust and dislike he had immediately conceived for the man on meeting him.

"He is good to you?" he said suddenly.

Alwynne answered. "Yes," without hesitation.

"He is too good, he is too kind," she said. "I try so hard to like him for his goodness. I never liked him from the first. I think I almost hated him, and yet—"

She paused in the same vague way, with the same strange, drawn, painful look in her beautiful eyes.

Lord Taunton bent and kissed her hands.

"I am your friend. You will let me be your friend?" he said passionately.

It was little less than torture to see her as she was. To him she seemed very ill—on the verge of a great mental and physical prostration. Her nervous system seemed entirely shattered; she had lost all the health and vigor that had been so apparent before even beneath all her delicate beauty. Her voice and the way she spoke betrayed her more than anything.

He had learned enough of her proud, reticent spirit, even in their short knowledge of one another, to feel that the girl had for some reason, as it were, lost grip of herself. He was assured that at any other time she would have died rather than have let him gather so much of her misery.

He felt a passionate anger against the man she called her husband, and in his agitation pressed her to speak more plainly—to tell him all.

She only repeated herself. "I don't know what I did. I do not remember," she said, and then she paused once. "He offered me a home. I was alone in the world, I could not earn my living, and then he was so kind. And even when I told him all, he did not care—he was only more kind, more good."

"He loves her! How could it be otherwise? And who am I that I should misjudge him?" Taunton thought swiftly to himself, his strong sense of justice forcing him to think this even of his rival.

He led her back once again to the tree, and made her rest.

"It is a long walk back to the village. You cannot do it. Will you stay here while I go to the house and bring you a carriage?" "I will rest," Alwynne said, and indeed, she looked as though the faint soul that stirred within her was about to flutter away forever. She was like a shadow.

Taunton stood looking at her, his whole love in his eyes for a few moments. He could not bear to leave her, and yet to stay was more than he could endure.

As he was moving away, Alwynne started forward.

"Oh!" she said suddenly, agitatedly. "Oh! I remember that I have not said all. You—you must promise me something. You will not refuse? I—I feel you mean to go away again, to leave your home—through me. You will not do this? Oh, say you will not do this; it is your home! We are only strangers at your gate. You must not go! It is we who must go! Give me your promise; it has haunted me all night!"

He stretched out his hand to her. "I give you my promise," he said, not quite steadily. "I will not go."

And, without another word, another look, he turned and left her sitting there alone.

CHAPTER XXI

Lord Taunton was not long in making his way to the central drive leading up to the Abbey, and, as luck would have it, he saw in the distance the car from which he had alighted so short a time ago, and which, having safely deposited Miss Glenchee at the door, was being driven around to the courtyard.

Taunton shouted to the chauffeur, and flung up his hand as a signal, and in a few minutes the car was alongside him. He dismissed the man, and drove happily as short a cut as possible to where it would be nearest and easiest to reach Alwynne.

Arrived at this point, he alighted, and pushed hurriedly through the grass to the spot where he had left her.

The old guarded trunk was where it had been these many years, but there was no woman seated on it—no graceful form, no wan, pale, beautiful face.

Taunton looked about from right to left. There was no sign of her. He had a sudden, painful fear at his heart that she might have fainted and fallen. But though he moved about, look-

ing anxiously, carefully, he could see no trace of her.

With a set look and contracted brows, he went back to the car. As he turned to look back, he saw in the distance two forms—one a man, the other a woman. It was she! His heart seemed to beat and throb to suffocation as he recognized the man to be her husband.

It was not very clear to him, in thinking matters over afterward, how he got back to the Abbey. There was such a miserable bewilderment in his brain, a confusion of suffering, of excitement of anger and resentment mingling with deepened love, and the yearning that the sight of Alwynne had only served to strengthen and intensify.

He made his way mechanically to his study—a room on the ground floor and sat down by the table, staring with unseeing eyes at the old familiar pictures and the endless rows of books which lined the walls.

Thought seemed suspended for the moment. He was only conscious of the sharp, contracting pain in his eyes. He was physically weary, too, from the long, wakeful night hours that had passed over his head, but yet he had no wish to sleep.

The voice of John Trevelyan just outside the door awakening him, he took up a pen, and began writing as his brother-in-law came in.

"How is Gus?" he asked, not looking up, but evidently deeply engrossed in his writing.

"Dropped off to sleep at last. She isn't used to pain, and she has managed to get about as had a headache as any mortal could desire. I don't disturb you, is it, old chap?"

Lord Taunton said, "No," and went on writing. He had not the least notion what the substance of his letter was. "He had commenced one to his lawyer, and had progressed so far as the date and the opening sentence acknowledging the receipt of some legal communications. Beyond that his brain did not travel; and, as John Trevelyan threw himself into a chair, and took up a paper, his pen came to a sudden stop."

He was still for so long a time that the other looked around at last.

"You don't look up to much this morning, Hugo," he said involuntarily, struck by the change of expression and coloring in the keen, handsome face. "Something in the air, I suppose?"

"It is one of my bad days," Lord Taunton said, with a good deal of indifference in his voice and manner. "I get like this now and again. General sort of seediness—means nothing. Goes off in a few hours."

Trevelyan lay back in his chair and smoked his pipe thoughtfully for a few minutes.

"I am afraid I know what your complaint is, Hugo, old chap."

Hugo looked at him questioningly. "You have got your wandering mood on again. You have had enough of this quiet, humdrum life, and long to be off again. I can sympathize with you. I know exactly how you feel. Been through it myself. Even when I got my dear wife I couldn't quite knock the old roving craze out of my brain. It comes natural to us men. Movement sometimes is the very breath of our nostrils, and," continued Mr. Trevelyan, leaning forward to knock some ashes out of his pipe, "and it can't be expected that you can settle down here right away. Why don't you take a run abroad for a week or two? Go to Paris? You have not been there for years. Furbish up your French. It is wonderful what a lot of good a trip across the Channel does one sometimes! Come with you, if you like."

Lord Taunton put his pen down and leaned back in his chair. Trevelyan's words carried a sense of sympathy that accorded well with his present mood.

His one conscious desire was to be gone—to be out in some wild, distant spot, with the heavens wide above him, and nature only as his companion. He had a longing for some wild, blustering wind to pour down upon him, to

feel the sting and the salt of the sea beat on his face!

His heart had a lighter throb for a moment, and then he forgot his own pleasure, and remembered her. If he should do this! If he should once more turn his back on his duties, on his possessions, on his position, she would utter a double sorrow. He must not forget this. In all his actions he must study her, so that she should at least be spared pain through him.

No, he must abandon the thought of a flight back to the great countries from which he had come. He must shut his eyes to the allurements of a life of freedom and of isolation—at least, for a time—until he was better acquainted with the conditions of her life, until he had assured himself that in all senses save of the heart it was well with her.

The danger of this position did not strike him in this instant; the misery that he must endure at the daily, hourly knowledge that she was so near him, yet that she was so utterly lost to him. This did not form itself tangibly, definitely, for the moment.

He was so long in answering that Jack Trevelyan laughed slightly, though there was something of an anxious expression around his mouth and in his eyes.

"Well! What do you say? Shall we give the Frenchies a turn?"

Lord Taunton roused himself. "It isn't a bad idea. But what will Gus say?" he asked hurriedly.

"Oh, so long as I am with you, she will be content," Trevelyan laughed, and smoked his pipe leisurely for a moment. "She knows I am sure to turn up again; whereas, if you took to your wings all alone—"

He did not go on for a few seconds, and then he said quietly: "You know she fretted herself almost to a shade about you sometimes, old chap. She does love you so dearly. If I ever had the faintest scintillation of jealousy for any one it should be for you; for I don't know—upon my soul I don't—"

Lord Taunton pushed himself out of his chair, and walked to the fireplace, standing before it thoughtfully.

"I won't give her such cause for anxiety again, Jack," he said quietly, after this pause. "You've hit the nail on the head, old chap. I have got my wandering mood on, and if I consulted my own inclinations alone I should be off to-night for Kam-schatka or the north pole. A fellow can't rub off all his odd corners at first. In time I shall settle down, I suppose; but there's something in the wildness, the risk, and the delight of going out to fight big game that does a lot to knock off any worries that may come along. However—"

with a slight laugh that was not very merry—"if we were all of this opinion, and took to our heels as soon as we had to face a bit of trouble, well, the north pole would be overstocked, and the white bears would be exhausted, to say nothing of showing decent shabby treatment to the old country—ch, Jack!"

"Well, when you can't get the north pole, try Paris!" was Mr. Trevelyan's reply, lightly given.

To himself he was busy thinking: "I have hit one bit of the right nail on the head, but not the whole. There is some bother on hand. What is it—old or new?"

"It sounds feasible," the other man answered, "only what am I to say to Gus? If I take you away she will scalp me!"

"Let's put her to the test!" Mr. Trevelyan smoked his pipe out thoughtfully for another few minutes. He got wonderful inspirations from this old-cherished companion. Perhaps, he said, putting it down at last, "perhaps, though, it would be just as well if you took a little rush to somewhere by yourself. I have been a married Benedict for so long. I've got rusty, as it were, and—"

"Dear old Jack!" Taunton said quietly, and his hand went out with one of those eloquent gestures which speak more than words.

"I'll make it all right with Gus," Trevelyan went on, as he

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clashed the strong, tanned hand in his for a moment, "and endeavor to impress upon her the fact that you are not gone for years. I expect she will be more philosophical about your departure than—well, Miss Glenchee, for instance!"

Taunton did not answer this. In truth, he only heard it vaguely. He was wondering if this short journey would be misconstrued by her when it came to her ears. She had besought him so piteously not to go away, and yet—yet she must know, she must feel, that to stay on so near to her was something more than he could endure. His heart flamed with emotion and suffering as he pictured what the life would mean.

He passed his hand over his brow and stood pondering. His resolution was taken at last. He would go away for the moment, but he would let her know this. He would not let her fear she had so dreaded come to her when she learned of his absence.

"Jack," he said, "I shall start. He dropped his hand suddenly, for Paris tonight!"

Mr. Trevelyan rose to his giant height.

"That's right, old chap! The best thing to do. Of course, you'll get your traps together easily! Nothing I can do, I suppose."

Taunton moved to the writing table and sat down.

"Yes," he said quietly. "Would you mind riding over to Torre village? I want to send a letter to Mrs. Blair Hunter. I would rather not give it to a servant, or wait till the post. I want her to get it at once."

John Trevelyan frowned a little, but not with anger. There was a pained look in his honest eyes. He stood knocking his pipe mechanically against the fireplace. The ashes were all emptied, but he did not notice this.

As Taunton rose and confronted him, he took the letter silently and put it in his coat pocket.

"I shall deliver it early this afternoon. I was going to Torre to see Stewart." He paused for a moment and then said, a flush mounting to his face: "Forgive me, old chap. May I ask you one question? Is it the old trouble, or a new one?"

Lord Taunton looked into his eyes.

"It's a new one, Jack; and it is something even worse to bear than the old one, something harder, something more bitter and cruel! Don't ask me any more, old fellow! I—I can't talk of it yet. I hardly dare think of it. I have always prided myself on being as tough as most men. I weathered the last storm; I may weather this, but—"

The sentence was left unfinished, and Jack Trevelyan walked out of the room without another word.

CHAPTER XXII

Lord Taunton had been in Paris nearly a fortnight, when one morning he received a letter written in his brother-in-law's big, ugly scrawl. It contained little odds and ends of news, and mentioned, in the most casual way, the fact that the Torre organist and his pretty young wife had gone away for some time.

(To be continued)